

Thomas Hobbes and the Problem of Authority in 17th c. England

All was well in England until the legitimacy of the throne had come into question, beginning with James I venturing over from Scotland as a local sovereign in 1603, and the problem of authority was hotly debated among contemporary thinkers. Thomas Hobbes, an early Scripture-based political scientist, laid the groundwork for understanding what source the civil law code is derived from, who is subject to its authority and why, and what the consequences are for obeying or transgressing the law. Though many later critics argue that Hobbes' political philosophy in *Leviathan* was atheistic in nature, his fundamental examination of the legal system's origin and authenticity of sovereign leadership appear very similar to the arguments conveyed by King James I in his "Trew Law of Free Monarchies" as well as King Charles I in his self-defense against Parliament's accusations of treason. While King James and Charles may not agree with the Protestant nature of Hobbes' Christian political philosophy, they would most likely have championed him as a defender of the faith, the monarchy and of England. From yet another perspective, Hobbes may have been penning his own ticket to the aristocracy through an elaborate satire.

King James VI of Scotland outlined his Scriptural basis for kingship in 1598 in "The Trew Law of Free Monarchies," recommending the reading of I Samuel in the Old Testament as a validated model of the duty of kings in protecting their subjects and precedent for his absolute authority as King of England. Since God had given King Solomon to his people, it was justified that autocracy was the preferred form of Divine leadership. He wrote the treatise 5 years before he even became King of England, prefacing his entry to the throne under legitimate authority by God's Word alone, and preeminently absolved contrarian arguments against the validity of his authority. This argument's logical foundation would later be contested in the trial of his son,

King Charles I. Citing the numerous kingships of the Bible, James asserts that unity is the perfection of all things (63). Without peace and order in a commonwealth, God is disgraced by man's misdeeds and lack of cohesion – thus a king is a very profitable thing to have around, to place order on society and enforce God's natural laws. The king is to administer justice and judgment to his subjects, to procure peace for the people, and to care for their nourishment, education, and government over their virtuous lives (64-65). Any disagreement with this natural order is a transgression of God's law and James asserts that, as a sovereign, he is able to freely apply justice to his unlawful subjects in any way deemed fit, with the only available recourse of prayer and tears to God himself (79-80).

By taking on the role of the protector, James asserted his personal role at the head of the State as God's direct aid and Father to the people. His perceived elaborate concert of arrangement of nourishment, securities and virtuous living was mostly orchestrated by the local barons that managed their feudal properties. This strong sense of leadership and aspiration of unity for England granted him the inspiration to rule absolutely over all of the territory. By establishing absolute authority, backed by his divine mandate to rule, James made progressive political changes that actually allowed the people to read and write in an increasingly unified language, experience religion in a collectivized way, and advocate healthy practices with regard to nutrition and exercise. Ultimately, these mandates benefited the people in exactly the same ways that James had promised with his Scriptural declaration, though the legitimacy of this authority was still challenged by others who were dissatisfied with the King's decision making for the whole of men in England.

James also later wrote "Declaration to His Subjects Concerning Lawfull Sports" in 1618, popularly known as the *Book of Sports*, where he attempts to prevent his subjects from simply

enjoying themselves and participating in non-sanctioned activities on Sundays (146). The King used his authority to directly control the habits of the people of England in an effort to manage the indoctrination of his subjects with his codified state religion. With Catholic adversaries and increasingly more organized Puritanical groups vocally chastising the King's behavior in matters of the Church, James had to make sure that any odd behavior that was not officially regulated would be duly noted and those people committing offenses would be subject to extra duties or punishments in relationship to the crime. One of the major incentives for this behavior regulation was to maintain the health of the citizens, so that if a situation arose where James would need to rally up soldiers to fight in a war, they would be fit and prepared for battle. Rather than getting drunk all day on Sundays, bowling and participating in idle banter, citizens should be leaping around, dancing and reading the bible – especially if you were a woman in this time (148).

Since James believes he is the head of the body of people and must think and act for them, his assertion of these values subjugates men openly and baldly claims all of God's power for himself (he must not be very considerate of the *other* kings roaming around). James concludes by stating the terms of agreement with regard to the social contract entered into by the people with their king (a topic later discussed in depth by Rousseau) and that the subjects were no longer bound to keep their part of the contract if the king were to fail in his obligated duties. But the only one that can determine this breach of contract is God himself, who alone may pass judgment upon the king and the people will only know of their freedom from these bindings when God has given sentence – a convenient arbitrary limitation if you are the only sovereign agent with a Divine Right to rule. Though all of these articulations place perceivably worthy limitations of the king's authority and outline his obligations to his subjects, James' argument does little to assert *his* personal right to rule from outside of England's royal lineage.

