

POLI 342: MODERN WESTERN POLITICAL THOUGHT

Session 4– . THOMAS HOBBS AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT (PART I)

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Session Overview

•Welcome to session 4: Thomas Hobbes and The Social Contract Part 1. Hobbes' political writings were occasioned by civil wars and were intended by him to exert influence upon the side of the king. Note that Hobbes' writings were designed to support absolute government and therefore absolute monarchy. Hobbes sincerely believed that monarchy was the most suitable and orderly system of government. The only positive impact this position had was the philosophical radicalism of the Utilitarians in the nineteenth century, and John Austin's theory of sovereignty. In this session, my focus is on three key things. First, I discuss the background of Hobbes. Second, examine his conception of human nature, third, the state of nature and law of nature and finally, explore the qualities of the natural law and the commonwealth. I wish you well.

Session outline

This session covers the following topics:

- The Background of Hobbes.
- Hobbes' Conception of Human Nature
- The State of Nature and Law of Nature
- The Qualities of The Natural Law and the Commonwealth



TOPIC ONE

The Background of Hobbes

Life and Works of Hobbes

- Hobbes was an English political philosopher who wrote in the 17th century, which was dominated by the 30 years' war in Europe.
- Hobbes was compelled to flee to France for eight years.
- The civil war (1642-1649) led to the beheading of Charles I.
- *His death virtually terminated the doctrine of the divine right of kings.*
- In his work, the *Leviathan*, he depicted the condition of humanity in a hypothetical “*state of nature*” that would exist in the absence of governmental authority.

Life and Works of Hobbes (cont' d)

- This condition of state of nature, Hobbes argued, would be characterized by anarchy.
- Hobbes argues that "during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war is of every man against every man" (Leviathan, ch. XIII).
- In this state there is “*a war of every one against every one*” .

Life and Works of Hobbes (cont' d)

- In such a pre-societal stage, there would be “*a continual fear of danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.*”
- He refers to that pre-civil condition as the “state of nature” .
- *People are living in constant fear of each other.*
- In such pre-civil condition there is no place for industry

Life and Works of Hobbes (cont' d)

- Hobbes says there is an escape route from the state of nature into a civilized human condition.
- The state of nature is for men and women to turn their fear of each other into a joint collaboration.
- Their mutual fear and insecurity drives them away from natural condition: the war of all against all.

Life and Works of Hobbes (cont' d)

- Hobbes is of the view that the human condition is a condition of insecurity and conflict which must be addressed and dealt with.
- There is a body of political knowledge, or wisdom, to deal with the problem of security.
- There appears to be no final escape from this human condition, which is a permanent feature of human life



TOPIC TWO

Hobbes' Conception of Human Nature

MOTION

- He says that some motions are vital and some are voluntary
- Breathing, pulse for instance are vital motions
- Whereas walking, speaking are voluntary motions
- Motions are dependent on previous thoughts and deliberate endeavor
- Men are moved by appetite and aversion
- Appetite and aversion determine a man's voluntary actions
- Man also responds to the call of the environment
- Man is therefore not totally independent

Power

- Apart from appetite and aversion, men are also moved by motive of power
- Power is used by man to achieve some future good
- The implication is that man is never satisfied with his present condition
- He is always looking for ways to increase or improve his present circumstances
- He divides power into two:
 - Original or natural power
 - Instrumental power

Power

- Original Power: Is the eminence of the faculties of body or mind such as ex-ordinary strengths, prudence, eloquence etc.
- Instrumental Power: This power is acquired by body or mind with the help of wealth, reputation etc.
- Power of man is used to resist the power of others
- The psychological principle behind all actions is the desire for “self-preservation” .
- The body wants to preserve or heighten its vitality
- Man is to a very large extent realistic minded.

Power

- There is a relentless desire on the part of man for power after power, that only ceases after death.
- For Hobbes good and bad are subjective concepts and absolutely private.
- Man can decide what is good or bad for him
- Man takes the cudgel for his own safety
- Man takes his own decisions with the behavior of others always in mind.



TOPIC THREE

The State of Nature and Law of Nature

The State of Nature

- Hobbes' notion of the State of Nature is a logical follow up from his perspective of human nature and the concept of power.
- To Hobbes, human "nature" consists passions like joy, pain, fear, hope, indignation and ambition.
- In the *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes (1651) writes: "During the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called War

The State of Nature (cont' d)

- Hobbes argues that all men must seek incessantly to attain satisfaction of their desires.
- Every man must always seek to have some power, although not every man is self impelled to seek as much power as others have, or to seek more than he now has.
- Hobbes points out that man's innate desires and his natural aversion of death are the primary motivations for him to seek power to satisfy those desire and avoid the aversions avoided.
- However, some men have immoderate desires compared to other men

The State of Nature (cont' d)

- Hobbes argues that in this hypothetical state of nature, the competitive nature of men for "a perpetual and restless desire for Power after power" means that it is a "war of all against all".
- He continues that, *the state of nature is an extremely adverse human circumstance in which there is a permanent 'state of war' of every man against every man.*
- Life in this hypothetical state of nature, a situation of anarchy and disorder, would be nothing but "*solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short*".

Natural Law

- Natural law or the law of nature (Latin: *lex naturalis*) is a theory that posits the existence of a law whose content is set by nature and that therefore has validity everywhere.
- Most philosophers who also believe in the concept of social contract also believe in the natural law.
- The phrase *natural law* is opposed to the positive law (which is man-made) of a given political community, society, or nation state, and thus can function as a standard by which to criticize that law.

Natural Law (cont' d)

- In English, this term is equivalent to the laws of nature.
- Among the Roman jurists, natural law designated those instincts and emotions common to man and the lower animals, such as the instinct of self-preservation and love of offspring.
- In its ethical application—the natural law is the rule of conduct which is prescribed to us by the Creator.

Natural Law (cont' d)

- According to St. Thomas Aquinas, the natural law is nothing else than *the rational creature's participation in the eternal law*.
- What then is eternal law? This is God's wisdom, inasmuch as it is the directive norm of all movement and action.
- When God willed to give existence to creatures, He willed to ordain and direct them to an end.

Natural Law (cont' d)

- Actions are wrong if, (though serving the satisfaction of some particular need or tendency), are at the same time incompatible with that rational harmonious subordination of the lower to the higher which reason should maintain among our conflicting tendencies and desires

TOPIC FOUR

The Qualities of The Natural Law and the Commonwealth

The Qualities of The Natural Law and the Commonwealth

- The natural law is universal in its conception and application
- This is because the natural law is deemed to owe its existence to nature
- There are two main qualities of the concept of natural law. These are:
- (a) The natural law is *universal*, that is to say, it applies to the entire human race, and is in itself the same for all.

Qualities of Law of Nature

- (b) The natural law is *immutable* in itself and also extrinsically. Since it is founded in the very nature of man and his destination to his end
- The natural law commands and forbids in the same tenor everywhere and always.
- Natural law theories have exercised enormous influence on the development of English common law, and have featured the writings of Thomas Aquinas, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke.

The Commonwealth

- According to Hobbes Men live in commonwealths or civil society for a variety of reasons.
- This includes putting limitations upon themselves.
- This will help them to preserve their lives and live contentedly.
- By living in commonwealths, men extricate themselves, to a large extent, “from the miserable condition of war” .

The Commonwealth (cont' d)

- The sole objective to create a single source of power so as to mobilize their collective resources and protect their interest and thereby live happily “*is to confer all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills, by plurality of voices, unto one will*”
- This sovereign power is attainable in two ways.
 - Commonwealth by institution
 - Commonwealth by acquisition.