PLSC 114: Introduction to Political Philosophy
Professor Steven Smith
Teaching Fellow: Meredith Edwards

By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. —Ryan Hollander

Save Yourself from Yourself

by Ryan Hollander

In *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes contends that government should highly restrict individual liberty. Readers find it difficult to determine *why* Hobbes thinks government should restrict so much individual liberty. On the surface, it seems that Hobbes believes that individual liberty engenders revolt against the government, threatening the stability of the government and preventing the government from protecting its people. However, a closer look shows that Hobbes does not believe that individual liberty is a threat to the government; he believes it is a threat to the very society that is free. Hobbes contends that the government should greatly restrict individual liberty because free individuals necessarily act in ways that threaten the survival of their society. Reversing the traditional maxim, which says that individual liberty empowers and enriches society but weakens government, Hobbes contends that individual liberty strengthens government but endangers society. While it seems that Hobbes is fearful of threatening the government, a close reading of *Leviathan* show that Hobbes is so fearful of threatening society that he believes that the government should focus exclusively on ensuring the survival of its society without regard to the quality of that survival. Therefore, he contends, the government should neutralize the threat of the individual by disarming him of his liberty and by forcing all individuals to behave in a way that protects society's survival.

We must begin by distinguishing individual liberty from the other type of liberty that Hobbes discusses, what we will call "ancient liberty." Individual liberty is "the absence of… external impediments of motion" (Hobbes XXI 1, XXI 10). A person is free, therefore, if "he that in those things which by his strength and wit he is able to do is not hindered to do what he has a will to do" (Hobbes XXI 2). For Hobbes, an individual is free if another party does not physically prevent him from acting in a way that he could otherwise act.

Hobbes contrasts individual liberty with what we call "ancient liberty," the liberty of the government to act without impediment in the realm of international affairs. Hobbes argues that a government has ancient liberty when its leadership can "resist or… invade other people" without being physically deterred (Hobbes XXI 8). Ancient liberty is the ability for a government to do what it wishes to other governments without obstruction from other governments.

The difference between individual liberty and ancient liberty is not just who possesses the liberty, but also who regulates it. Individual liberty, as Hobbes defines it, is regulated not by individuals and not by society, but by a sovereign. He writes, "the liberty of a subject [individual] lieth… only in those things which… the sovereign hath praetermitted" (Hobbes XXI 6). Unlike individual liberty, which is regulated by the sovereign of the possessor, ancient liberty is regulated by the possessor's equals—other governments encountered in its foreign affairs. Hobbes carefully excludes commonwealths that are "dependent on one another" from the set of commonwealths with "absolute liberty" (Hobbes XXI 8). Hobbes believes that dependency on other governments, not a social contract with a sovereign, is how a government loses its ancient liberty.

Hobbes takes issue with those intellectuals who misidentify the true sources of individual and ancient liberty, which we have demonstrated to be, respectively, the social contract with a

sovereign and dependency on other governments. In particular, Hobbes seeks to debunk the myth that both types of liberty derive from the structure of the government. He contends that "whether a commonwealth be monarchical or popular, the freedom is still the same" (Hobbes XXI 8). Referring to both types of liberty with the term, "freedom," Hobbes argues that the government type does not determine an individual's liberty or a government's ancient liberty. Hobbes would hold that a democracy can restrict individual liberty as easily as a dictatorship can, just as a democracy can be dominated by another state as easily as a dictatorship can.

Now that we have clarified the distinction between the two types of liberty, we will examine Hobbes's attitude toward individual liberty. Hobbes believes that government should greatly restrict individual liberty, and we can infer this attitude in two ways. First, Hobbes believes that the government should condition individuals to act a certain way, which necessitates that the government does not allow individuals the liberty to choose how they act. He writes that the sovereign should provide "pubic instruction, both of doctrine and example, in the making and executing of good laws" (Hobbes XXX 219). Second, we know that Hobbes wants individual liberty to be restricted because the liberties that he thinks the individual should always be granted are so few that Hobbes can list them all in just a few pages (Hobbes XXI 11-25).

