

Is Might Right?

“The End of the Institution of Sovereignty; namely, the Peace of the Subjects within themselves, and their Defence against a common Enemy.” (Ch 21, p. 153)

Hobbes tries to provide us with a convincing argument to believe and obey the sovereign of a Commonwealth. But he also notes that the “obligation of subjects to the sovereign is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth by which he is able to protect them.” (Ch 21, p. 156) Though this might seem to be a very fair-weathered commitment, it is a very practical and ‘life-preserving’ aim. I will argue that, even though this commitment is morally incorrect in today’s day and age it is consistent with Hobbes’ claims and his period of time.

A covenant is signed by the people amongst themselves, to transfer authority to a sovereign, with the end goal of the sovereign being maintenance of peace among the citizens and defense of the country against common enemies; But since the sovereign has no covenant with the people, he is merely an actor and is doing what the people have asked him to do. This leads Hobbes to believe that the sovereign can’t do injustice to his citizens. But this is very problematic to me, for this absolves the sovereign from any moral obligation to his reign. There is no semblance of “checks and balances” upon the powers of the sovereign and no one can question the sovereign’s judgment, for it’s the sovereign who adjudicates (or chooses people who judge) as to what is right or wrong. This would be absolutely unacceptable today, for we are very unlikely to rely on a single ruler, who is subject to human imperfections and error and also do not want to concede

our liberties to a single leader, whose only two answerable goals are the preservation of peace and defense.

Though unthinkable today, this blind faith in an absolute monarch might have been correct at his time, given that Hobbes had witnessed a Civil and Religious War. This might explain Hobbes' call for an absolute power, the Leviathan, the *Immortal God*, who could put an end to the chaos.

Hobbes also claims that the sovereign can justly kill a subject. He bases his claim on the belief that the sovereign must be doing this in order to protect the peace of the commonwealth. This view would be quite unacceptable today, as we don't believe in the judgment of one individual and are used to the "due process" and find it an infringement on our civil liberties, if it is otherwise. Here again we need to put this piece of work in perspective of the mid-17th century.

Another point that one might find dubious is Hobbes' claim that every person has a "right to self-preservation," which might be exercised even in opposition to the sovereign's view. Hobbes doesn't claim this to be just, but believes that any means required for self-preservation ought to be allowed. This leads to an interesting interplay of the Right of Nature and 'injustice', which according to Hobbes is the "not Performance of Covenant." But once again, we should realize that the commonwealth is instituted to escape a condition of 'warre' and self-preservation remains one of the most important desires, for no peace is useful to a person if he is not alive to enjoy it!

This should not be seen as an endorsement of Hobbes' ideas, rather as a critique and understanding of his way of thinking and presentation of one of the most important pieces of work in political theory which tries to provide answers to many questions and also raises some unanswerable question!