Thomas Hobbes's Belief Concerning Human Nature and the Government

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Thomas Hobbes was an English philosopher, born 1588 and died 1679. He was considered to be one of the founders of modern political philosophy, the other being John Locke. Hobbes is best known for his book “The Leviathan”. Hobbes was interested in many things when he became a philosopher and even before that as a child, but none more than his idea of the perfect kind of governing system. His ideas of government made him unpopular with people, as he favored a monarchy, and as such he was exiled. Despite the fact he was exiled, his thoughts on the matter might be true. *Monarchy, as long as not taken too far, might be the way.*

I. In Hobbes’s book “The Leviathan”, he argues that the only true form of government would be a Monarchy of absolute power, for he believed when there is a monarchy in place, “*...the private interest is the same with the public. The riches, power, and honour of a monarch arise only from the riches, strength, and reputation of his subjects.*” (“The Leviathan”, Pg. 115). He believed that though there were other forms of government, monarchy was the only true way for mankind to be civilized otherwise, he believed, we would live by what he referred to as the “law of the jungle”, where he stated that the life of all mankind would be short and violent, because individuals are in a "war of all against all". He stated this when he said “*...whereas in a democracy, or aristocracy, the public prosperity confers not so much to the private fortune of one that is corrupt, or ambitious, as doth many times a perfidious advice, a treacherous action, or a civil war.*” (“The Leviathan”, Pg. 116). Another reason Hobbes believed that monarchy was the right way to go was that a monarch couldn’t disagree with himself/herself, and thus cause a civil war with itself. He stated this when he said “*...a monarch cannot disagree with himself: out of envy or interest, but an assembly may; and that to such a height as may produce a civil war.*” (The Leviathan, Pg. 116). Hobbes himself quoted in “The Leviathan” that there was “*...no perfect form of government, where the disposing of the succession is not in the present sovereign.*” Simply put he meant that there was no perfect form of government that could solve all of man’s problems of choosing his successor, but in a sovereignty the choice simply falls to that of the king or queen. That choice must
always fall upon the present one. All of these reasons and more are why Hobbes believed that sovereignty would be better than any form of democratic/republican government.

II. In “The Leviathan”, Hobbes stated that there are many rights of a sovereign ruler that he believed would better serve people than any other government could. But there are many people who believe these rights have disadvantages in them as they rarely give any power to the people that the king/queen rules. Hobbes stated these “unalienable rights” of sovereign rulers as such: “First, because they covenant, it is to be understood they are not obliged by former covenant... none of his subjects, by any pretense of forfeiture, can be freed from his subjection... he that dissented must now consent with the rest; that is, be contented to avow all the actions he shall do, or else justly be destroyed... no man that hath sovereign power can justly be put to death, or otherwise in any manner by his subjects punished...the sovereignty to be judge of what opinions and doctrines are averse...the sovereignty the whole power of prescribing the rules whereby every man may know what goods he may enjoy, and what actions he may do...the right of judicature... the right of making war and peace with other nations and Commonwealths...is committed the power of rewarding with riches or honour; and of punishing with corporal or pecuniary punishment.” (“The Leviathan”, Pgs. 107-111). This means his people must be completely loyal, can never be freed from his rule, and must always submit to his rules and ideals. This also means that the king/queen can’t be put to death, gets to say what is acceptable or not, has power over the legislative rules and judicial power, has the power to make war and peace with whoever he/she choose, and finally has the power to reward and punish whoever he/she choose. Hobbes goes on to say that he/she have the power to “coin money, to dispose of the estate and persons of infant heirs, to have pre-emption in markets, and all other statute prerogatives may be transferred by the sovereign, and yet the power to protect his subjects be retained.” (“The Leviathan”, Pg. 112). Hobbes believed that these rights make up what is is to be a sovereign ruler, and belong only to the sovereign ruler. Looking at these, one can understand why we would prefer a
representative government instead. A sovereignty would place all of the power in the hands of a single person and makes them the most powerful person even over God, as they have the power to say what is acceptable and what isn’t (religion). Hobbes stated “...it is impossible for a man, who continually endeavoureth to secure himself against the evil he fears, and procure the good he desireth, not to be in a perpetual solicitude of the time to come.” (“The Leviathan”, Pg. 66). Hobbes believed that this is why man created, or at least believed so heavily in God, whom he himself didn’t believe in. Hobbes also said that in religion “The right of nature whereby God reigneth over men, and punisheth those that break his laws, is to be derived, not from His creating them, as if He required obedience as of gratitude for His benefits, but from His irresistible power” (“The Leviathan”, Pg. 219). Hobbes believed that this power belonged solely to the monarch, therefore not only does the monarchy have power over all matters of his kingdom, but the rights which people say belong to god, only belong to the monarch. Hobbes also believed that the church shouldn’t meddle in the affairs of the king. As said, Hobbes didn’t believe in God, he simply found the notion of him a source of power, and one that could become a source of civil war. This was a primary reason he believed the king should be placed above the church (and therefore over God). Some people would, and do, find this idea blasphemous in nature. That being said, there are people who believe that a sovereignty has advantages as well. Crystal Lombardo states this when she states that “It provides people with regional stability, creates numerous economic opportunities, and allows unique cultures to thrive and grow.” These ideas are why some people today still stick with monarchy.