Why does Hobbes want the government to restrict so much individual liberty? On the surface, it seems that Hobbes barrages excessive individual liberty because he believes that individual liberty leads to revolt against the government. We might easily derive this initial interpretation, which is mistaken, from Hobbes's treatment of the Ancients. He argues that the writings of the ancient Greeks and Romans, in which "there is so frequent and honourable mention" of liberty, "produce sedition and change of government" (Hobbes XXI 8-9). It seems as

though Hobbes believes that, like a drug, the slightest individual liberty addicts the people and tempts them to acquire more by rebelling.

A closer study, however, shows that Hobbes abhors the Ancients for teaching not a love of liberty, but rather what we will call the Free Republic Doctrine, which holds that democracy always provides abundant individual liberty and that holds that monarchy can never offer any individual liberty. Hobbes quotes Aristotle's *Politics*: "In democracy, Liberty is to be supposed; for it is commonly held that no man is Free in any other government" (Aristotle qtd. in Hobbes XXI 9). As Hobbes interprets, Aristotle's Doctrine teaches that "all that lived under monarchy were slaves" (Hobbes XXI 9). According to Hobbes, the Ancients preach not a love of liberty but a mistaken doctrine that there is necessarily a link between democracy and liberty.

Furthermore, Hobbes criticizes the Ancients for teaching what we will call Ancient Libertarianism, the doctrine that government *ought* to grant extensive individual liberty. Ancient Libertarianism is what Hobbes calls a "false show of liberty"—the word "show" meaning a celebration. Hobbes believes that the Athenians taught Ancient Libertarianism to keep their people from revolting against the government, which because of its democratic nature, the people believed to be free by the Free Republic Doctrine (Hobbes XXI 9-10). Hobbes argues that the Athenians were taught, first, to love freedom, and second that "they were freemen" in order "to keep from them the desire of changing government" (Hobbes XXI 9). Hobbes believes that the Ancient teachings not only established philosophical inaccuracies, but also lead to violence and death. He argues that "by reading of these Greek and Latin authors men from their childhood have gotten a habit (under a false show of liberty) of favouring tumults and of licentious controlling the actions of their sovereigns," which has led to "the effusion of so much blood"

(Hobbes XXI 9). According to Hobbes, the combination of the two Ancient dogmas, the Free Republic Doctrine and Ancient Libertarianism, inspired killing.

We have already shown that Hobbes rejects both doctrines—that Hobbes believes that individual liberty is separate from democracy and that he believes that individual liberty should be highly restricted. As we found, Hobbes rejects the first doctrine because he believes an individual's liberties are determined by his social contract with his sovereign, not the structure of that government. But why does Hobbes reject the second doctrine? Why does he think that individual liberty should be so restricted? As we discovered, though it seems like Hobbes believes individual liberty is a threat to the state, he does not really believe that. Hobbes wants to restrict individual liberty because he thinks individual liberty is a threat to society. Hobbes's belief is founded in his conception of human nature, that is, his prediction of what the individual will do with liberty.

Hobbes believes that men are inspired exclusively by personal appetites such as the "competition of riches, honour, command" and most notably by pride and fear (Hobbes XI 3). Hobbes believes that these appetites would cause men to war continuously amongst each other, either physically or psychologically, if a government didn't exist to prevent men from warring. He contends, "During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war, and such a war is of every man against every man…. War consisteth not in battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known" (Hobbes XIII 8). Hobbes believes that men inevitably engage in perpetual and total war with each other when a government does not force them to act otherwise. This war, of course, would destroy society if the government allowed individuals the freedom to start it.

