

Hobbes' Leviathan: Innovation or continuation?

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/05/09/hobbes-leviathan-innovation-or-continuation/>

MARINA POPCOV, MAY 9 2011

Hobbes, by moving the human being to the focal point of his theory and by scientifically approaching power relations, almost independent of theology, exposed himself to sharp criticism by officials and fellow theorists. (Skinner, 1964: 306; Oakeshott, 1946: 10-13; Barry, 1968: 128) Thus in historical context Hobbes is portrayed as a radical intellectual outcast and even atheist. (Skinner, 1964: 286-288)

The following essay will thoroughly compare and contrast different academic interpretations of Hobbes with the natural law tradition on several levels of analysis, as goodness, obligation, inner coherence and coeval context to demonstrate Hobbes' radicalism and innovation, which become clearer if viewed from historically and structurally appropriate background.

Natural law within Hobbes' theory is an essential motivation and foundation of the Leviathan. First, the desire and interest driven human being is seeking to satisfy his needs of self-preservation and good life. Not restrained by any superior authority in the state of nature he fights a war of all against all on the short term and eventually surrenders fragments of his liberty to lead a beneficial coexistence with others and preserve his advantage in the long run. The basic moral principles of this association are summed up as natural law and provoked by human reason. (Hobbes, 1987: 189-217) Second, upgrading the satisfaction of their personal security and sufficiency the individuals, leave the perilous state of nature by forming or joining the order of a commonwealth, transferring all of their natural rights to the absolute sovereign, who again transforms natural law in positive law and dictates civil judiciary according to his very own rationality. (Hobbes, 1987: 311-335) Hence, without the application of natural law the catalyst for society and administration of the same would be unthinkable, the corpse of the Leviathan would remain without acumen.

The western canon, composed by ancient and medieval thought, also supports the idea of natural law as a set of fundamental principles of harmonic human interaction ultimately resulting in an organized public government. The key ingredient of this natural law tradition is the hypothesis of a universal and natural good, which ought to be pursued and an antithetic evil, which ought to be avoided. The core rule of conduct relies on a categorical imperative, to treat others as one wishes to be treated by them. (Murphy, 2008)

It seems that to a certain extent Hobbes does not break with the tradition. Thomas Aquinas, generally characterised as the "father" of the natural law, (Murphy, 2008) describes the substance of morality as the simple apprehension on the unchangeable, universal and infinite good, which is the "*first precept of law.*" (1988: 44-55, 94) Hobbes' reasoning accords with this act of pursuit, he further adds the universally applicable rule: "*Whatsoever you require that others should do to you, you do to them*" (1987:190) Both concepts are paradigmatic. In order to function they require the fulfilment of certain preconditions as the ability of human reasoning, strive towards peace and the fear of death. Both rely on "derivationism" and "inclinationism" towards goodness as vectors of human epistemology. (Murphy, 2008) However, the parallels stop at that point, since no consensus on the exact definition of goodness between the Aquinas lead tradition and Hobbes' theory can be reached.

According to St. Thomas, goodness and the pursuit of the same, namely morality or virtue, transcends the material world, precedes the state of being as an objective preconditioned truth in reference to an end or potential. (1920: 5) Thus goodness and with it natural law appears as an independent factor, originally deriving from God. (1988: 48, 94) The judgment of something as good or not, concentrates on the idea and intention, rather than the action and result.

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Hobbes on the other hand, distinguishes the pursuable good in two branches, which are “*to seek peace and follow it*” and “*to defend ourselves by all means*” (1987: 190) Goodness in Hobbes’ system is not detached from the actor, but on the contrary highly conditional. The value of the good will and the good intentions diminishes, since it is the results of actions, which count, namely staying alive, the paramount aim of all men. The roots of the idea for the generally desired good are therefore embedded in the internal, biological, and prudential human nature. Though the individual decisions are subjective the principal goal of peaceful coexistence is common. The average sum of these decisions is, according to Hobbes, natural law, as the least common denominator, “*the essence of all other laws*” (1987: 319) and “*part of the civil law in all commonwealths in the world.*” (1987: 323)

Based on that, theoretically no external factors or a dictating authority is necessary to find and follow the good. This assumption is new and radically different to the 17th century thinking. In Hobbes’ state of nature, where men are deprived from supreme power, morality and consequentially natural law fully relies on internal motivation. But without surveillance or punishment, why should men obey the natural law? Is the bargain of self-preservation sufficient or does it require a certain extent of obligation to make this basic set of rules work and lay the path out of the state of nature into the commonwealth and secured peace? Or is it outweighed by man’s opportunistic character to take advantage of the other parties’ trust and break a covenant, if the chance to get away with it is high enough? Does Hobbes’ Leviathan, if read as an innovative and scientific piece function or does it require a certain compromise with traditional ideas of God, ultimate justice and moral obligation to make natural law a law, not a bunch of theorems, and therefore binding?

