


Hobbes Theory Of Human Nature

Thomas Hobbes
England

Major Work
The Leviathan (1651)



Theories

- Human life in original state of nature—i.e. Without government—was “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”
- Unable to rule themselves, men voluntarily surrendered their freedom to a ruler.
- Ruler was obligated to use absolute power to maintain order.
- Subjects were obligated to accept his authority.

Analysis

- Pessimistic view.
- Only alternative to anarchy was absolute monarchy.

Hobbes theory of human nature is a fundamental concept in political philosophy, formulated by Thomas Hobbes in the 17th century. His insights into human behavior and society have shaped the foundations of modern political thought. Hobbes posited that humans are inherently self-interested, driven by a desire for self-preservation and the pursuit of power. This article will explore the nuances of Hobbes' theory of human nature, its implications for societal organization, and its relevance in contemporary discussions about human behavior and governance.

Understanding Hobbes' View of Human Nature

Hobbes' perspective on human nature is grounded in his materialistic view of the world. He believed that humans are essentially physical beings, governed by the same natural laws that govern the rest of the universe. His most notable work, *Leviathan*, published in 1651, articulates his theories about the state of nature and the social contract.

The State of Nature

At the core of Hobbes' theory is the concept of the "state of nature." He described this hypothetical situation as a time before organized society and government, characterized by a lack of authority and social order. According to Hobbes, in the state of nature:

1. Human Life is Solitary: Individuals live in isolation, without the support of a community.
2. Human Life is Poor: Resources are scarce, leading to competition and conflict over survival.
3. Human Life is Nasty: Violence and fear dominate interpersonal relationships, as individuals prioritize their own safety over cooperation.
4. Human Life is Short: The constant threat of violence and warfare results in a life expectancy that is drastically reduced.

Hobbes famously summarized this bleak outlook by stating that life in the state of nature is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." This description underscores his belief that without a governing authority, human beings would revert to a primal state defined by chaos and violence.

Self-Interest and the Pursuit of Power

Central to Hobbes' theory of human nature is the idea that individuals are inherently self-interested. He argued that humans are driven by a desire for self-preservation and the pursuit of power. This self-interest manifests in various ways:

- Desire for Security: Individuals seek to protect themselves from harm, leading to a natural inclination toward conflict.
- Pursuit of Resources: Competition for limited resources drives individuals to act in ways that may be harmful to others.
- Need for Recognition: Humans crave acknowledgment and respect from their peers, which can lead to jealousy and rivalry.

Hobbes believed that this relentless pursuit of self-interest ultimately leads to conflict among individuals, making a strong governing authority necessary to maintain peace and order.

The Social Contract

To escape the chaos of the state of nature, Hobbes proposed the idea of a social contract. This concept represents an agreement among individuals to form a society and establish a government to enforce laws and maintain order.

The Formation of Government

The social contract involves several key elements:

1. Mutual Agreement: Individuals collectively agree to surrender some of their freedoms to a central authority in exchange for security and protection.

2. **Absolute Sovereignty:** Hobbes argued that the government must have absolute power to enforce laws and prevent conflict. This authority ensures that individuals adhere to the social contract.
3. **Legitimacy of Authority:** The legitimacy of the government arises from the consent of the governed. Although individuals give up certain rights, they do so to gain the benefits of living in a structured society.

Hobbes believed that a strong, centralized authority was necessary to mitigate the violence and chaos inherent in human nature. He asserted that only a powerful sovereign could maintain peace and prevent the return to the state of nature.

Implications of Hobbes' Theory

Hobbes' theory of human nature and the social contract has significant implications for political philosophy and the understanding of governance. Some of these implications include:

- **Justification for Authoritarianism:** Hobbes' emphasis on the need for an absolute sovereign has been interpreted as a justification for authoritarian regimes, where individual freedoms are sacrificed for the sake of collective security.
- **Foundation for Modern Political Theory:** Hobbes' ideas laid the groundwork for later political theorists, including John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who presented alternative views on human nature and governance.
- **Relevance in Contemporary Politics:** The tension between individual rights and state authority remains a central theme in modern political discussions, echoing Hobbes' concerns about the balance between security and freedom.

Critiques of Hobbes' Theory

Despite its influence, Hobbes' theory has faced criticism from various quarters. Critics argue that his view of human nature is overly pessimistic and fails to account for the capacity for cooperation and altruism among individuals.

Alternative Theories of Human Nature

1. **Rousseau's Noble Savage:** Jean-Jacques Rousseau proposed that humans are inherently good and that society corrupts this natural state. He argued that the state of nature was one of peace and harmony, contrasting sharply with Hobbes' view.
2. **Locke's Tabula Rasa:** John Locke suggested that humans are born as blank slates, shaped by their experiences. This view emphasizes the potential for positive development and cooperation rather than conflict.

3. Evolutionary Psychology: Modern evolutionary psychology offers insights into human behavior, suggesting that cooperation and altruism have evolved as adaptive traits, challenging Hobbes' portrayal of humanity as purely self-interested.

Conclusion: The Legacy of Hobbes' Theory

In conclusion, Hobbes' theory of human nature presents a stark and compelling view of humanity's inherent tendencies toward self-interest and conflict. His insights into the state of nature and the necessity of a social contract have profoundly influenced political philosophy and continue to resonate in contemporary discussions about governance and human behavior. While critics may challenge his views, the legacy of Hobbes serves as a crucial point of reference for understanding the complexities of human nature and the organization of society. As we navigate the intricacies of modern political landscapes, Hobbes' theories remind us of the delicate balance between individual freedom and the need for collective security.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Hobbes' view on the state of nature?

Hobbes believes that in the state of nature, humans are in a constant state of war, driven by self-interest and competition for resources, leading to a life that is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short'.

How does Hobbes define human nature?

Hobbes defines human nature as fundamentally self-interested and competitive, where individuals are motivated by desires for self-preservation and power.

What role does fear play in Hobbes' theory of human nature?

Fear plays a crucial role in Hobbes' theory; it drives individuals to seek peace and security, ultimately leading them to form social contracts and governments to maintain order.

How does Hobbes' theory contrast with other philosophers like Rousseau?

Hobbes' theory contrasts with Rousseau's view that humans are inherently good and that society corrupts them; Hobbes sees human nature as requiring strong governance to curb its destructive tendencies.

What is the significance of the social contract in Hobbes' theory?

The social contract in Hobbes' theory is significant as it represents an agreement among individuals to relinquish certain freedoms in exchange for security and order provided by a sovereign authority.

How does Hobbes justify absolute authority in government?

Hobbes justifies absolute authority by arguing that only a powerful sovereign can provide the security and peace necessary to prevent the chaos of the state of nature.

What implications does Hobbes' theory have for modern political thought?

Hobbes' theory has significant implications for modern political thought, particularly in discussions about the legitimacy of authority, the necessity of government, and the balance between individual freedoms and social order.

How does Hobbes' view of human nature influence his ideas on morality?

Hobbes' view of human nature influences his ideas on morality by suggesting that moral rules are social constructs created to facilitate cooperation and prevent conflict, rather than intrinsic values.

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