

HOBBS' POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

*This is basically an attempt at an original conceptual reconstruction of Hobbes' philosophy as set in *Leviathan*, namely one in the view of which Hobbes was neither an atheist nor an absolutist, as the standard interpretation holds, but rather what we could call an agnostical pragmatist (fact which, quite surprisingly, places Hobbes in the company of Burke). More to the point, my basic claim within this paper is that Hobbes was not such an 'enemy of individual freedom' as we traditionally hold him to be and that his thought was just as attached to the notion of individual freedom as the later contractualist views. The difference however, arises from the fact that Hobbes, unlike Locke, Rousseau or Kant, was what we could call a voluntaristic determinist and consequently viewed human freedom not so much as 'unhindered action derived from reflective choice', but rather as what we could call 'reasonable fulfillment of the basic human inclinations' (self-interest). As such, I will analyze the three main focal points of Hobbes' thought, namely (i) human nature, (ii) the principle of association and (iii) the principle of authority. More specifically I will try to offer a perspective on the link between his voluntaristic determinism, his notion of legitimate absolute coercion (sovereignty) and his political theology (the view that any form of political authority rests on a religious legitimacy) in trying to demonstrate how all these were Hobbes' specific way of seeking to find individual freedom a place under the sun.*

Keywords: *self-interest, behaviorism, sovereignty, contract, commonwealth*

I. Introduction

Hobbes' thought was deeply struck by the political and social events from during the English Civil War (1642-1651). As such, very originally, its basic assumption is that the greatest threat to individual freedom is constituted not so much by tyranny or despotism, but by anarchy. In other words, the essential claim of his political philosophy would be that the unregulated freedom of all is more harmful to the freedom of each than any form of authoritarianism, however arbitrary and cruel. He sets his arguments in this respect in three main works: *The Elements of Law* (1640), *De Cive* (1642), *Leviathan* (1651).

In a general sense, the intent behind Hobbes' philosophy is twofold: (i) the determination of an eventual scientific principle of morality and politics; (ii) pacifism, namely the edification of a system that predisposes people to the accomplishment of their civic duties.

Noticeably, the former finality is rather theoretical, while the latter practical. Therein resides the strong link between these two finalities which actually belongs to the specific British version of the Enlightenment: knowledge means power. In this respect, the influence of Bacon on Hobbes is rather obvious as the basic idea in the former's thought, i.e. that the essential finality of knowledge is the domination of Nature, remains unaltered in the latter's philosophy. As such, according to this vision, the main task of knowledge is not so much of a theoretic and descriptive, but rather of a practical nature.

II. Contents

This constitutes an adequate starting point for the understanding of Hobbes' criticism of classical philosophy (Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Plutarch, Cicero). In this respect, Hobbes adopts Machiavelli's argument in claiming that all traditional political thinkers, notwithstanding their *doctrinary peculiarities*, shared the same fundamental flaw: *they aimed too high*, i.e. they derived their claims from an idealized and artificial conception on human nature, which condemned their

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vision to utopianism; they¹ made up imaginary laws for imaginary communities. He, on the other hand, will allegedly derive his political considerations empirically, i.e. on the basis of the observation of human behavior in its most *natural* environment: society. More specifically, Hobbes claimed having tried to arrive at an universal principle of morality, that is *natural law*, not so much on the basis of reason as such (as a supposed fundamental and irreducible human faculty) but of a motivation which, at least empirically, seems far more powerful: self-interest. To the extent that he is the first to systematically integrate inductive empirical observation with deductive reasoning, Hobbes can be considered the first *political scientist*. Therefore, in order to understand his political theory we must first take a glimpse of his wider epistemological perspective.

As such, in his understanding, philosophy and science² are essentially faced with two complementary methods:

(i) the *synthetic* method, based on deduction, which, essentially, infers from general to particular, i.e. from the prime causes to their apparent effects;

(ii) the *analytic* method, which infers regressively, i.e. from certain apparent phenomena (effects) to their supposed prime causes;

In this context we must consider Hobbes' claim that there are two fundamental principles of the universe, i.e. *the body (matter)* and *movement* (the displacement, as the changing of *the locus*): "(...) every part of the Universe is Body; and that which is not Body, is no part of the Universe: and because the Universe is All, that which is no part of it is nothing (...)"³. At the same time, as we have seen, with respect to the elucidation of the human nature, Hobbes preferentially adopts the analytical method. As such, he sets about from the observation of the actual empirical behavior of humans and then regressively and inductively draws general conclusions on the prime principles of any motivation whatsoever. As such, he claims, the facts on which he grounds his analysis constitute common knowledge accessible to anyone from one's own everyday experience. In this respect, he suggests in *Leviathan* that anyone can test the validity of his considerations by pure introspection: anyone who would take the time to look within oneself and observe one's own thoughts, passions, natural inclinations, more precisely their influence on one's own behavior would arrive at the same conclusions.⁴ Basically, what we are dealing here with is an empirical and causal conception on human nature, i.e. one in which the human behavior can be understood as *passion mechanics*, thereby excluding all matters of purposive explanations of our actions, namely of exterior motivations for the individual behavior. The reason for his avoidance of this sort of teleological explanations is, as he claims, twofold: first, as the *objects of passions* vary across individuals depending on heredity, biology, education etc. and second, as they can be, and for the most part actually are, dissimulated. *In nuce*, we could say that with regard to human nature Hobbes is a deterministic behaviorist.

Further on, in matters of *morals* he is a nominalistic relativist – in his conception, good and evil are nothing but words, i.e. generic labels applied to various situations, the contents of which depend upon their specific relation to the individual observing them. More to the point, according to Hobbes, when someone claims a thing to be *good*, we should not understand by it anything more than that it provides the respective individual a certain form and amount of pleasure. Moreover, in his

¹ Just as Bacon did, actually.

