

A Critique of Hobbes' Notion of the Absolute Sovereign

Azibalua Onyaghola &
Emmanuel Ekadi

Abstract

This study is a critique of Thomas Hobbes' notion of the Absolute Sovereign. The study employs textual and expository analysis. The paper discovered that in Hobbes' society, people decide to come into a commonwealth because of the fear of surrendering all their rights to an Absolute Sovereign who becomes the author of morality and law. Hobbes' theory of Absolute Sovereign breeds chaos and social disorder as well as dictatorship and authoritarianism. This would especially be dangerous in the age of hi-tech nuclear weaponry. This work is therefore inspired the anomalies in Hobbes' premises and conclusion. The paper finally recommends that a political theory should be formulated towards solving the holistic existential problems of people and not just an aspect of it.

Keywords: Absolute, nature, power, Social Contract, and sovereign

Introduction

Political philosophy is one of the most important branches of philosophy because it brings to bear the significance, meaning and ought of political concepts, and how they should affect the well-being of people in society. Political philosophy is more than the history of political theories. It is the point where political science and philosophy meet to ensure good governance. Describing good government, Aristotle said, "it is the government that creates an enabling environment for the people to actualize their natural potentialities" (Collinwood, 234). As a result of the significance of politics in everyday activities, Harold Laswell defines politics as "who gets what, when and how". He proceeds to emphasize that power is the major ingredient of politics. This, therefore, suggests that politics is essentially the struggle for power to legally monopolize the decision-making process in society. Because political philosophy erects the platform for such fundamental questions of how society ought to be ruled, the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679) was not only significant during his time, but also in every epoch under the sun.

As a political philosopher, Hobbes was also troubled by these political questions of how men in a society ought to be governed in peace. In the world in which Hobbes found himself, there was strife, conflicts and political tussles for power and other severe political unrest, such as described in "Human Condition". When Charles I was beheaded in 1649, many thinkers at this time felt physically threatened, the Catholic Church, newly banished from the England court by Henry VIII but still the most powerful political force in Europe, cracked down hard on what it considered heresy ... Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake in 1600 for claiming as Galileo did that the earth revolves around the sun (Galileo later retracted his statement to save his life) (Rosenstand, 354)".

Because every philosopher is inspired to philosophize on any aspects of life, as a result of the extant social and political circumstances, Hobbes concluded that man is by nature selfish, and is geared towards self-preservation. Arising from the foregoing, man can only be united and ruled in peace by a sovereign with absolute power. Here, the paper tries to delve into Thomas Hobbes' view on human nature, the state of nature and the notion of the Absolute Sovereign to critique it.

Human Nature

Thomas Hobbes sees humans as not only selfish by nature, but equally and simultaneously nature has made men so.

...equal in the facilities of body and mind as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in the body or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he (Hobbes, 12).

As to the strength of the body, Hobbes argued that "even the weakest has enough strength to kill the strongest either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with him. Emphasizing equality among men, Hobbes adds that there exists more among men than that strength. This is called prudence, which is but experience, which equals time equally bestowed on all men in those things they equally engage in. "A vain concept of one's wisdom which almost all men think they have in a greater degree than all men but themselves make such equality incredible (Hobbes, 12). According to Hobbes, man thinks of himself as wittier, more learnt, and wiser than others, even though he may acknowledge that there exists some witty, learnt and wise. "For they see their wit at hand other men's a distance" (Hobbes, 183). Nevertheless, Hobbes argues that this point goes to show that men are equal to unequal. "For there is not ordinarily a greater sign of the equal distribution of anything than that every man to be contented with his share (Hobbes, 184).

It is via this equality of ability that arises the hope in attaining our ends, but if two men desire the same thing which they both cannot enjoy they become enemies. Therefore, in the process of getting their ends, they destroy or subdue one another.

And from hence it comes to pass that when an invader has no more to fear than another man's single power; if one plants, sow, builds or possess a convenient seat, others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united to dispossess and deprive him not only of the fruit of his labour but also of his life or liberty (Hobbes, 186).