Thomas Hobbes' political philosophy is established with the publishing of *Leviathan* in 1651, two years after Charles I had been killed and the throne handed over to Oliver Cromwell. His intention was to establish an understanding of the rights of man as individuals and the rights held by society collectively in the commonwealth. Similar issues were being discussed contemporaneously by Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, Locke and Hume – but Hobbes was the most thorough in establishing the logical genesis of authority and expounding upon each facet of authority throughout the lives of men and society. Hobbes took after Galileo's methodology in disassembling the construction of the State (or in Galileo's case, the accepted cosmogony) and reassembling its parts in a logical fashion through deductive reasoning that hoped to work out any kinks along the way. While he hoped to be purely logical, Hobbes' background was highly influenced by Protestant thinkers and he believed that the Bible and man's direct communion with God was the primary concern of life and that all grounds for authority are thus founded upon this connection.

Hobbes' begins his political framework by establishing the most important relationship in all legal or philosophical traditions: that between God and man. Assuming God has bestowed man with a set of natural features including physical preferences and desires, the individual must realize that the basis for existence and the natural order is firmly rooted in the Biblical narrative (Hood 2). Natural Law follows directly from Divine Law and is (assumed to be) understood by all men with reason, with Civil Law fitting in as a codified establishment of Natural Law. Hobbes stated that the Natural Laws were plain to see, that the first and fundamental law of nature is "to seek peace and follow it" where peace may be obtained (Warrender 48). The second law, derived from the first, is that a man is not obliged to lay down his defenses against external injury, that this protection of oneself in defense of an attacker is directly related to maintaining

the peace (48). The third natural law is that “men perform their covenants made” which maintains the peace established by men collectively with one another (49). The fourth natural law is called the law of gratitude, making sure that those who are granted benefits should return those favors and strengthen the community bonds (49). Natural law only becomes law as commanded and enforced by the sovereign; therefore, all law is essentially civil law (167).

It is important to examine Hobbes’ use of the concept of the covenant because it has an important relationship with laws, the covenant being a freely accepted contract between two parties exercising reason and safety measures for both parties if the other decides to break their end of the deal. When a covenant is broken, unlike a law, it is justifiable to cease any pending relationship with the other party and deny compliance, even if it is only reasonably suspected that the other party will turn traitor. A law, taking after the natural order and Divine Law, cannot be transgressed as breaking the laws of the land are considered sins, even if that law is deemed immoral or to follow the law would break Divine Law – a perplexity that is not easily solved (Hood 5). A covenant, however, can be broken if it is against the law to comply, if it requires an impossible feat, if it requires that one not defend themselves, if it breaks another existing covenant, if either party does not accept the terms of agreement, or if the subject of the action is unknowable. This organizational pattern is described by Hobbes as a theory of obligation which sees it necessary to follow laws based on natural, physical, moral and political justifications – that a citizen *ought to* follow the law (and because they *can*, they *must*) to avoid public outrage or religious persecution (Warrender 9).

In order to apply these laws, since God is absent (and Christ is gone), a sovereign must lead the commonwealth who’s chief duty is to protect the peace and liberty of the subjects therein. Hobbes establishes the rights of the sovereign in a manner similar to King James and his

son Charles, that the sovereign is only answerable to God and cannot be usurped by any power less than his own. Hobbes asserts that a sovereign cannot be punished by his subjects, though he is allowed to supervise the opinions and publications of his subjects to control their communicative abilities if working against the king (178). The sovereign can make laws to protect civil security, to protect property of subjects, or for religious observances (179). The sovereign has the right of judicature on all controversies, and acting in God's place, can punish subjects with impunity (179). The sovereign can make war and peace with enemies, direct an army, and levy taxes for these causes – the very claims that Parliament made against King Charles I when trying him for treasonous acts against the commonwealth (180). The sovereign is also, according to Hobbes, allowed to choose any and all officers, magistrates, judges or other public officials in order to bring cohesion to the commonwealth's management (180). The rights that Hobbes believes are justly provided to the sovereign come directly from Scripture's authority and fall right in line with the protestations of previous kings in their defense of the monarchy.