² This being represented, first and foremost, by geometry, the only one that, according to him, had achieved at the time a series of undisputable conclusions.

³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 447.

⁴ When Hobbes speaks of introspection we should take the notion in a generic sense, namely regarding only those motivations which are valid for humans in general. Precisely on this ground Hobbes claims that each of us, provided that he learns how to observe and interpret his own motivations, will manage in knowing the others' motivations as well.

view, inclinations are much stronger than rational thought: “for the Thoughts are to Desires, as Scouts and Spies to range abroad and find the way to the Things desired.”⁵

Paradoxically, although a critic of both Socrates and Thomas Aquinas, he shares their notion that the principle of the moral law should be sought within nature, *human nature* that is. This basically constitutes one of the first modern explicit formulations of the so called *natural state theory*. But however modern in its formulation it actually represents an attempt at providing an answer to a very old philosophical question: are human beings *moral* willingly or only when constrained to being so? And as you could imagine, Hobbes’ answer corresponds to the latter alternative, i.e. that humans act morally only by constraint. All the more, against Aristotle, he claims that human being is not a *social animal* and that only due to constraints within natural state as such humans come to associate with each other. More to the point, the natural state constitutes for Hobbes that pre-political condition in which all humans live without any form of civic government or authority which would inspire them fear of any sort. As an observation, Hobbes does not claim that any such state has necessarily actually existed at some point in human (pre-)history, but that such states exist in his time in areas which, for one reason or another, are placed outside the boundaries of the *proper order* of things: America, the European states during times of civil war (England), the inter-state relationships during times of war etc.. In a general sense, we could claim that to Hobbes, the natural state constitutes more of a counterfactual model which serves to lay bare and clarify those aspects of the natural inclinations of the human being which become relevant when seeking to design an adequate political and social order.⁶ More to the point, allegedly, through this model we can determine the motives, purposes and objectives which make human individuals want to form political communities by association. Once determined, the problem becomes designing an optimal social order for the accomplishment of these finalities. This is basically Hobbes’ task in *Leviathan* and, as we can see, it is set from a fairly deterministic perspective on human nature.

Now, for a more detailed exposition of the aforementioned problematical and conceptual framework. Synthetically, Hobbes’ initial preoccupation in *Leviathan* would amount to the following question: *How would human condition look like in the absence of the civil society?* As a first observation, Hobbes states that humans are much more equal with each other than has been previously acknowledged and, surprisingly, that the most relevant of these supposed equalities is represented by their equal possibility of killing each other. The importance of this type of equality derives from the fact that, in his view, self-preservation constitutes the fundamental interest of any individual. This is the basic interest which all human individuals essentially share and consequently the collective backbone of any functional political community should reside in the fear of death. However, Hobbes goes on, equal abilities lead to equal *hopes of wellbeing*, respectively to equal material claims and therefore to inter-individual competition for acquiring and securing those rare things which make the object of everyone’s particular interest. In other words, in his search for personal security and wellbeing, each individual comes to the point of wanting to subjugate the others precisely in order to eliminate any potential threat. On the other hand, happiness as fulfillment of personal wellbeing constitutes, in Hobbes view, not so much an *immutable state of grace* but a perpetual transition from one object of desire (which has been attained) to another (which although unattained is attainable). Moreover, in this perpetual attempt, the individuals seek not only to acquire the desired objects but also to secure and universalize their acquisition, that is to ensure their permanent possibility of attaining every conceivable object of desire. As we can see, in Hobbes view, happiness and power are two faces of the same coin.

On the other hand, power, he claims, has a special relation to vanity, understood as an innate tendency of the human individual towards self-righteousness and –flattery. And this self-evaluation is always of comparative nature, that is it takes place on the background of the relationships between

⁵ Idem 48.

⁶ I.e. both just and functional.

the respective individual and the others: any man wants for the others to appreciate him as much as he appreciates himself and when this narcissistic need is not met by the others (treating him with arrogantly and disrespectfully) he is unavoidably overwhelmed by the desire to destroy them.

This subjectively biased comparison principle is used by Hobbes to explain most of the collective activities of humans, even those destined for personal recreation. More precisely, when they are together, humans try to share activities that produce laughter and amusement. Laughter however is, in Hobbes view, caused either by the attainment of sudden glory, or by the perception of something deformed or misplaced in the other and in comparison to which the respective individual comes to see himself as obviously superior, thereby becoming overwhelmed by self-admiration. Precisely this latter aspect makes Hobbes establish a sharp distinction between honor and justice, claiming that the former has nothing to do either with the latter, or with morals in general – in his view, honor does not constitute anything more than the acknowledgement of someone's superiority, be it harmful or helpful for the person acknowledging it.

Further on, according to Hobbes, there are three main causes potentially responsible for the conflict between individuals: (i) competition, (ii) distrust, (iii) fear. All three reach their apex within the state of nature which is therefore basically defined as *a war of each against all*. In the *Leviathan* he provides it with the following characterization: “men live without other security, than what their own strength, and what their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”⁷

Obviously, in the state of nature there is no possibility of addressing any form of justice, as justice and injustice lack any meaning without a preexisting law which, in this case, doesn't exist. As Hobbes puts it, within the state of nature *man is alienated from his kindred*. In a wider context, this argument is set against the classical Aristotelian view regarding the supposed social nature of man, claiming quite the opposite, i.e. that the civil state is conventional and not natural. However, this does not mean that, according to Hobbes, human nature would lack any intrinsic forces and tendencies towards association and *civility*, but only that the anti-social tendencies within man are just as powerful as these, if not more powerful given the proper conditions. Essentially, to Hobbes, nature constitutes not a model, but an anti-model for society, precisely because the latter appears through the negation of the former: by observing nature we can learn what not to do as citizens.