Nevertheless, Hobbes asserts that the invader himself is also in danger of another.

Men according to Hobbes, do not take pleasure in keeping company where there is no power to keep them quiet. Every man desires that his companion should value him at the same rate he sets upon himself. Thus, like man, three principal things are the causes of quarrels. They are competition, diffidence and glory. Competition makes men invade others for gain and utilize violence to make themselves masters of other men, their wives, children and cattle. Diffidence makes them fight to defend themselves. Glory makes men invade others for reputation. It is therefore like men to utilize every means necessary for their preservation and their ego.

State of Nature

Hobbes talks about a time before organized society, which he called the state of nature, where men lived according to their appetites. For morality was absent in the state of nature. Thus, it is a state of war for men had no power to keep them all in awe. Thus, in the state of nature, it is neither morally good nor bad, just which is a fact of life, and was determined by the appetite and might of man. So, what is life like in the state of nature? Hobbes sees it as a "war of every man against every man" and he proceeds to describe it in the Leviathan thus:

In such conditions, 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 instrument of moving and removing such things as required 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 (Rosenstand, 355).

So, for Hobbes, the state of nature is a state without rules for the selfish nature of man and in them no sin. However, the state of nature was not entirely lawless, it had the law of nature to govern it but the law of nature itself which according to Hobbes is discoverable by reason is the foundation of man's selfishness. Hobbes describes it as:

A law of nature, *lex naturalis*, is 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 (Rosenstand, 356).

Therefore, the state of nature is a state of war of every man against every man because of the selfish nature of man.

Social Contract

Man seeks self-preservation and security, but he is unable to attain these in the natural condition of war. The law of nature is unable to achieve this desired end by itself alone but requires a coercive power above to enforce its observance by sanctions for morality according to Hobbes is absent in the state of nature: the state of war and insecurity. Though the laws of nature are dictates of reason, they are contrary to man's natural passions. Covenants without the sword are but words and of no strength to secure a man at all (Copleston, 32).

It is thus expedient that there should be a common power or government backed by force and able to punish. According to Hobbes, “the law of nature themselves without the terror of some power to cause them to be observed are contrary to our natural passion: that carries us to partiality, pride, revenge and the likes” (Hobbes, 225). For without a power erected and great enough for human security, every man will lawfully rely on his strength as a form of protection against all other men.

Men according to Hobbes got fed up with the solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short life in the state of nature, for there were constant fears of violent death. So, men decide to form a civil society, by coming into a social contract. Hobbes says:

The only way to erect such a common power as may be able to defend them from the invasion of foreigners and the injuries of one another and thereby to secure them in such a way that by their industry and by the fruits of the earth, they may nourish themselves and live contentedly, is to confer all their power and strength upon one man or upon one assembly of men that may reduce all their wills by a plurality of voices unto one will (Hobbes, 229).

From the above quotation as made by Hobbes, he maintains that for man to co-exist peacefully they must confer their powers and strengths upon one man or upon one assembly of men that may reduce their wills by a plurality of voices into one will. However, the paper doubts if Hobbes suggested one assembly as well because the gigantic individual on the cover page of the 'Leviathan' does not suggest an assembly of men, but a single individual.

This transfer of rights and powers takes place by a covenant of every man with every man, for instance, every man says to every man, I authorize and give up my right of governing of myself, to this man or this assembly of men. When this is done, the multitude so united in one person is called the commonwealth. It is noteworthy that where Hobbes speaks of the multitude being united in one person does not mean that the multitude constitutes this person. Rather, it means that the multitude is united in the person, whether an individual or an assembly to whom they transfer their rights. He, therefore, defines the essence of the Commonwealth. According to him:

One person of whose acts a great multitude by mutual covenants one with another have made themselves everyone the author to the end he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient for their peace and common defence (Hobbes, 230).

This person is called the sovereign and everyone else is his subject. The supreme power, whether a man or an assembly of men is called the sovereign and his powers are unlimited.

