

Topic Covered:

Paper : C-8 (Modern
Western Pol.
Thought)

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Sem
IV

Unit - I:

Hobbes -

Materialism,

Human Nature &

Sovereignty.

~~Year~~

Study Material given
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~~Year~~

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Introductory.— From Jean Bodin who is generally regarded as the first modern political philosopher to have developed the theory of state sovereignty we naturally pass to Thomas Hobbes whose great masterpiece, the *Leviathan*, contains the first full and complete statement of the theory of *absolute* and *unlimited* Sovereignty of the State. (It would be recalled that though Bodin defined sovereignty as the supreme power of the state unrestrained by law, he admitted that it was limited by the Law of Nature, the constitutional law of the state, the law of God, and the right of the individual to private property.) There is thus a lurking inconsistency in his theory. (This inconsistency seems to be primarily due to his failure to analyse the notion of sovereignty fully and to examine the relation between the state and its component units as well as the grounds of the citizen's duty to obey the authority of the State. This deficiency was made good by Hobbes who, writing some sixty years later under conditions of civil strife broadly similar to those existing in France in Bodin's time, developed a systematic theory of state absolutism and removed all those limitations and restrictions by which the French thinker had hedged its sovereignty.) The political theory of Thomas Hobbes thus constitutes a further stage in the development of the theory of the nation-state and its sovereignty whose earlier phases are found in the doctrines of Machiavelli and Bodin.

The Scientific Materialism of Hobbes.— From the preceding account it should be clear that what makes Hobbes a great political philosopher and gives him an important place in the development of western political thought is not his defence of absolutism which forms a rather superficial part of his effective political philosophy; it is not even the complete divorce between politics and religion which he made. His claim to greatness rests on providing a *scientific basis* for absolutism and secularism. Bodin and others before him had written a good deal in defence of absolute monarchy; and Machiavelli writing about a century earlier had effected a complete breach between politics and religion. But neither of them had been able to rest his conclusions on a strong scientific basis. Hobbes realised that to justify monarchic absolutism on the basis of the Divine Right of Kings was like building a structure on foundations of sand. He chose to base it

on what seemed to him to be an incontrovertible view of human nature and in accordance with the new method of thought which was fast coming into vogue. In the same way he provided a scientific and logical basis for the subordination of religion to the state. Like Machiavelli he made the inherently selfish and competitive nature of man the main ground for the thoroughly secular and non-religious nature of political authority; but unlike him he gave a scientific explanation of human egoism.' In other words, the greatness of Hobbes lies in his attempt to base his political doctrines on what then had come to be regarded as the true or scientific method. The essence of this method consists in accepting the method of Geometry as the model on which all philosophical enquiry should proceed) and in viewing the physical world as a purely mechanical system in which every thing that happens can be explained in terms of the preceding event or events. Hobbes also believes that there is nothing real in the world besides matter, that what is not Body or Matter is not a part of the universe. He is thus a thorough-going materialist and mechanist. The *Principia* of Newton, published some years after the death of Hobbes, was perhaps the finest explanation of the universe in accordance with the new conception.

In studying the state according to this new method Hobbes could have started with the whole, namely the state itself, and explained its nature by resolving it into its component parts. Or, he could have begun with its constituent parts, i. e., individual human beings, and shown how the nature of man makes it necessary for him to create the state and what its nature must be. Hobbes chose the latter method. Instead of starting with an examination and analysis of the nature of the commonwealth, he first studied the nature of man and his behaviour, including mental processes like sensation, feeling, thought and will, and then concluded what the state must be in order effectively to deal with such a being and control his activities.) Hobbes adopted this method because he believed that like the universe of which he is a part, man also is a machine. Man is a 'microcosm, and epitome of the great universe'. He is more complicated than plants or beasts; but is nothing more than a compound of moving particles. Hobbes thought that if he could find the law according to which particles move in man, he could easily understand his relation to

his fellow-beings, i. e., the nature of the body politic. He, therefore, insisted that a study of political society must begin with an examination of the nature of man, and tried to 'ground the civil rights of sovereigns, and both the duty and liberty of subjects, upon the known natural inclination of subjects.' His procedure is thus deductive. He builds the science of politics on psychology. In his method there is no place for citation of authority, or for the teachings of history, or for dependence on Scripture or Revelation. It starts from self-evident truths and deduces conclusions from them. In his method Hobbes makes a complete breach with the past and is thoroughly modern.