III. A primary reason Hobbes believed that monarchy was the only true form of government that could keep people in line is human greed. It’s safe to say that there is little upside to human greed except for the person who the greed comes from. Erich Fromm, a German psychologist and philosopher, was quoted to say “Greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction.” And there is really no better way to put it, for as soon as we want one thing and get it, we want another. Hobbes wrote “…men have no
pleasure, but on the contrary a great deal of grief, in keeping company where there is no power able to overawe them all. For every man looketh that his companion should value him at the same rate he sets upon himself...” (“The Leviathan”, Pg. 77) By this he means that we never experience happiness, but we do experience grief trying to constantly keep other people in awe of our own accomplishments. Who doesn’t want the attention of others as they marvel at what we accomplish. In the paper “Ethics in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism” by Charles Goodman, Mr. Goodman writes “Actions motivated by greed, hatred and delusion have a tendency to drive those who do them into the three lower realms of suffering.” This simply means that any action caused by greed or hatred will only cause those who do them to suffer. I believe that it’s not only the person who did them that suffers, but everyone around them as well. There are many other cons to being greedy as well, such we may lose those we care for. Hobbes believed that if two men wanted the same thing, then they would become enemies. He states this when he says, “if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end...endeavour to destroy or subdue one another.” (“The Leviathan”, Pg. 76). Hobbes referred to this as the “Right of Nature,” or jus naturale. Hobbes stated that “…the liberty each man hath to use his own power as he will himself for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life; and consequently, of doing anything which, in his own judgement and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto.” (“The Leviathan”, Pg. 79). The idea of The Law of the Jungle, and Might makes Right simply mean that the bigger and tougher you are, the better your life is going to be. He also believed that if you are the strongest, what you say is right no matter what. These ideas, signify human greed. If people truly are like this, then Hobbes was correct and we truly will live short, violent lives. It is because of these characteristics in humans that Hobbes believed that we needed a strict form of government that would keep us in line. And what better way than a monarchy as it allows only a single person to say what is or isn’t allowed.
IV. Of course, Hobbes also spoke of judicial rights and natural rights in “The Leviathan”. The difference between the two is a natural right is one we have since birth, and a judicial right is one granted to us by our government. A (human) right is quite simple: it is a moral or legal claim to have/get something, and to behave in a certain way. These “rights” are believed to belong to every single person (or at least now they are.) Hobbes described a “law of nature” as “…a precept, or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same, and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved.” (“The Leviathan”, Pg 80). These natural laws state that “…every man ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek and use all helps and advantages of war…a man be willing, when others are so too, as far forth as for peace and defence of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things… every man strive to accommodate himself to the rest… a man ought to pardon the offences past of them that, repenting, desire it… every man acknowledge another for his equal by nature…” (“The Leviathan”, Pgs 80-95). This simply means that men (and now women) have the right to pursue their own interests. Hobbes also spoke of rights granted to us by the government, or judicial rights. These rights nowadays would be null void if the all-powerful monarch that Hobbes described was in power (See Appendix). If they had right over all people, then all of the amendments to the Bill of Rights (last page) would become nothing more than ink on paper. Of course, if these monarchs cannot keep social order in their own kingdom then they themselves are a failure as a ruler. The main thing connecting them is the fact that they are rights by name. However, one is granted by the government/king, and the other by of the idea of Might Makes Right. This idea is very simple: in a community with no government, people are chaotic. Because there is no one to rule them, people can do whatever they please, meaning that the rights granted to us by the law are non-existent. And because of this, the only right you have is the one you make for yourself. Hobbes stated this when he said “From this equality of ability ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the
same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies; and in the way to their end (which is principally their own conservation, and sometimes their delection only) endeavour to destroy or subdue one another. And from hence it comes to pass that where an invader hath no more to fear than another man’s single power.” (“The Leviathan”, Pg. 76). If one man wants what another has, he simply has to take it, and since there is no government that is his right.