The Sovereign and His Rights

The rights of the sovereign emerged from the institution of a commonwealth. One such right is absolute power bestowed to him by the subjects. Thus, the subjects cannot change the form of government; they cannot lawfully make a new covenant amongst themselves to be obedient to another without the permission of the sovereign; for all powers belong to him. The subjects cannot even without the leaves of a monarch cast off monarchy and return to the state of nature. "For they are bound every man to every man to own and be a reputed author of all, that he that already is their sovereign shall do and judge fit to be done" (Hobbes, 230). It is thus injustice for one man to dissent, and all the other subjects to break their covenant made to the sovereign. It is also injustice for the sovereign to be overthrown.

Another right of the sovereign by the institution is that his power is unforgettable because the right of bearing the person of them all is given to him, they make sovereign by covenant only of one to another and not of him to any of them; there can happen no breach of covenant on the part of the sovereign (Hobbes, 232). Thus, none of his subjects can ever be freed from his subjection.

It is also the right of the sovereign that no man can without injustice protest against the institution without the entirety of the citizens who avowedly consented to their right upon the sovereign with one voice. Hence, whosoever must now consent with the rest ... "that is be contented to avow all the actions he shall do or else justly be destroyed by the rest" (Hobbes, 232). This, therefore, implies that citizens in the minority who disagree with the instituting of a sovereign must as a matter of necessity agree with the majority group or stand to be destroyed if they do otherwise.

It is as well the sovereign's right to be always right in all his actions. In other words, the sovereign's actions cannot be justly accused by the subjects.

Every subject is by this institution author of all the actions and judgment of the sovereign instituted; it follows that whatsoever he doeth, it can be no injury to any of his subjects, nor ought he to be by any of them accused of injustice (Hobbes, 232).

Consequently, the man that complains of injury from his sovereign complains of that which he is the author of. Thus, he ought to accuse himself and not any man. However, Hobbes holds that the sovereign might commit iniquity, but it cannot be regarded as an injustice. "It is true that they that have sovereign power may commit iniquity, but not injustice or injury in the proper signification" (Hobbes, 232). It is also the right of the sovereign to be the judge of what is necessary to ensure the peace and defence of his subjects.

And because the end of this institution is the peace and defence of them all; and whosoever has right to the end, has right to the means, it belongeth of right to whatsoever man or assembly that hath the sovereign to be the judge of the means of peace and defence, and also of the hindrance, and disturbance of the same, and to do whatsoever he shall think necessary to be done, both beforehand, for the preserving of peace and security by prevention and discord at home and hostility from abroad (Hobbes, 234).

It is thus evident that the sovereign enjoys absolute power to ensure peace and security, even if it means killing any of his subjects. The next right of the sovereign is the right to make rules which none of his subjects can without injustice taken away from him. This right of the sovereign was postulated by Hobbes in the seventh right. The sovereign ruler has the whole power of prescribing the rules whereby a man may know the benefits he starts to enjoy and actions he may carry out without being harassed by any of his fellow subjects (Hobbes, 234 – 235).

Also, the rights of adjudication over decisions of controversy belong to the sovereign. It is the right of the sovereign to preside on controversial issues concerning the law, either civil, natural or concerning facts. If there is no decision of controversy, there will be no protection of one subject against the injustice of another. This is the eighth right of the sovereign by an institution as postulated by Hobbes.

The ninth right of the sovereign as postulated by Hobbes is awesome and worrisome simultaneously. It is the right of the sovereign according to Hobbes, to see to the making of war, and peace as he shall think best.

The tenth right of the sovereign by an institution is the right to choose all councilors and ministers, both of peace and war. He alone has the right to choose the magistrates and officers.

The eleventh right of the sovereign as postulated by Hobbes is the right of rewarding and punishing good or bad actions of the citizenry. The sovereign has the power to reward with riches or honour those that have performed excellently. He also has the right of punishing those that have acted corruptly. However, the purpose of rewarding and punishing men is to encourage men to serve the commonwealth or deter them from doing evil to the commonwealth.

The twelfth right of the sovereign is according to Hobbes, "to the sovereign therefore, it belongeth also to give titles of honour and to appoint what order of place and dignity each man shall hold and what signs of respect in public or private meetings they shall give to one another" (Hobbes, 235).