Consequently, he will attempt to find the two categories of *natural forces*, namely those hostile and those favorable to the peaceful coexistence of the individuals, respectively to determine those mechanisms by which the former can be inhibited and the latter strengthened. His solution resides in a certain dialectic between the fear of death and the appetite for comfort (along with the hope of attaining it by productive activities). In other words, reason is the key in finding the proper balance between these three passions (fear, desire and hope) and employing them for the better use of mankind, i.e. peaceful association. We must take note of the fact that, for Hobbes fear of death and the desire for comfort have an ambivalent status as they belong both to the pacifying and to the conflictual factors. Vanity, on the other hand is, in his view, a solely negative passion, belonging exclusively to the latter category. Synthetically, his task in *Leviathan* would basically amount to the attempt of determining those mechanisms by which reason can (i) direct the fear of death and the desire for comfort strictly towards their pacifying consequences and (ii) dominate and even eliminate vanity. In this respect, Hobbes' mechanistic determinism with regard to human nature becomes quite apparent: it represents nothing more than an immutable system of forces which, if properly known and influenced, can be manipulated just as easily as any physical system. The only specific aspect of

⁷ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 84.

this type of system is the fact that the law governing it is the moral one, i.e., in Hobbes' terms, the *natural laws*, in the hierarchy of which the supreme status is obviously held by self-preservation. In other words, all laws and political obligations stem from and are subject to the individual's natural right to self-preservation. Quite interestingly, although the political finality of this argument is different⁸, this assumption places Hobbes in the proximity of liberalism. The philosophical difference however is quite important, as while for Hobbes the grounding principle of self-preservation resides in volition (passions, inclinations, instincts), for the liberals lies with pure reason. The apparent advantage of Hobbes' view in this respect is that to the extent that these so called *rights* are backed by subjective passions they attain some measure of self-sufficiency – they don't have to be imposed as they correspond to the fundamental affective principles of human existence: self-interest. Basically, what we are dealing here with is an attempt of legitimating a peaceful society on the grounds of egoism. In fact, these are the most proper terms in which we can refer to Hobbes' understanding of the concept of *natural right*: the absolute freedom in doing those things instrumental to one's own self-preservation and, complementary, of abstaining from those that endanger it. All the more, just as for Machiavelli, the right of pursuing a certain finality implies the right to the means necessary for attaining it.

Further on, to the extent that individuals vary both in intelligence and prudence (i.e. the natural capacity to anticipate danger), some understand better than others the necessities instrumental to self-preservation. However, notwithstanding intelligence, no man in particular is in fact sufficiently interested in the wellbeing of the others. Therefore, in the state of nature, each individual must be the only authority in judging the means necessary to one's own self-preservation and, consequently, of using them in any way fit to this end. Basically, in the state of nature, *every man is entitled to everything*. As previously stated, all this belongs to the so called *natural rights*.

Natural laws, on the other hand, are rational precepts instructing individuals with respect to the alternative means instrumental to avoiding the various dangers to their self-preservation. These laws stem on the one hand from their natural rights, and on the other, from their irrational desires. Quite expectedly, the ground of the system of natural laws is peace. Correspondingly, the basic natural law states that people fundamentally seek peace and are entitled in this respect to any means necessary in protecting themselves against those in relation to whom there can be no peace. All the other subsequent natural laws are instrumental to this basic one.

As such, the first natural law⁹, states that any individual must renounce his potential claim on all things¹⁰ when all the others show themselves willing in doing the same, that is to limit oneself to as much personal freedom with respect to the others as he is willing to acknowledge on their part with respect to him. This is the covenant that grounds the so called *social contract* by which the political community is born. Consequently, within the political community each individual pledges himself by contract with respect to all the others in obeying such authority (person, council, institution) they have acknowledged together as sovereign. This is what we could call political sovereignty. Moral sovereignty, on the other hand, further belongs to the individual, i.e. to one's own right of self-preservation. In this context, the task of the political community resides precisely in making sure that the two types of sovereignty converge as much as possible, the product of this convergence being peace. More precisely, according to Hobbes, each individual becomes part of the contract by virtue of his own personal interest, but, once he renounced by contract a certain right for the benefit of protection on the part of the community, he implicitly obliges himself not to hinder in any fashion those in favor of which he renounced the given right (the Sovereign) in making use of it and of its corresponding authority. In short, people, by their own personal agreement, pledge to obey the civic duties stemming from the contract. This is what Hobbes calls the *covenant principle* and it

⁸ The legitimization of the absolutistic monarchy.

⁹ I.e. primarily derived from this fundamental one.

¹⁰ *Naturally valid* in the state of nature.

represents the institutional ground of justice. As such, any agreement is based on trust, but how can this trust be ensured? And his answer is that by the reciprocally shared fear of the consequences of breaking the agreement. In fact, this is precisely why there was no trust among individuals in the state of nature, namely because there was no authority equally feared by all when envisioning the perspective of breaking the agreements. Consequently, in Hobbes' view, before speaking of justice and injustice, there must be (i) an initial agreement with respect to the moral meaning of these terms¹¹ and (ii) a specific legitimate power, i.e. a *sovereign*, equally coercive with respect to all individuals who partook in the initial contract. In sum, the sovereign must make sure that the fear of the punishment is always greater than the attraction of any potential benefits from breaking the contract.