There are some ideas of an all-powerful monarch I do not agree with. I do not believe that one person should have the right to force others to live by their will. Neither do I believe that everyone has to swear undying loyalty to said person, and back down even if they do not. But as a person who believes strongly with the philosopher Kai Nielsen, I do believe in the idea of utilitarianism. This being the idea that any action, if done for the benefit of the majority of people, should and must be done. This being the case, I find that a single person in charge of a nation would fare much better in politics than a large group of men and women bickering over what’s right and wrong. But like I said, this is only if the monarch doesn’t go too far and become power hungry. In that case, the only action to be taken in the name of the majority is a revolution.
Paper Citations

  This website is a pdf file of the Leviathan. Here Hobbes discussed his ideas of the state of mankind, government, and human greed at length. I used it to give me reading material Hobbes had written about on these subjects.

- https://plato.stanford.edu/search/search?query=greed
  This website is a paper written on Indian and Tibetan Buddhism ethics. While not entirely in line with the focus of my paper, I used it as a perfect example of a person's perception of human greed.

  I used this website as a way of finding a modern day person’s idea of advantages to sovereign rule. “The Leviathan” is full of Hobbes ideas of advantages, but these leave little to be desired. I hoped that by looking for modern day ideas, there would be a little more people who could find advantages of a monarchy.

- https://wcfcourier.com/news/opinion/clayson/natural-vs-legal-rights-there-is-a-differe nce/article_67be7e3e-4e03-11e0-acde-001cc4e002e0.html
  I used this website as a way of finding the difference between judicial and natural rights. As “The Leviathan” is a huge book, I had a hard time finding everything I needed for this, so I tried to find the difference online.

  I used this website as I couldn’t find another website that tells me what our legal rights are. Hobbes didn’t (in my opinion) clearly state our natural or legal rights, so I tried to find another source that would tell what they are.
Appendix

(If a monarch like Hobbes described was in power, all of these rights could be overridden due to the word of the king. If he has power over all things in his estate, he has the power to deny us our rights)

The Bill of Rights
Ratified December 15, 1791

Article I
Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Article II
A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed.

Article III
No Soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the Owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law.

Article IV
The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no Warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by Oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized.

Article V
No person shall be held to answer for a capital, or otherwise infamous crime, unless on a presentment or indictment of a Grand Jury, except in cases arising in the land or naval forces, or in the Militia, when in actual service in time of War or public danger; nor shall any person be subject for the same offence to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb; nor shall be compelled in any Criminal Case to be a witness against himself, nor be deprived of life, liberty, or property, without due process of law; nor shall private property be taken for public use, without just compensation.

Article VI
In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, by an impartial jury of the State and district wherein the crime shall have been committed, which district shall have been previously ascertained by law, and to be informed of the nature and cause of the accusation; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining Witnesses in his favor, and to have the Assistance of Counsel for his defence.

Article VII
In Suits at common law, where the value in controversy shall exceed twenty dollars, the right of trial by jury shall be preserved, and no fact tried by a jury shall be otherwise reexamined in any Court of the United States, than according to the rules of the common law.

Article VIII
Excessive bail shall not be required, nor excessive fines imposed, nor cruel and unusual punishment inflicted.

Article IX
The enumeration in the Constitution, of certain rights, shall not be construed to deny or disparage others retained by the people.

Article X
The powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people.