

Thomas Hobbes's Political Philosophy

Thomas Hobbes was born in England and lived during a time of religious strife and absolutism. He is best known for his thoughts on social and political order, and reasoned why we should give our full obedience to the government in order to avoid the 'state of nature' - which is defined as the condition of people before there is a civil society.

Hobbes believed that every human action is motivated by selfishness. For example, we would only donate to charity or a homeless person out of the fear that one day we may fall into the same situation. The same theory can be applied to the workings of firefighters and soldiers. These views can easily be considered as extreme because of his failure to consider that there is a difference between selfishness and acting in self-interest. For example, buying food when you are hungry would probably not be considered as an act of selfishness, but rather an act of self-interest.

Acts of selfishness, according to Hobbes, would be characterized as living in the state of nature, which is living by one or all of the following: 1) selfishness, 2) fear, and 3) a lack of morality. Hobbes believed that selfishness is the opposite of morality, because with morality there is a connection with good behavior- whereas with selfishness there is a lack of consideration for others. For example, cutting in line at the grocery store is inconsiderate of others that are in line, and therefore bad or immoral behavior.

Fear is also a major characteristic in the state of nature. Hobbes believed that fear was also a main motivation for religion, because it helped people with their fear of death by creating an afterlife. If there is an afterlife, there is no reason to fear death because death is not the end- and not only is death not the end, but possibly the beginning of a much better life. For these reasons, Hobbes believed that religion was a great source of control.

By defining the state of nature, Hobbes concluded that human beings cannot live together in peace or avoid civil conflict without government intervention. He believed that without government, everyone is selfish, or living in the state of nature. He believed that laws are the legislation of moral values- and he also thought we should abide by them even when they are bad laws.

Hobbes believed that there are no unjust laws because justice means obeying the law. However, there can still be bad laws, and if there are, we should still abide by them because if we don't we are contradicting our decision to obey the sovereign and such an act brings us back to the state of nature. The only way we can leave the state of nature, according to Hobbes, is to reason and problem solve.

The ability to reason and problem solve is determined by the 3 laws of nature: 1) To pursue peace, 2) to achieve peace, and 3) to keep one's agreements.

Basically, these laws of nature say that we should not treat others the way in which we would not like to be treated ourselves. According to Hobbes, the only way to achieve this is for everyone to submit their power to the sovereign authority. When everyone mutually

submits their power to a sovereign, they are promising their obedience in exchange for protection- and only when the government fails to protect the people is when their political obligation ends.

It is only when we realize these laws are absolute that we can leave the state of nature. Eventually, whatever the will of the sovereign is, becomes your will. And any resistance against the sovereign is immoral.

Hobbes was against civil disobedience for 2 reasons: 1) It violates the laws of nature, and 2) To resist is to revert back to the state of nature.

One of the reasons civil disobedience violates the state of nature is because the act of disobedience is not pursuing peace (which is the 1st law of nature). If you are not pursuing peace, you are still in the state of nature, and being in the state of nature is the worst place you can be. During Hobbes's lifetime, blacks and American Indians were considered uncivilized, and other scholars classified them as being in the state of nature.

Civil disobedience is also like reverting back to the state of nature because it is like fighting yourself. When the social contract was formed between you and the government, you agreed to submit your powers to the sovereign. To resist the sovereign is like resisting or fighting yourself because you made the decision to align yourself to the sovereign. Fighting these decisions violates the laws of nature (primarily the 3rd law which states that one must keep one's agreements) and confirms that you are still in the state of nature- which again, is the worst place one can be.