These rights according to Hobbes are indivisible:

These are the rights which make the essence of the sovereign, and which are the marks, whereby a man may discern in what man or assembly of men, the sovereign power is placed or resideth" (Hobbes, 235).

Therefore, for Hobbes, these rights of the sovereign are what make the sovereign. Thus, the rights are incommunicable and inseparable. The power of the sovereign is the same in whosoever it is placed. Hence, the honour and power of the subjects vanish in the presence of the sovereign power. For in the sovereign is the fountain of honour and power. The dignities of Lords, Earls, Dukes and Princes are his creatures. He is more like God in whose presence man is powerless. As in the presence of the master, the servants are equal and without any power at all, so are the subjects in the presence of the sovereign. Although the subjects may be relevant in the absence of the sovereign, in the presence of the sovereign, all their powers become automatically irrelevant. For his rights and powers supersedes all their powers. They are like darkness in the presence of light.

What kind of rights and powers are these, in the hand of a single individual or group of individuals?

Critique

There is nothing that is so in philosophy, and this is the reason for the continued existence of philosophy. Over the years, many political scientists and political philosophers have either written for or against Hobbes' notion of rights, sovereignty, the state of nature, social contract and so on. Their reason is not far from those presented here, which is to unravel the inconsistencies and irrational modes and arguments used by Hobbes in his political philosophy. However, the paper hopes to produce a novel form of criticism of Hobbes' notion of absolute sovereignty within the scope of his postulations in the Leviathan.

The situation in contemporary Nigeria is not too different from that which prompted Hobbes' postulation of an Absolute Sovereign as the necessary condition for peace amongst selfish men in a commonwealth. We, on the contrary, think it will be very dreadful to take the same decision as Hobbes because absolute power corrupts absolutely.

Many scholars, scientists, theologians, philosophers and politicians have critiqued the Absolute Sovereign for many reasons, but the argument that fascinates curiosity here is that by G. A. Balz, who holds that Hobbes'

sovereign is nothing, but a dictator, which he likens to a frictionless machine, and which from the standpoint of a mechanic is a logical monster.

From the standpoint of political theorizing, dictatorship is not a theory of the state and the government. ... Dictatorship like a frictionless machine can only be exposed (Balz, 143).

Balz has a good reason for regarding dictatorship as a logical monster because all rights and powers which Hobbes does not differentiate, are vested upon the sovereign whom Hobbes seems to forget that he is also selfish. The theologians say that dictatorship is nothing but madness. The scientists also deny dictatorship as a form of government, especially as described by Hobbes because in such an environment, science and technology will be nothing but a handmaiden to the sovereign; whose powers or rights supersede that of sciences.

Be that as it may, one of our biggest problems with Hobbes' premise is his notion of human nature as absolutely selfish and aggressive when he strives to satisfy his desires.

The desires and other passions of man are in themselves no sin. No more are the actions that proceed from those passions, till they know a law that forbids them; which till laws be made they cannot know; nor can any law be made, till they have agreed upon the person that shall make it (Rosenstand, 386).

Hobbes' postulation of man as a naturally selfish and aggressive being does not portray man as a rational animal, superior to every other animal. Rather, Hobbes' description portrays the character of a wild beast that is driven by his passions. If such an animalistic character is central to human nature, then it would be impossible for men to decide to form a social contract. For beasts cannot suddenly become rational and let go of all their rights and powers and bestow them upon another selfish individual or group of individuals to have a rule over them. This we think is a logical inconsistency in Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*.

The State, according to Hobbes, defines the interests of individuals and society; it alone has the prerogative of fixing aims. The State is sovereign over all good and bad, rights and wrongs, and the very meaning of the terms. If this is not the case, then the absoluteness of the sovereign is jeopardized – and there is a return to the state of nature. There may seem to be a harmony of interests between individuals and groups but becomes nonsense if the sovereign does not second their common view, especially if he thinks it is a threat to national security. Thus, it is nonsense to speak of harmony between citizens and the sovereign, which makes the right to revolt untenable.