In a general sense, what makes Hobbes special in the philosophical context of his age is the attempt to ground political legitimacy on morality and morality on self-interest (and correspondingly, fear): we could say that, paradoxically, to him, sovereigns are morally bound to keep their sovereignty undivided, unbroken and absolute as otherwise they would fail to meet the self-interests of all his subjects on which the very existence of the state rests.¹² Given this specific view on sovereignty, Hobbes criticizes the Aristotelian notion of justice according to which the legitimacy of any political authority derives from heredity. More precisely, according to Aristotle, some individuals are born to rule and others to obey. In this univocal relationship of authority of the former with respect to the latter, the role of the leaders is to distribute benefits proportional to the virtues/defects of each individual. This is what in moral philosophy is called distributive justice. Hobbes' objection is that this notion is (i) false, as in the state of nature (i.e. by birth) all people are equal and (ii) dangerous, as it encourages vanity which can bring upon the dissolution of the political community. As such, in his view, true distributive justice requires the existence of an impartial arbiter whose fundamental role resides not so much in distributing benefits depending on every individual's merits or misconducts but in treating everybody in keeping with their natural rights, i.e. equally: if he is to be permissive he must be equally permissive with all, if he is to be oppressive, he is to be equally so with all.

We must take note of the fact that a very frequent objection to this notion of natural equality is to say that nature, quite obviously, doesn't make all men equal: some are more intelligent than others, some are born stronger or otherwise gifted than others. Hobbes' counter-argument at this point is quite interesting (and penetrating actually): if nature has made all individuals equal, this equality should be acknowledged as such, and if it didn't, people, given their essential egoism, would never agree to acknowledge their own inferiority with respect to others, and all the less to form communities with other such *superior individuals*; as such, claims Hobbes, even if natural equality between individuals were a false notion we should still pretend it were a true one for the sake of peace and of the political community as such.

Roughly, his moral conception amounts to the golden principle: *do unto others what you would have them do to you*. For the argumentation of this view Hobbes attempts a pragmatic reformulation of the theory of virtue in the terms of which virtue corresponds to nothing more than those actions, persons, situations favorable to self-preservation, respectively to its essential condition, peace. Complementarily, vice is the opposite of such things. With respect to this latter aspect however, he notes that the main flaw of the rational laws and precepts is that they, by themselves, are coercive only morally and not physically as well, in other words that they bind individuals only in consciousness and not in deed, while in order for them to be really functional it would be required

¹¹ I.e. to what specifically is *just* an *injust*.

¹² A consequence of this rather odd conception is the extension of the notion of *just war*. More to the point, if in the standard view of the time (Grotius, for example), a war was deemed just only to the extent that it was made (i) as a reaction to a direct aggression, (ii) in order to secure some form compensation for unjust harm or (iii) punishment in Hobbes' view (iv) preemption could also constitute a legitimate reason for war.

that people feared the consequences of their breach. This requires certain concrete conditions that ensure that all people equally obey these laws as, otherwise, even if, *in extremis*, some chose to obey them voluntarily, they would fall victims to those who chose not to. All this comes to justify the necessity of some form of sovereign political authority.

As such, common security is in the interest of each individual in particular, and it requires the existence of a social body that is to be sufficiently numerous so as by its collective strength to be able to (i) render the eventual breach by any individual of anyone else's natural rights a very *unprofitable endeavor* and (ii) defend all its members against foreign threats. In order to accomplish this task, the political community must be established as a sole and undivided legal person by a contract in which each individual, by his own will, binds himself with respect to all the others in acknowledging the will of this legal, civic and artificial person as his own. Obviously, this is the commonwealth. In other words, each individual must consider the actions of the sovereign power as stemming from his own will. Institutionally, this sovereign will can be *incarnated* by an individual (the monarch), or by a council (the Parliament).

There are two steps in the conclusion of the contract as viewed by Hobbes: (i) a voluntary pledge by each member of the future social body that he acknowledges as sovereign any such individual or council as chosen by the community and (ii) the actual vote with respect to the identity of the sovereign as such. Interestingly, Hobbes suggests that the legitimacy of the sovereign is not justified by its source, i.e. by the actual way in which it arises, but by the way in which the sovereign exercises its authority. Consequently, the social contract must not be seen as a descriptive document, but as a purely normative one, i.e. as a modal fiction, as an *as if*. In this respect, we must take note of the fact that Hobbes separates between two actual ways in which commonwealths arise, the *natural* and the *institutional* one. However, fear is in both circumstances the binding element of the political community. As such, if despotic commonwealths, on the one hand, result in a *natural way* through the fear of the subjects with respect to the sovereign (as in the case of a conqueror for example), the institutional commonwealths, on the other, result on the base of the reciprocal fear of the individuals. Either way, as noted, fear is the catalyzing element of the political association and, as such, claims Hobbes, legally, there is no difference between the establishment of a commonwealth through conquest and its institutional establishment. Obviously, says Hobbes, nobody has ever actually signed such a contract, but the point is that all those living within the territory of a commonwealth and, consequently, benefit by its protection, should see themselves (and *be seen*) as implicit parts to such a contract.

In what follows, a few considerations on the specific aspects of the sovereign's absolute authority:

(i) the right to punish – the sovereign is the only one who holds the right to punish and, as such, any form of justice must be intermediated by its authority.¹³

In this context the sovereign *cannot be abusive*, i.e. no individual could rightfully claim that the sovereign had committed an abuse with respect to an alleged initial agreement as, technically speaking, there never was such an agreement between the sovereign as such and each individual but only between the individuals themselves with respect to the sovereign. In legal terms, the sovereign was the object and not the subject of the social contract. Consequently, given that the sovereign is not party to the contract, he is the only one still having the right to all things that, in the state of nature, belonged to all individuals. All the more, given that the sovereign represents all individuals, this alleged accuse of injustice would be self-contradictory, that is the respective individual would accuse himself that he violated his own rights, which is impossible. Therefore, the sovereign cannot be held accountable by his own subjects.