It is easy enough for us in the twentieth century to find fault with the method Hobbes employed in his study of man and the state, and say that if there is any thing which the development of the social sciences during the past hundred years or so has demonstrated, it is that the method of physical sciences has a very limited applicability to social phenomena. In the light of present day knowledge we can say that in his efforts to construct a science of man on the model of the natural sciences Hobbes was working under a delusion. In fairness to Hobbes, however, we should remember that in the seventeenth century all science was under the spell of Geometry; it was the ambition of all great thinkers like Descartes, Gassendi, Spinoza, and Leibnitz to carry over to their fields of study the method to which Geometry owed its success. Even Locke who is generally regarded as the founder of the empirical school aspired to make morality a demonstrative science like Geometry. It is no wonder that Hobbes also came under the spell and tried to assimilate psychology and politics to the exact physical sciences.

Right or wrong, the method adopted by Hobbes has some implications which must be clearly understood. Firstly, by holding that there is no reality other than matter in the world, Hobbes identified man with body and denied the independent existence of what the medievalists called soul or spirit. For him sensations, feelings, emotions, perceptions and ideas were nothing but so many modes of motion of the grey matter in the brain. This necessarily led him to find the standard of moral valuation of human conduct in man himself and to reject the medieval idea of its transcendental source. If the norm of human conduct exist in man, the gulf that

separates the actual from the ideal according to the medievalist theory is removed; the ideal itself is evolved from the natural capacities of man. Secondly, it involves the repudiation of another typically medieval theory, the theory which finds the source of the state in the Fall of man. For Hobbes society is not the result of the Fall; it is an immeasurable advance; it lifts man out of the anarchy and fear of the natural state and makes it possible for him to become civilized and progressive. Finally, it may be mentioned that, in spite of his defence of absolutism; in spite of the fact that his contract is not a charter of freedom for the citizens but a bond of slavery for them, Hobbes can be regarded as the philosopher of liberalism and the spiritual ancestor of Bentham and Mill, because in working out an ethics and politics based on man, he gave rise to the individualistic mode of thinking which always comes back to the needs of human nature and thus suggests a basis from which the subject may judge the rulers. 'If men have a pre-political right or claim which it is the commonwealth's business to secure, then the implication is, however unwillingly faced, that a commonwealth which habitually fails to fulfil this claim, may be rejected.'* This aspect of the political philosophy of Hobbes has been recognised only recently. Prof. Strauss traces a deep connection between the philosophy of Hobbes and that of nineteenth century radicals like Bentham. It is not suggested here that Hobbes himself was conscious of this implication of his system. =

Hobbes's View of Human Nature and Motives.— From the account of the method of Hobbes we may turn to his views about human nature and motives which constitute the foundation of his entire political philosophy. In this connection it may be mentioned that before examining how man behaves as a member of society, Hobbes first studies him as an individual, apart from others whose existence is for the time being ignored. In the picture of the abstract man as drawn by Hobbes the following features stand out prominent :

1. Man is essentially body and nothing besides. What is called *mind* is decaying matter; it is so refined a matter that it cannot be observed by the senses even with the help of instruments like the microscope. It is subject to the laws of cause and effect like all physical bodies: belief in freedom of will and teleology or

* Perez Zagorin : *Political Thought in the English Revolution*, page 170.

pursuit of ends is an illusion. Men are as much driven by impulses as animals are; the only difference between them is that men have the faculty of speech and of reason which the animals lack. As has been stated earlier, according to Hobbes man is a machine composed of moving particles like plants and animals and the universe at large.

2. Man is a creature of activity; he must always be doing and can have no final end where he can rest. The achievement of one objective becomes a starting-point for a new activity; so the series goes on till death ensues.

3. What a man desires he calls good; what he dislikes and wants to avoid he calls evil. Good and evil are thus not absolute; they have meaning only in reference to the ends of human activity. This would seem to land Hobbes in ethical subjectivity and leave him no common and objective standard of goodness. This is not the case however; he finds a common and objective criterion for determining what is good and what is bad in the laws of reason, about which more will be said later on.

4. Hobbes treats the numerous passions of man in a masterly way and reduces all of them to the two original and primitive feelings: desire and aversion. Desire is the feeling produced when a motion set up by an external object heightens the vital processes going on in the body; aversion is the feeling produced when such a motion retards the vital processes. Desire is endeavour to secure such an object; aversion is endeavour to get rid of it. Desire for an object creates love for it; aversion for it produces hatred. The possession of what one loves gives one joy; failure to possess it or the loss of it is followed by grief. In the same way Hobbes traces other emotions like glory, envy, pity, and humility to the two primitive feelings, desire and aversion. The central feature of this derivation is that all of them are ultimately made to refer to the self of man; they are the form which egoism or selfishness assumes. Hobbes's man is completely self-centred. It is this effort to base all human behaviour on egoism that makes the theory of Hobbes an improvement on that of Machiavelli and gives his system a decidedly scientific form.