Another major inconsistency in Hobbes' *Leviathan* is his assertion that morality and ethics emerge at the installation of the sovereign. According to Hobbes:

To this, war of every man against every man, this also is consequent: that nothing can be unjust. The notion of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power there is no law; where there is no law, no justice (Stumpf, 272).

The above passage in the *Leviathan* is shrouded with a mist of inconsistencies and questions, as a result, John Locke, father of British Empiricism postulated his state of nature in which he argued that "man is not by nature selfish, and the state of nature was not a state of war, of every man against every man" (Stumpf, 272). For Locke rather, the state of nature was a peaceful one because the natural law which is the same as the moral law was there to guide and judge the actions of men, for it is discoverable by reason, "men living together according to reason without a common superior on earth with authority to judge between them is properly the state of nature" (Stumpf, 272). Locke proceeds further in his "Second Treatise of Government" to emphasize his concept of the state of nature:

The reason is that law teaches all mankind who will but consult it that, being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possession (Stumpf, 273).

However, if the state of nature was not chaotic as Locke thinks because people naturally have rights and also know the moral law, why do they desire to leave the state of nature? The answer Locke gave was intriguing, "... the great and chief end of men's uniting into commonwealth and putting themselves under government is the preservation of their property" (Stumpf, 273). By property, Locke meant people's lives, liberty and estate. Although Locke asserts that people know the moral law or can know the moral law if they turn their minds to it, unfortunately, through indifference and neglect, they do not always consult it. When disputes arise as a result of the smartness of some more than others, they use it to their advantage. It is thus better to have a booth a set of written laws and also an independent judge to decide judgments over disputes. To achieve this end, people create a political society.

Furthermore, Hobbes' assertion of the emergence of morality at the advent of the sovereign, had also tickled the curiosity of this author: if morality was absent in the state of nature, how then did the sovereign becomes the author of morality? Did the sovereign come from another world? Or maybe the sovereign is an angel who descended from heaven with the concept of morality and law. This is not so, Hobbes meant that the sovereign is one of the citizens who lived together with everyone else in the state of nature as a selfish and aggressive individual or individuals. If this is the case, then it does not follow that the sovereign: whether an individual or an assembly of men could be the inventor of morals.

It also insinuates that man in the state of nature was not properly described by Hobbes as naturally selfish. Rather, it implies that the existentialists had a better understanding of the nature of mankind, which according to Friedrich Nietzsche is not fixed but several, which according to him, is the reason there cannot be a universal moral standard that all men must conform to.

Nevertheless, this paper is not asserting that it agrees with Locke's notion of the state of nature or Rousseau's version that man in the state of nature was naturally good but was corrupted by society. The paper is careless about whether it is a truism or false that there was ever a time in history when men lived in a state of nature because it has to realize that the Leviathan and the state of nature are merely political propaganda meant by Hobbes as an incentive to attract favour in the sight of the royal family. For this reason, it is very significant the paper exposes some of the inconsistencies that tarry with it, for the political philosophy or propaganda of Hobbes is applicable everywhere, and every time. There are shreds of evidence of it even in contemporary Nigeria, especially in the reign of Olusegun Obasanjo.

Similar to the view above, Fredrick Copleston asserts that Hobbes' deduction of the state from a consideration of the passions of man goes a long way towards explaining his authoritarianism and his insistence on the powers of the sovereign. But it could be seen that his authoritarian ideas were not simply the result of a philosophical deduction, for they were greatly strengthened by his reflection on concrete historical events in his own country and by his fear and hatred for civil war (Copleston, 50 – 51). According to Hobbes' biography, it could be discovered that he was a very fearful man; he attested to this fact when he explained, "fear and I were born twins" (Hobbes, 7). The paper, therefore, argues that Hobbes' postulation of an absolute sovereign was deliberate, and geared towards tyranny because Hobbes thought that everyone was as fearful as he was, and thought that it is only under the rule of an absolute sovereign that genuine and assured peace can be attained against naturally selfish men.