Because he fears this war that could end society, Hobbes advocates that government concern itself exclusively with protecting the lives of its people without concern for the quality of those lives. He contends that "the office of the sovereign (be it a monarch or an assembly) consisteth in the end for which he was trusted with the sovereign power, namely the procuration of the *safety of the people*…. By safety here is not meant a bare preservation, but also all other contentment's of life, which every man by lawful industry, without danger or hurt to the commonwealth, shall acquire to himself" (Hobbes XXX 1). Hobbes implies that government should *force* individuals to behave in ways that promote society's survival because, if left to their own devices, individuals cannot behave in ways that are safe for society. He contends that "common people are not of capacity to understand [right principles]," however, they are "fit to receive whatsoever by public authority shall be imprinted on them" (Hobbes XXX 6). The code of behavior that the government ought to force men to act by is what Hobbes calls the Laws of Nature. Hobbes argues that the sovereign is "obliged by the law of nature" (Hobbes XXX 1). The Laws of Nature summarize norms that, when followed in "civil society," are supposed to lead to the "conservation of men in multitudes" (Hobbes XV 34). Essentially, widespread adherence to the Laws of Nature replaces the personal appetites that would naturally govern people's behavior with a new maxim popularly dubbed the Golden Rule. It states, "do not that to others which thou wouldst not have done to thyself" (Hobbes XV 35). Hobbes believes so strongly that all people should accept the Golden Rule to subdue their personal appetites and sustain society that he thinks all individual liberty except for the most essential liberties ought to be restricted.

On the surface, it appears that Hobbes cares not only about the survival of society, but also about the quality of that survival. He writes, "It is necessary… for man's life to retain some [liberty] (as, right to govern their own bodies, [right to] enjoy air, water, motion, ways to go from

place to place, and all things else without which a man cannot live, or not live well)" (Hobbes XV 22). Interpreting this passage, editor and critic Edwin Curley writes that Hobbes believes "it is not mere survival, but living well, which is the end of entry into civil society" (Curley 97).

Curley and his supporters fail to realize two things. First, these amenities that Hobbes acknowledges are not primarily for pleasure, but for survival. Though a person might derive some pleasure from drinking water, breathing air, and moving his appendages, the pleasure is only a side-effect. The real importance of those activities, and the reason why Hobbes says that they should be allowed, is that they are "necessary for man's life" (Hobbes XV 22). Hobbes believes that these liberties should never be denied because they allow bodily functions required for survival, and the reader infers that preventing the individual from surviving hinders the aim of achieving survival for society. Later in *Leviathan*, Hobbes clarifies that a sovereign should allow a person those freedoms because they are necessary for survival. He writes, "If the sovereign command a man… to abstain from the use of food, air, medicine, or any other thing without which he cannot live, yet [ought] hath that man the liberty to disobey" (Hobbes XXI 12). Second, even if Hobbes really does believe that the primary benefit of those activities is pleasure, then Hobbes approves of those activities because he believes that *pleasure* is a necessary ingredient for survival, similar to air and water. If Hobbes has any concern for the quality of people's lives, it is only because he believes that they must retain a certain base-line quality of life so that they will not revolt against the sovereign, who protects not their quality of life, but their lives. Hobbes's ideal sovereign maintains the exclusive aim of protecting the lives of the masses, "the conservation of men in multitudes," and considers any other aim, such as the quality of those lives, only as a means of achieving the former aim (Hobbes XV 34).

Accepting Hobbes's depiction of human nature, let us assess the validity of his choice that the sovereign should highly restrict individual liberty and should condition the people to accept the Laws of Nature. After dissecting Hobbes argument, we realize that Hobbes's system is flawed because there cannot exist a sovereign that cares about society's survival if human nature is how Hobbes describes. If the sovereign is a man or a body of men, and if the sovereign, because of human nature, is necessarily motivated by the same personal appetites that motivate all other men, how can the sovereign subdue his own appetites and rule in the interests of society? Accepting Hobbes's depiction of human nature, the sovereign lacks the capacity to place genuinely the longevity of his people before his own desires. If the sovereign that cares for society's survival above all else does not exist, how can society ensure its survival? Perhaps, society should allow a great deal of individual liberty *and* should adopt a democracy, a sovereignty of free people. Perhaps the societal norms that arise when free people interact naturally promote society's survival. If free people who were motivated by these norms governed themselves, they likely would achieve Hobbes's end—the survival of society. Hobbes introduces us to the perfect sovereign, one who forces the individual to protect society's existence. But because the perfect sovereign does not exist in the real world, maybe we ought to look to the next best alternative, a free democracy.

Works Cited

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