(ii) the right of declaring war and concluding peace (including that of claiming the support of its citizens in these respects, both financially and physically).

¹³ This corresponds more or less to what Webber would later on call *legitimate monopoly on violence*.

The ground for this second authority is quite obvious: these rights, in order to be functional, must belong to the same authority that has the capacity to punish those who refuse to acknowledge them.¹⁴

Precisely the same ground justifies the concentration of the (iii) legislative and (iv) judicial powers in the hands of the sovereign, given that it is highly probable that people would otherwise refuse to obey the commands of someone who they had no reason to fear. In short, according to Hobbes, the law constitutes nothing more than the commands of the sovereign and it must define and regulate absolutely any aspect of public relevance: which are the goods attainable by the individuals, the nature of private property, respectively its boundaries, the publicly accepted actions, the defining elements of morality and its legitimate means of enforcement.

All the more, to the extent that the sovereign must also own the means necessary to the fulfillment of his commands, he is also exclusively entitled to the (v) executive power, i.e. it has the sole right of naming the councilors, ministers, magistrates and all other such officials.

Last, but not least, the sovereign holds the right to (vi) censorship. The reason is that, according to Hobbes, to the extent that people's voluntary actions result from their decisions and their decisions derive from certain shared moral notions, the sovereign must also have them under control for the benefit of the political community, i.e. he must be the supreme judge of all opinions, doctrines and *intellectual stands* precisely in order to be able to eliminate those potentially harmful to the common good.¹⁵

Now, against everything that later contractualists (Locke, Rousseau, Kant) shall have to say with respect to *rightful authority*, Hobbes claims that the sovereign must not even obey its own laws, given that it is the one generating them. This, by a very simple reason: new circumstances may require new laws and so, if the sovereign was bound by the already existing ones, it could not act appropriately with respect to the new circumstances and this would affect its capacity of doing precisely what the contract requires it to do, protect its subjects.

Now, a few of words on the rights the individuals have with respect to each other and more importantly, to the sovereign. In this respect, Hobbes accepts some form of limitation of the latter's authority based on those particular inalienable rights of the individuals which cannot be either transferred or alienated by contract. More to the point, to the extent that the contract was concluded in the interest of protecting individual life and ensuring all necessary means in this respect, the sovereign cannot demand of any *particular* individual to do anything against this fundamental personal interest – correspondingly, any individual is entitled to refuse to harm himself or do anything detrimental to his own self-preservation (provided that this is not a request addressed by the sovereign to *all* members of the commonwealth). In short, (a) the right to self-preservation is inviolable. Apparently there is a self-contradiction in Hobbes' claims in this respect – one could ask: *How does this inviolable character of individual self-preservation become consistent with the right of the sovereign to forcefully recruit soldiers in times of war? Isn't it precisely risking their lives for his benefit what he asks of its subjects? And, in this context, doesn't the coward refusal to take part in war become the right thing to do precisely on the grounds of the natural right to self-preservation?* Hobbes' answer is that avoiding participation in war is not morally condemnable but that, in such conditions, the task of the sovereign is precisely to make sure that the fear of the consequences of desertion is always greater than that that of partaking in war. In simpler words, in a state of war, the

¹⁴ The relation to the actual political status of Hobbes' contemporary England is obvious given that *the power of the purse*, i.e. the right of imposing taxes, represented the main *point of debate* between the Parliament and the king, leading to the civil war.

¹⁵ Obviously, this clause is relevant in religious matters as they have constituted another important cause for conflict in the history of England. In this respect, Hobbes makes an interesting distinction between religion and superstition claiming that the difference between them resides in their public acceptability; in other words, notwithstanding the fact that they both represent forms of *fear of invisible powers*, the former is permitted by the public authority, while the latter isn't.

sovereign must impose *in his own camp* a series of coercive measures which are so draconic that no individual, precisely by its personal interest, would be tempted to desert. In short, during times of war the sovereign must make sure that his own subjects fear him more than their enemies on the other side.

Other individual rights are: (b) any individual has the right to refuse to accomplish a task demanded by the sovereign provided he manages in finding a suitable replacement; (c) any condemned individual has the right to oppose an executioner in performing his task¹⁶; (d) any individual is entitled to refuse in making a deposition detrimental to his own interests; (e) no individual can be rightfully coerced in performing an action harmful to his own life.

By the compliance with these fundamental individual rights we can separate the good (i.e. proper, efficient) sovereigns from the bad ones; however, irrespective of their characterization, the power of the sovereign remains absolute, that is, in Hobbes view, *bad sovereigns* are entitled to just as much power as the *good* ones. In other words the sovereign, good or bad, is entitled to executing or detaining all those refusing to execute his demands, irrespective of the eventual morally legitimate character of the latter's refusal. In short, according to Hobbes, it is not legitimate for the people to rebel against bad sovereigns. Why? Because in his view, the sovereign is accountable only to God.

However, a certain limitation of the sovereigns' power derives indirectly from his ability in ensuring the security of its subjects with respect to third parties – the obligation of the subjects to obey their sovereign lasts only as long as his power to protect them. If the sovereign loses this capacity, he is sovereign no longer.

