

Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*

Lecture I

Why Do We Need Political
Institutions?

Political Philosophy

What is political philosophy?

- Studies political institutions and the normative principles that apply to them
- Political institutions:
 - Those associated with states
 - Global governance institutions
- Key concepts:
 - Power, coercion, and authority
 - Legitimacy and obligations
 - Justice and rights, including liberty rights

Political Philosophy

Relationship to Moral Philosophy

- Political philosophy as applied moral philosophy
 - Plato
 - Mill
- Political philosophy as a normative discipline in its own right
 - Machiavelli
 - Hobbes

Political Philosophy

Relationship to Moral Philosophy

In Hobbes' understanding of the different parts of philosophy, one part "concerns the passions, the manners [*mores*] and the aims or purposes of men, and is called ethics or moral philosophy. Another concerns human society and discusses civil laws, justice, and all the other virtues; it is called politics or civil philosophy" (Anti-White, quoted in Tuck in *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*, p. 179).

Political Philosophy

Relationship to Moral Philosophy

“So, just as the proverb hath it ‘So many men, so many opinions’, one can also say, ‘Many men, many different rules for vice and virtue’. Nevertheless, what is to be understood about man insofar as they are men, is not applicable insofar as they are citizens; for those who are outside of the state are not obliged to follow another’s opinions, while those in a state are obliged by covenants” (Hobbes, *De Homine*, quoted in Tuck *ibid.*, p. 180).

Political Philosophy

What roles can political philosophy play?

- Practical role: analyze disputed questions in the hope of finding a level of agreement or at least a way of narrowing disagreement
- Orientation: enable reflection
- Reconciliation: calm our frustrations about society and its political institutions
- Utopian thinking: probing the limits of what is possible

(from Rawls, *Lectures on the History of Political Philosophy*)

The Justification of the State

The anarchist challenge (cf. Robert Wolff)

- Legitimacy premise: the coercive power of the state is justified (legitimate) if there is a general duty to obey its directives
- Autonomy premise: autonomous individuals cannot be under a general duty to subject their will to the will of someone else
- Conclusion: the coercive power of the state is necessarily illegitimate

The Justification of the State

Pre-modern views

- The state is justified by divine authority
- The state is justified if ruled by Philosopher kings

The Justification of the State

The Utilitarian view

- Political institutions are necessary and justified to the extent that they contribute to the maximization of the general happiness
- Problems with the utilitarian answer:
 - Can the state be justified in this manner to those who stand to lose?
 - It implies that individual rights are inadequately protected (cf. lecture on Mill)
 - Justification of the state contingent on empirical facts

The Justification of the State

Social contract tradition

- The state is justified if those who are ruled by it have given their actual or hypothetical consent to its rule
- Hobbes' work stands in this tradition

Hobbes on the Need for a State

- In the view of many, English-language philosophy started with Thomas Hobbes (1588 – 1679)
 - Wrote in Latin and English
 - On moral and political philosophy, metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of mind, etc.
- *Leviathan* (1651), written while in exile in Paris, is his most famous book – a treatise of political philosophy
- Background:
 - Widespread civil unrest and war marked the times in which Hobbes lived
 - English civil war 1642 - 1651

Hobbes on the Need for a State

- The main purpose of political institutions, according to Hobbes, is to achieve self-preservation (security, peace)
 - “all men agree on this, that peace is good” (*Leviathan* XV, 40)
 - “The final cause, end, or design of men (who naturally love liberty and dominion over others) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves in which we see them live in commonwealths [in a state] is the foresight of their own preservation” [VXII.1]

Hobbes on the Need for a State

- Problem: cooperation among human beings does not arise spontaneously, unlike for some social animals (*Leviathan* XVII:7 – 12)
 - There is competition among human beings
 - Discrepancy between what is good for each and what is good for all
 - Human beings have language and opinions about governance, which can both help and hinder their cooperation
 - Human beings distinguish between injury – harm done with intent – and damage and take offense at the former

Hobbes on the Need for a State

- Because there is no natural agreement, our security is threatened without political institutions (more on the state of nature in lecture II)
- Mere associations between people cannot achieve security
 - Small associations, even if they agree internally, will fight each other
 - Large associations will be marked by internal disagreements
 - In addition, security is needed from one generation to the next

Hobbes on the Need for a State

- Hobbes' solution: security requires the coercive power of an authoritarian state
 - Contracts alone cannot guarantee peace: “covenants without the sword are but words” (17.2)
 - “[T]he only way to erect a commonwealth [a state] is by conferring all their power and strength upon one man, or upon one assembly of men, that may reduce all their wills ... unto one will” (17.13)

Hobbes on the Need for a State

- Hobbes' solution: security requires the coercive power of an authoritarian state
 - We can think of creation of an authoritarian state on the basis of a hypothetical social contract: “as if every man should say to every man *I authorise and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or to this assembly of men, o this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner.*” (17.13)
 - The social contract creates “the great Leviathan”; “that mortal God to which we owe .. our peace and defence” (17.13)