The duties required of the king, as handed down by God's authority, are also very similar in Hobbes' political philosophy when compared with the writing of King James and King Charles' speech. Just as King James had referenced I Solomon as the justification of his "head of the body" of the state, father of his children (subjects), and concern for the wellbeing of the nation, Hobbes cites the same source to establish the duties of the sovereign. Hobbes and the monarchs agree that the king's main obligation is to preserve the safety of the people, like a shepherd to his flock, as mentioned by King James. Other duties include maintaining the security of the nation, promoting prosperity within the kingdom, and working to achieve equity among individuals and groups within the society. These are all concepts that I believe we are familiar

with in a first-world democratic republic, as far as the duties of the President or Prime Minister or other high-mark governing agents, though we now assume that the people grant the power to the State through the Social Contract as Rousseau later demonstrated.

Would history be the same if Hobbes' political exposition was published before the death of Charles? It may also be that Hobbes wouldn't have considered writing *Leviathan* without the events of the regicide unfolding before him. In 1640, the troubles in England that caused the Short Parliament to be convened also diverted Hobbes' attention from his studies in mathematics to pondering political theory (Hobbes ix). Hobbes had close association with the Cavendish family, met with Galileo and discussed in depth many philosophical subjects with Descartes. After the struggle in England became apparently problematic for his safety, Hobbes left to stay in Paris for eleven years in which time he had many lengthy debates with Descartes concerning free will, sovereignty and the social contract (ix). After much thought and laborious writing, Hobbes brought his manuscript of *Leviathan* and personally presented it to King Charles when he returned to Paris (x). Despite this attempt to prove his allegiance to the Royalist cause, his manuscript got him into trouble for a section called "Kingdom of Darkness" which discusses violent abuse of the Roman Catholic Church (x). Hobbes may have gotten a little bit too much into his role as a people pleaser and idealist and forgotten some of his rational mathematical nature in this political endeavor.

There is speculation that some of Thomas Hobbes' writing, notably *Leviathan*, contains a subtle degree of sarcasm that has been claimed due to changes in Hobbes' character after the publication of the book. After contributing the manuscript to Charles and aligning himself with the Restoration's ethos, Hobbes was singled out as a heretic and called an Atheist for his relationship with other thinkers like Galileo and Descartes. He burned some of his papers in a

state of alarm after being called out to be burned as a heretic, the publication of his book *Behemoth* on the causes of the Civil War was forbidden, and *Leviathan* was not to be published or distributed anymore. These reactions raise some legitimate skepticism about the true nature of Hobbes' writings, whether or not his intention was altruistic in the spirit of Christianity and the absolute authority of the sovereign King of England, or a subtle lampoon on these arguments.

I find it curious that Hobbes never establishes a legitimate and reasonable cause for selecting a sovereign that can rule absolutely. This logical gap is also present in the writings of King James and King Charles alike, and in my own reading of the text this complete avoidance of a valid rationalization appeared very obvious, which may give credence to these claims of inauthenticity. After Hobbes' lost his favor in the eyes of the Royalists, he returned to his mathematical and scientific studies, actually claiming to have squared the circle, which involved him in a long and fierce controversy with an Oxford professor (xi). He was wrong the whole time, but he continued to propagate his pamphlets and counterarguments until his was ninety years old, suggesting that Thomas Hobbes could have been the troublemaker that tried to put the final nail in the coffin of the Divine Right to Rule.

The Civil War in England caused many factions to vie for political power and experiment with new forms of thought and society. The convoluted political system caused the breakdown that had the head of the state removed in a way never seen before, and Thomas Hobbes wanted to solve the problems of Sovereignty and Right to Rule. The grounds were claimed by many men, James, Charles, and Cromwell, all for the commonwealth - but the concerns of legitimacy were raised after the limits of authority were challenged. By denying the balanced opinion of Parliament, King Charles tested the political will of the people of England, and lost it all. Thomas Hobbes claimed that the King was in the right, performing his duties as a sovereign

perfectly well – and would hope to be handsomely rewarded when the Royalists reclaimed the throne. Whether or not his political treatises were an elaborate joke or earnestly inspired by Scripture, we may never know for sure.

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