In what follows, a few words on Hobbes' view on what we would presently call *political regimes*. Basically, he addresses the classical distinction between monarchy, democracy and aristocracy while changing its meaning – in his terms, they are not three different forms of sovereignty, as there can be only one, i.e. the absolute one, but only different ways of institutionalizing it. As such we have three potential situations in this respect:

- (i) monarchy – when sovereignty belongs to a single individual;
- (ii) democracy – when sovereignty belongs to a council or a board in which every individual member of the commonwealth has the right to vote;
- (iii) aristocracy – when sovereignty belongs to a council/board to which only part of the citizens belong;

However, as mentioned, despite using this classical distinction, he criticizes its originators' (Plato, Aristotle) understanding of it, especially the separation they established between these three *legitimate* forms of government and their three allegedly illegitimate ones, namely tyranny, anarchy and oligarchy. More to the point, Hobbes criticizes the fact that in the classical understanding, the distinction between good and bad government was drawn on accounts of the interest in which the sovereign used its authority, i.e. the common good, for the former and the personal good, for the latter. In his view however, these characterizations are relative as they derive rather from the sympathies and antipathies of the *perceiving subjects* with respect to the regime in cause, than from its intrinsic nature or some alleged objective moral standards. Therefore, those beneficially affected by the sovereignty of a single (particular) individual shall call it monarchy, while those disfavored by it, tyranny and so on. As such, in a general sense, in Hobbes' view, the distinction between a tyrant and a legitimate monarch becomes irrelevant as long as subjects and rulers (irrespective of the way and interest in which they exercise their authority) both share the same main benefits of sovereignty, namely protection and peace, respectively shortcomings of its lack, i.e. anarchy and civil war. More specifically, his argument claims that just as the people would have no interest in undermining the absolute power of the sovereign, as in this case they would lose the protection he granted them, the latter would have no interest in unnecessarily worsening the people's condition as, ultimately, his own power and political wellbeing directly depend on their state and relation to him.

¹⁶ This having no consequence, however, on the legitimacy of the latter's performing this duty.

Probably, the tacit assumption behind Hobbes' argument in this respect is that we can never plausibly expect for a sovereign to fully obey the public good in stronger measure than his personal one, then the problem becoming not so much in finding the one who is willing to do that, but rather in devising such a political system in which the two interests converge as much as possible.

Further on, against classical positions such as Cicero's or Aristotle's, he claims that the power of the sovereign and the freedom of the subjects do not vary that much in these three political regimes, to the extent that in all cases both the absolute character of the sovereign's power and its essential finality (security and peace) remain the same. As such, Hobbes interprets one of the classical problems of political philosophy (*Which is the best form of government?*) in his typically pragmatic manner: *Which type of government is best suited for ensuring peace and security?* His answer is that as the bearers of the sovereign power are, ultimately, mere human beings, more preoccupied with pursuing their own interest than that of the entire community, the latter would best be served in that system in which (i) it is the closest bound to the former and (ii) the former is as undivided as possible.

Consequently, his resulting criticism of democracy is rather obvious: given that in such a regime each individual bears only a small fraction of the sovereignty, the number of those who will try to bend the common good to their own interests is much larger than in the other regimes. In his words, in a monarchy there can be only one Nero, while in a democracy as many as those who are willing to butter up the crowd.¹⁷ All the more, Hobbes claims that despite the alleged superior capacity of democracy in controlling its officials, in a monarchy, although nobody can explicitly prevent the monarch from naming incompetent or immoral persons as public officials, he will most often avoid doing that, given that a bad administration of public affairs would be detrimental to his own interests. In a democracy on the other hand, the promotion of incompetent or immoral persons is unavoidable, given that such a regime functions by the very competition between various popular orators and demagogues whose power is limited only by their ability to manipulate and control the masses. The main problem would be that the unavoidable conflict between these various claimants to power breaks the unity of the people, which can very easily derive in civil war.¹⁸ As such, Hobbes claims that those who are hostile to monarchy on its alleged lack of freedom, fall victims to a misunderstanding of both their own interests and desires and of those of the pro-democratic demagogues. As mentioned, his argument is that while the relation between sovereignty and individual freedom does not vary substantially from one regime to the another, the promoters of the notion of *equality* seek to undermine the sovereign in power only so that they could take his place. In other words, the critics of monarchy pretend to desire democracy not so much for attaining freedom for all citizens, but only power for themselves. So, essentially, Hobbes' position with regard to democracy would be that its alleged universal freedom and equality represents a mere cover for vanity and will to power.

At this point however we must draw a distinction between the *post-contractual democracy*, i.e. as the form of government eventually emerging after the conclusion of the contract and the *pre-contractual democracy* as the democratic procedure by which the individuals still living in the state of nature choose to conclude the contract and its incumbent clauses. More to the point, given that in the state of nature all individuals are equal, so that any form of legitimate obligation is in fact a self-obligation, in order for the future social contract to be legitimate, it must be grounded on the general agreement between each individual with all the others with respect to the acknowledgement of any such sovereign as chosen by their majority. Basically, the initial act of choosing the sovereign is

¹⁷ This will become a quite typical objection to democracy. One century later we will find the same notion with Burke and Voltaire. In this respect, the latter would claim that he would rather *be governed by a single lion than by a thousand rats*.

