

Moral Subjugation and Gender Inequality:
A Critical Analysis of Thomas Hobbes's Nature of Man

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Introduction

In response to the tumultuous aftermath of the English Civil War, Thomas Hobbes wrote the *Leviathan* in hopes of quelling violence and uniting the English. This goal resounds throughout the entire text and manifests into a single compelling claim: an absolute, uncriticizable authority is needed to establish and maintain order. To achieve peace, he observed the selfish nature of man, the resulting state of war from that nature, and the need for submission to a sovereign power to keep that state of war at bay. In this essay, I will scrutinize Hobbes's underlying assertions about the core nature of humans and argue that men are innately moral. Furthermore, I will show how Hobbes's view of mankind affects his sovereign, resulting in the moral subjugation of the populous and inequality between the men and women.

Hobbes's Lawless Man

To further his argument for a commonwealth and, ultimately, an absolute sovereign power, Thomas Hobbes summarizes the fundamental nature of man as "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes 2001, 97). His reasoning for such a pessimistic view of mankind begins with an evaluation of men in nature as equal in body and mind. He posits that every man has enough strength, either through deceit or by alliance with others, to kill any other man (Hobbes 2001, 94). Hobbes views man as being on an even playing field – having intrinsic equality but also equal vulnerability. This equality, Hobbes believes, is a major reason for men's conflict. He argues that when two equal men desire the same indivisible resource, they inevitably become enemies. Furthermore, he elaborates on this point to say that, even when a man is able to rise up and attain his desires, other men will attempt to deprive him of his accomplishments, his life, and his liberty (Hobbes 2001, 95). This competition of resources, combined with mistrust (for safety), and pursuit of glory (for reputation), is what Hobbes believes pushes men to quarrel and invade each other (Hobbes 2001, 96). At this point, Hobbes paints the nature of man as

completely self-interested and solitary. Man is only capable of chasing his desires, including his safety, with no regard for the cost to others.

Using this description of the nature of man, Hobbes moves to look at the collective. He believes that in the absence of a common power, humans exist in a perpetual state of war with no moral compass or justice: “To this warre of every man against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place ... Justice and Injustice are none of the Faculties neither of the Body, nor Mind” (Hobbes 2001, 98). It is at this point that Hobbes reaches the crux of his argument, the logical preceding for the motivation for an absolute sovereign power: if there was a common power, there would be laws, and if there were laws, there would be no injustice. Because man cannot be trusted, a strong undivided government, capable of inspiring fear, is necessary to enforce laws and maintain order. Hobbes crafts the image of an inherently chaotic lawless mankind, then persuasively presents stability and morality through the imposition of a sovereign authority as the vital counterbalance.

“Moral Totalitarianism”

Although Thomas Hobbes’s argument hinges on man inherently lacking a moral compass, it is also a major point of contention. Is man truly unable to collaborate or distinguish good without an authoritative government instilling him with fear? Mencius, a Chinese philosopher prominent in Confucianism, held the opposite view, that man, even without external pressures, did have some naturally instilled sense of morality: “There are no men who are not innately good, just as there is no water that does not flow down” (Mengzi 1970, 6A2). Mencius expresses his argument by presenting a scenario in which a bystander suddenly sees a small child on the verge of falling down a well. Mencius says that any person would feel fear and dismay that wasn’t summoned from self-interest, like aiming to gain good relations with the parents of

the child (Mengzi 1970, 2A6). The contrast between Mencius's and Hobbes's view of human nature shakes the foundations of Hobbes's argument. If human nature doesn't completely lack morality, and collaboration between men is feasible without a sovereign authority, then Hobbes's picture of a chaotic lawless mankind becomes less plausible. Moreover, if men could find common ground without authority, then Hobbes's claim regarding the inevitability of war without an absolute unquestionable sovereign becomes significantly weakened.