The question of obligation in Hobbes’ state of nature is a matter of heated debate between scholars. The extent to which natural law is binding seems to rely on interpretation. Some academic revisions of Hobbes’ works, as Tyler and Warrender, argue against self-preservation and egoistic human nature as efficient theoretical foundation and for the account of natural law as binding law, deriving from God and binding by God, who, according to them, plays a central role within Hobbes’ thought (Barry, 1968: 121-122; Tyler, 1938: 420). Further they conclude that obligation in the state of nature exists and no new kind of obligation is introduced in the commonwealth (Barry, 1968: 122). Tyler defends his position by concluding that if civil society is essentially dependent on the fulfillment of covenants, it automatically implies a certain deontology in the theory, independent of egoistic human psychology. Further, according to Tyler, if we closely examine the authority of the sovereign, a certain moral limitation must be connected to his power, so that he can fulfill his duties towards his subjects mentioned in chapter 30 of the Leviathan (1938: 415). Walking a similar path Warrender feels that there are in Hobbes two separate systems, a theory of motivation, triggered by self-preservation and an additional theory of obligation, based on divine morality. Additionally he suggests obligation is based on power relations, we obey the more powerful and since God is omnipotent we automatically obey natural law. Thus he is convinced that both structures are necessary to make the Leviathan breathe (Barry, 1968: 120-122).

However the majority of scholars disapprove of this interpretation. Barry and Watkins agree on the existence of a certain obligation in the state of nature, but for them it is a rationally-driven internal obligation, since men are accountable only to themselves (Barry, 1968: 120-122). For Nagel moral obligation is not based upon self-interest, thus genuine moral obligation is irrelevant for Leviathan and replaced by rational strategic calculation (1959: 69). For Oakeshott men follow the natural law simply because they want to, if they see it as beneficial to give up a right and enter a covenant, exercising “*the will not to will*” (1946: 21). Subsequently, assenting with the first or second group of academics on the requirement of natural morality and obligation diminishes or enlarges the extent to which Hobbes derives tradition from natural law.

Though obligation seems to play the role of the independent variable in the discussion, in the end it all comes down to the question of correct interpretation and the speculation on what Hobbes really thought himself and intended to communicate to his audience. But how can we estimate Hobbes’ perspective beyond semantic misunderstanding? Distinguishing between the biased expectations of the modern reader and Hobbes’ contemporaries is a helpful method to suggest an adequate solution.

Oakeshott points out, in his revision of Hobbes’ work, that the error some interpretations commit is searching for a consistent overarching theory in the Leviathan, which they are not likely to find, since 17th century philosophers did

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not fulfill the criteria of strict order in the architecture of their writing. (1946: 35). According to that assumption Tyler's and Warrender's efforts to detect a formal doctrine and supra-structure within Hobbes is just forlorn hope. Hood went even further and tried to reveal the coherence within all works of Hobbes to find evidence for his traditional and deeply religious ideology, receiving harsh critique from Skinner, a devotee of historical context (Skinner, 1964: 322-323). Hence, Skinner and Oakeshott embed Hobbes into his own time and underline the disagreements and intolerance he had to face imposed by the public, demonstrating his brilliance and break from the western canon (Skinner, 1966; Oakeshott, 1946: 31). Therefore it can be concluded that Hobbes, as ambiguous as he might seem to us, was not understood as a traditional thinker during his lifetime, and by responding to his critiques was fully aware of that fact.

Finally, another argument for Hobbes intention and awareness of his unconventionality is evident in the second part of the Leviathan, when he gives credit to his *Zeitgeist* (Cooke, 1996: 203-206; Oakeshott, 1946: 26). Though the end of the 31st chapter completes the theory, Hobbes restarts the discussion and thus doubles the volume of the book. Is all the effort necessary? It only seems to be if we interpret natural law as personal guidelines, fully built on self-preservation, non-obligatory in the state of nature and for the sovereign and subsequently independent of theology. Since Hobbes left out one ingredient in his theory, which is crucial for the fundamentals of his contemporary society, he includes it in the second part, namely religion. His axiom, the fear of death, is not only the source of natural law, but also normally the seed of religion (Cooke, 1996: 209-210). With this addition in mind Hobbes recreates the Leviathan as a non-secular commonwealth, the "Christian Commonwealth". This delayed compromise demonstrates the progressiveness of his original theory in the first half of the book.

In summary, Hobbes suggests that men exposed to unlimited liberty in the state of nature make subjective and individual decisions to stay alive and, if the level of trust allows it, enter agreements and cooperate with others to raise their standard of living. He uses the state of nature, which can be regarded as a thought experiment or the state of anarchy, as a tool to demonstrate that it is in the people's selfish interest to follow certain standard of behavior and to form a government. It is not their "telos" or God's command, which leads them out of the state of nature. For Hobbes, good is defined as what is good for them and not what is good in general. Men in the state of nature are the only judges and executors of their own good and natural law. They have ultimate rights, hence they do not have to leave this state of liberty, they do not have to surrender parts of their rights to follow natural law and eventually all of their rights to one representative absolute power, but they do, because they want to. Despite Hobbes' ambiguous language, this is the most supported and, it seems, accurate interpretation of his work.

In conclusion, it becomes very clear how far Hobbes' views drifted away from the medieval natural law tradition, which dictates that natural law is provided by God and is a universally binding, authoritative and knowable good. Hobbes was aware of the fact that by excluding theism and universality his readers might condemn and ignore him as a radical, which as we know, proved to be the case. To make the Leviathan more appropriate and applicable in his own time Hobbes adjusted the second part of the masterpiece to the theological perspective of his contemporaries, in hope his writing "*may fall into the hands of a sovereign,*" (1987: 408).

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Date written: December 2010