¹⁸ Expectedly, aristocracy lies somewhere in between these two alternatives, its quality basically depending on its bias towards one of them.

essentially democratic, irrespective of the later way in which this will exercise its authority within the commonwealth. This is a potentially vulnerable point of Hobbes' argumentation as someone could ask: *Well, in this context, to the extent that some individuals withdraw their initial agreement in obeying the absolute authority of the sovereign doesn't that discharge them of the obligation to do so?* Hobbes' reply is that the initial agreement was not concluded between the individuals and the sovereign as such, but only among the individuals with respect to the creation of the commonwealth and the designation of the sovereign, so that in order for someone to legitimately withdraw from under his/its authority¹⁹ the individual agreement of all contracting individuals would be required; as such, if a single contracting individual would refuse to withdraw its agreement, the sovereign's authority would remain untouchably absolute with respect to all individuals. A potential counter-argument to Hobbes' claim would be that in this terms there is an unjustifiable unbalance between the type of consent initially required for the designation of the sovereign, when the agreement by the majority sufficed, and the type of consent ultimately required for the dissolution of the sovereign, when the universal agreement of all contracting individuals is necessary. However we will not follow any further this direction of analysis, given that this fact is outside of the scope of our finality.

Further on, Hobbes' critical attention is directed towards the so called *mixed government*, that is what the modern theory of democracy (Montesquieu) would later on call the *separation of the powers of the state* between the executive (monarchy), the juridical (aristocracy) and the legislative (the people) branches. His argument against this form of government is that the individual freedom is just as developed in such a regime as it could be in any of the three *pure* ones as long as there is consent among the three branches of the authority; individual freedom could increase only if conflict would arise among the three branches, but the incumbent price would be far too great, i.e. civil war which in fact ultimately leads to the complete loss of the individual freedom itself. The true sovereign, on the other hand, derives its/his strength according to Hobbes, not by consent but by the unity of all wills in a single legal person. All the more, true monarchy is the hereditary, not the elective one, as in the latter case, the true sovereign would not be the monarch, but the elective board – as such, for sovereignty to be authentic, the monarch must have the right of designating his successor and if he, for one reason or another, fails to do so, the closest kin must be designated in his place.

One of the fundamental errors which the sovereign can make at the very establishment of his/its rule of the commonwealth is for him to content himself with less power than necessary for the insurance of peace and security, precisely in order to get the respective commonwealth.²⁰ As such, when public safety requires the use by the sovereign of certain powers and authorities upon which it was initially agreed otherwise, this may seem abusive and lead to mutiny and rebellion.

As such, any renunciation on part of the sovereign to some part of its authority represents an infringement of its/his own duty as sovereign. His authority can be only absolute and correspondingly, he/it must make sure that the people are completely informed with respect to the grounds of its/his authority and also to eliminate any potentially usurping perspectives. As mentioned, this has to do not so much with the *interests* of the sovereign, but with his/its duty: any encroachment on the absolute character of sovereignty is potentially harmful as it can bring upon civil war and, implicitly, the loss of security and peace which represent the basic finalities of the initial contract. As such, all such *usurping doctrines* must be eliminated.

¹⁹ Just as in order for the sovereign as such to be dissolved.

²⁰ The greatest issue with hereditary monarchy was, of course, succession and the conflicts to which it led. In this context, a very frequent phenomenon arose when having, on the one hand, a foreign claimant to the throne which was already taken and an interior group of lords dissatisfied with the present monarch. Quite expectedly, in such conditions, an agreement between the exterior claimant and the lords was concluded, by which the latter would support the former's claim to the throne, while the former that he would grant them certain privileges once he attained the rule of the commonwealth. Although somewhat profitable, on short term, for the monarch in cause, on the long term, such arrangements always lead to very unstable power relations between the monarchy and the nobles and, in many cases, to civil war.

The first type of such doctrines is the one claiming, one way or another, that there is a fundamental incompatibility between faith and natural reason. The problem here would be the fact that such views promote the idea that only individuals as such are the rightful moral judges of their own actions. On the other hand, Hobbes claims that such an argument could eventually be valid in the natural state, but under no circumstances in the post-contractual commonwealth in which only the sovereign can be the supreme moral judge. Any deviation from the absolute character of sovereignty is harmful to the commonwealth and must be eliminated.

A second type of such insurrectionist views, is the one claiming that everything an individual makes *against his own consciousness*, even when representing commands of the sovereign, constitutes a sin. Hobbes' objection in this respect is quite interesting: the subject must obey the command of the sovereign irrespective of his personal opinion on the matter and, if the respective action really constitutes a sin, then only the sovereign and not its performer will be held accountable for it by God. On the other hand, he further claims, any disobedience to the command of a sovereign constitutes a sin, even when his/its command is unjust, as the sovereign is nothing less than God's chosen representative on earth.

The third type, corresponds to those doctrines that we could call *mystical*, namely those holding that faith and grace are not attainable by study and reason, but by some form of supernatural inspiration, i.e. by subjective revelation. If this were true, asks Hobbes, how come that not all Christians automatically become prophets, but, on the contrary, most of them guide their behavior by certain *exterior models*? Basically, all such doctrines are in his view potentially harmful as they instigate to rebellion and anarchy.

I think that in order to understand all this we should take a glimpse at Hobbes view on the relationship between political and divine authority in history (corresponding epistemologically to the one between political philosophy and theology). As such, to him, *God's kingdom* was an actual commonwealth inhabited by actual citizens, namely the Jewish people. Their relationship to God was from the very beginning contractual in nature, the first agreement being the one between God and Abraham by which the former promised to grant the latter the land of Canaan in exchange for his and his offspring's loyalty. Thereby, Abraham becomes the instrument of God's power on Earth, that is the *worldly sovereign*, with the right (and duty) to punish all those who refuse to obey his (and indirectly God's) laws, under the pretense of personal revelation (the mystic attitude). The contract between man and God is renewed by Isaac and Jacob, suspended during the Egyptian exile and subsequently reinstated by Moses on Mount Sinai.