Additionally, Thomas Hobbes's view of the nature of man, particularly his claim that humans lack morality, creates "moral totalitarianism" for the subjects of the commonwealth after subjugation. According to Hannah Arendt, Hobbes creates a society where individuals are incapable of making independent moral judgments. She argues that Hobbes's construction of a conscienceless social order diminishes the capacity for moral thought and leads to the rise of totalitarianism (Arendt 1994). More specifically, she believes that "the Leviathan provides definitions of right and wrong which individuals are ostensibly powerless to influence, and expresses the common interest as a single, unitary voice which organizes action" (Branstetter, 2017, 779). It is in Hobbes's view of the nature of man and the complete subjugation of the populous that this independent moral extinguishment occurs. The subjects of the commonwealth give up their power to decide morals for themselves and the power to question the sovereign because of their nature. As a result, the moral judgment of all the subjects is left to an uncriticizable, all-powerful man or assembly, which would inevitably share the same nature as the subjects: a sort of "moral totalitarianism". In short, Hobbes's evaluation of the nature of man, not only incorrectly claims that human nature lacks morality, but also results in moral subjugation from a moral-less authority.

The Nature of “Woman”

Another criticism of Hobbes is that he only includes “man” in his discussion of human nature. By leaving gender out of the picture, Hobbes is able to simplify and generalize his argument for an absolute sovereign at the cost of misrepresenting the populous. According to Preston King, Hobbes’s goal was “to formulate a uniform theory of authority which did not simply happen to neglect gender, but which was specifically meant to exclude gender as a ground“ (Slomp 1994, 1). His attempt at equality can be seen through his implication that women and men are equal in nature: “the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others” (Hobbes 2001, 94). However, Hobbes’s attempt for equality ultimately fails because he does not include protection for unequal treatment of women in his social contracts. Also, within Hobbes’s commonwealth, the sovereign is acknowledged to be the “ultimate criterion” for laws and judgments (Slomp 1994). If Hobbes’s goal was truly to establish equality, he failed to do so by leaving the treatment of women up to the sovereign and not putting any concrete safeguards in place.

To properly include women in Hobbes’s theory, it is important to recognize past cultural patriarchal tendencies. Hobbes, having started his discussion from the very nature of mankind, had laid the groundwork for natural equality between men and women. As a result, to ensure equality, all that Hobbes’s theory is missing is an acknowledgment of these past tendencies. As Gabriella Slomp pointed out, by including the equal treatment of women in social contracts – in the very glue of Hobbes’s commonwealth – women would be protected from a patriarchal commonwealth and sovereign.

Conclusion

At the beginning of the paper, I presented Thomas Hobbes’s discussion of the nature of man in the Leviathan. I showed that Hobbes’s argument for an unquestionable absolute

sovereign rested on his evaluation of the nature of man as selfish, lawless, and lacking morality. In the subsequent section, I argued that it was this argument – specifically that men innately lack justice and morality – that was unsound and responsible for Hobbes’s tyrannical moral-less sovereign. Finally, I discussed Hobbes’s failed attempt at gender equality in creating a genderless “man” and showed that the only way to ensure the equal treatment of women in Hobbes’s commonwealth is to add a protective clause to Hobbesian social contracts.

Through this analysis, it is evident that by using the nature of man as a central axiom in his theory of commonwealth, Hobbes is able to draw power away from subjects and into the sovereign. It is also evident that Hobbes makes no effort to mitigate that very nature of the sovereign. The result is Hobbes’s pessimistic view of man transferring to the all-powerful sovereign. If man lacks morality, then the laws and morals forced upon subjects by the sovereign would also lack moral grounding. Likewise, even when women are seen as equal to men in nature, a selfish sovereign could easily instantiate patriarchy. Hobbes’s view of the nature of man is a glass cannon: it might be his most powerful asset, but it is ultimately his Achilles heel.

In general, Hobbes’s issue holds true for all political philosophy grounding itself in the nature of man. A political philosophy that views man as collaborative, trustworthy, and selfless would have nothing to stand on. However, a political philosophy founded on a selfish man, while powerful, must grapple with the consequences of a selfish authority.

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