And we can take him up with the Renaissance writer, Machiavelli, who they are extremist. Copleston holds that Hobbes' absolute sovereignty represents God. Thus, he wrote the *Leviathan* when he had the intention of going home and that he wished to win the favour of Cromwell.

Bertrand Russell on his part maintained that Hobbes was obsessed with the fear of anarchy. He says that at times, rebellion and revolution are necessary to check the evils of rulers, for he sees the Russian revolution of

1917 as one which was timely and necessary to end ignorance and subjugation which bad government engendered. But alas! Absolute sovereign, he preferred could be worse.

Conclusion

It is worthy of emphasis that the creation of every moral and political theory is meant to improve the social and political situation of the time of its propounding. And it is not produced to satisfy the personal interests of the one who propounds, but the common interests of the masses. But Hobbes' political philosophy – *Leviathan*, tends to have been propounded to satisfy the personal interest of Hobbes. Any theory that cannot help solve human existential problems should be discarded, so the pragmatists argue. Let alone a theory that might worsen the situation like the Absolute Sovereign as postulated by Hobbes. Like the paper has said before, the *Leviathan* is a political propaganda that should be jettisoned like excretion because it asks all powers to be bestowed to a sovereign to be more like God, all in the name of security and peace as if the Absolute Sovereign is a necessary condition for peace and security. People decide to come into a commonwealth because of the fear of danger but Hobbes is asking them to go back into greater danger; by consenting all their rights upon a sovereign to also be the determiner of good and bad. Thus, whatever the sovereign thinks is in the best for the people is what counts, for he is the author of morality and law. In other words, what is best for the sovereign is best for the people, and what is bad for the sovereign is bad for the people, all in the name of peace and security. What Hobbes asks people to do is worse than asking somebody to commit suicide. Therefore, it should be jettisoned and left in the cold to die.

These are reasons for not thinking only about the risk of anarchy, but also about the danger of injustice and ossification that is bound up with omnipotence in governments. Hobbes thus failed to realize that there are many other factors to consider in government than the fear of anarchy. His hasty conclusion is derived from his fearful nature. "Fear and I were born twins" (Hobbes, 9). Hobbes thinks everyone is as fearful as he was, and this led to the birth of his conclusion in the *Leviathan*.

Hobbes was so strongly impressed with the need for the compulsion to maintain social cohesion that, he could not envisage a society without government. The dissolution of government, for Hobbes, meant the end of all order and restraint, and the return to barbaric living. He trusts that society will set up a new government to serve its ends and purposes.

Finally, from our analysis of Hobbes' "Absolute Sovereign", we can infer that Hobbes is ready to sacrifice the freedom and the rights of the citizens on the altar of security. Hobbes would rather have an authoritarian ruler than social chaos and disorder. However, Hobbes failed to understand that human historical development can never be entirely peaceful as he wishes. He forgot what Heraclitus asserts, that there is unity in the opposite, and that conflict is necessary for development.

Works Cited

- Balz, A. G. A. *The indispensability of dictatorship and the doctrine of Hobbes*. The Journal of Philosophy, Vol 36, (NYSC Press, 1939).
- Collinwood, Robin G. *Essays in political philosophy*. Clarendon Press, 1989.
- Copleston, Fredrick. *History of philosophy*. Burns and Oates Limited, 1961.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. Ed. with an introduction by C. B. Macpherson, Penguin Books, 1981.
- Machowski, M. Mideast Journal, www.mathewmachowski.com/2009/12/htm>, Accessed July 1, 2022.
- Omogegbe, Joseph. *An introduction to philosophical jurisprudence*. Joja Educational Research and Publishers Limited,

2007.

Rosenstand, Nina. *The human condition: an introduction to the philosophy of human nature*. McGraw-Hill, 2002.

Stumpf, Enoch Samuel. *Philosophy: history and problem*. McGraw-Hill Inc. 1994.

William E. – *Great political thinkers: Plato to the present*. Dryden Press, 1969.

www.mathewmachowski.com Accessed October 29, 2022.

www.norton.com/./hobbes.htm Accessed September 2, 2022.