In my opinion, we could consider Hobbes' arguments in this respect as a legitimacy attempt with respect to Caesaropapism, i.e. the view holding that religious and political authority should be placed in the same hands, namely those of the monarch. Consequently, he offers a very original interpretation of the teachings of the Bible. For example, in the case of Jesus, Hobbes claims that His three basic divine qualities, (i.e. as Redeemer, Teacher and Emperor) are not concomitant but successive. On Earth, he claims, Jesus only fulfilled the first two qualities, and proof of this fact is that He never manifested any actual political intention in His stand, i.e. of changing the civil laws or to contradict the authority of the Jewish king or of the Caesar. Hobbes applies this *successivistic* interpretation to the very notion of Trinity as well. More to the point, he claims that God, as one and the same entity, was represented in three historically different circumstances: Moses represented Him as the Father, Jesus as the Son and the apostles as the Holy Spirit.

This *historical theologism* is backed by Hobbes' *manifestationist* attitude with respect to religion, essentially holding that in matters of belief, what matters is not what one feels, but what one does²¹; at the same time however, *what one must do* mostly refers to the plain obedience with respect to the status quo, i.e. to actually *not doing anything*. As such, for example, in these terms, martyrdom does not constitute a Christian imperative. In other words, if a heathen sovereign demands of a

²¹ In perfect opposition to Luther's claim.

Christian to renounce the Christian God in favor of the heathen one, he should do it, as it as the *politically right* thing to do. In this case, the sin is not of the one obeying, but of the one commanding (the heathen monarch), and he is the one that shall be held responsible in the eyes of God. On the other hand, if the respective Christian were to disobey the commands of the heathen sovereign, and refuse to renounce the Christian God, he will be held responsible for it by the Christian God Himself. Why? Because the heathen king is, in some indirect form, the instrument of the Christian God's will so, if someone were to disobey him, he would disobey God's will itself. Basically (and paradoxically), according to Hobbes' claims, it constitutes a Christian sin to contest the authority of a heathen, or sinful sovereign. As mentioned, all these claims are in fact arguments for Caesaropapism: on Earth the religious authority derives from the political one as, if Constantine, the first Christian emperor, was also the Bishop of Rome, all subsequent Christian sovereigns automatically inherited his religious capacity as well. As such, basically, the religious authority adheres to sovereignty, so that the priests in a Christian commonwealth are the mere ministers of the sovereign, i.e. they draw their entire authority from his, as supreme priest.

Correspondingly, Hobbes' soteriological view is quite *realistic*: the Kingdom of God will begin after the resurrection of the dead and it will constitute an earthly commonwealth ruled by Christ himself. The Hell and the Devil are in fact on Earth, the former corresponding to the state of nature and the second to any enemy of the legitimate Church. At the same time, to Hobbes, the so called *tortures of Hell* constitute in fact only a metaphorical expression for *the envy that burns the hearts of the damned* when witnessing the happiness of the redeemed, i.e. of those enjoying the sovereign's protection.

Noticeably, Hobbes eliminates the distinction between the earthly and the divine worlds precisely in order to harness the political resources of religion. More to the point, in claiming to bring man's world in accordance with God's, he actually brought the latter in the former. Even if that does not enable us to say that Hobbes was an atheist, his influence on the subsequent atheist thought is rather obvious. On the other hand, his *theopolitics* grants him (along with Machiavelli) a specific place in the history of this type of issue as he moved the question from an ontological realm²² (*What are the arguments for the existence of God?*) into a pragmatic one (*What are the effects of the belief in God?*). In this context, he prefers faith by virtue of its latent benefits with respect to social cohesion.

III. Conclusion

As we can see, Hobbes' thought is articulated on three focal points: (I) human nature, (II) human coexistence and (III) the principle of authority. The order of the argumentation proceeds correspondingly. In what follows, we will sum up Hobbes' basic claims in these regards. As such, he initially holds that the human individual is a deterministic system of passions and inclinations (among which reason is a fairly secondary faculty in terms of power). Correspondingly, freedom basically amounts to nothing more than self-preservation²³ and, in this understanding, constitutes the basic human interest. At the same time, however, reason constitutes the most suited faculty for the achievement of self-preservation. On the other hand reason is unattainable by the individual as such, given that, on this level, reason is *slave to passions*. Nevertheless, given that most often passions are self-contradictory, reason can become dominant in those specific circumstances in which they are properly balanced in order to cancel each other out. Still, on the individual level, this specific balance of the opposites is unattainable. As such, human association becomes necessary in order to achieve this state of reason which is instrumental in attaining self-preservation. Further on, this association is realized by means of a contract in which each individual agrees with all the others to renounce his/her individual authority in favor of the ruling authority of the commonwealth thus created. This

²² As it had happened in the medieval scholastic philosophy.

²³ The rationalistic notion of *freedom as rational choice* is deemed illusory.

authority is the sovereign who basically constitutes (i) a collective body and (ii) the only rational person of human origin. As such, he/it is the only one preserving the natural authority which had previously belonged to all individuals. Further more, he/it must have at his/its disposal all the resources and collective force of the commonwealth in order to be able to (i) protect its members from exterior dangers and (ii) keep egoistic passions in check. Basically, given that the sovereign (as an institution) is the only fully rational person in the human world and that reason is the best way of achieving the basic individual interest, i.e. self-preservation, Hobbes holds that it is in the most direct interest of the individuals to subject their wills to that of the sovereign. However, individuals would not be willing to do that in front of a human authority and, as such, the sovereign must be seen as a direct representative of God on Earth. Only to the extent that he/it would be seen as some sort of *earthly god* could he/it inspire the necessary respect in order for the individuals to unquestionably obey its/his authority.

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