Attention may be drawn to two important features of this derivation of all emotions from the desire for objects and aversion


from them. In the first place, the mode of derivation is deductive. Hobbes does not merely make a list of the various emotions and passions of man on the basis of observation: he tries to show the different forms of reaction which occur under complex situations on the assumption that the only motives to action are desire for what furthers the process of life and aversion from what thwarts it. In the second place, Hobbes's theory must be clearly distinguished from hedonism. He does not say that good is what pleases us and bad what causes pain, that we desire nothing but pleasure or the avoidance of pain. The fundamental fact for him is that men desire *objects* which will satisfy their wants, and not pleasure by itself. He is thinking in terms of stimulus-response and not in those of pleasure-pain. Every stimulus affects the organism either favourably or unfavourably. If the effect is favourable, the organism wants the stimulus to continue; if it is unfavourable, the organism tries to get rid of it. 'The rule behind all behaviour is that the living body is set instinctively to preserve or to heighten its vitality. In a word, the physiological principle behind all behaviour is self-preservation, and self-preservation means just the continuation of individual biological existence. Good is what conduces to this end and evil what has an opposite effect.'*

5. This leads to another important point. It means that the real goal which nature has placed before man is not merely the satisfaction of momentary desires, but self-preservation. In order to preserve himself an individual must be continuously engaged in the struggle for existence; there can be no rest or halt for him. Life thus becomes a perpetual and restless desire for power after power, which ceases only in death. Therefore, the chief characteristic of man is that he seeks power as the best means to secure future apparent good.

6. Hobbes says that an examination of human beings shows that there is no great difference or inequality between them, that all of them are nearly equal. 'Nature has made men so equal in the faculties of the body and mind; as that though there be found one man manifestly stronger in body or quicker in mind than another, yet when all is reckoned with together, the difference between man and man is not considerable.' In other words, when

* Sabine: *op. cit.*, page 463.

all the mental and physical qualities of men are taken into consideration, it would seem that they have much the same ability to attain their ends. Lack of physical strength is compensated by intellectual ability and *vice versa*. From this equality of ability there arises equality of hope in the attainment of their ends.



7. Finally, Hobbes says that man is endowed with a faculty of reason by which he acquires 'the knowledge of consequences and dependence of one fact upon another'. Such knowledge is generally acquired by experience; it enables man to calculate the most effective means for attaining the objects of his desire.

Such is the nature of the typical man according to Hobbes. It would be observed that so far there is no question of his nature or passions being good or bad. Man is selfish; all his passions refer to his self or ego. This fact by itself does not make either man or his emotions bad, immoral or sinful.

The problem of moral goodness or badness arises only when man is considered in relation to other men.

Hobbes on Sovereignty.— In the foregoing account of the nature of the commonwealth which the rational principle in man leads him to set up we have had to refer to the sovereign powers of the ruler many a time. The reason is that the commonwealth entails sovereignty as a necessary attribute. Hobbes designates as sovereign the man or the assembly of men to whom people transfer their rights. For Hobbes, sovereignty is an undeniable fact of political life; wherever there is civil or political society, sovereignty must exist. In its absence every one will have the liberty to do as he pleases, and the entire purpose for which the commonwealth is set up will be lost. Moreover, one of his important contributions to political thought is the analysis of this vital concept and the removal of the limitations by which Bodin had hedged it. A brief account of it is therefore necessary.

The best starting point for a discussion of Hobbes's conception of *sovereignty* is found in his definition of the sovereign as that person 'of whose acts a great multitude, by mutual covenant with one another, have made themselves every one the author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their peace and common defence'. It follows from this definition that the essence of *sovereignty* lies in the power to determine on behalf of the entire community what should be done to maintain peace and order and promote their welfare. The will of the sovereign thus replaces the separate wills of the contracting individuals. In other words, sovereignty lies in the power to make laws binding on all the subjects. Since all the subjects renounce their power of determining what they should do to attain security, it is evident that the sovereign person or assembly of persons in whose favour the surrender is made becomes the *sole*

law-making agency in the commonwealth. This conception of the sovereign authority as the source of all positive law was not new; it had been formulated by Bodin. What Hobbes accomplished was to make it more definite and precise and to remove the limitations to which it was subjected by the Frenchman. It was further developed by Austin and others in the nineteenth century.

(The second fundamental attribute of sovereignty is its *absoluteness*. The power of the sovereign to make laws is not limited by any human authority, superior or inferior. There is no rival or coordinate authority in the commonwealth besides the sovereign; all the subjects have surrendered their rights completely to him. He has no obligations towards them; they cannot complain or grumble if he pays no heed or regard to their opinions and wishes. In surrendering all their natural rights the people give him unlimited power and unfettered discretion in regard to the ways and means by which the end of a secure, peaceful and contented life is to be attained.) The sovereign is the source of laws and also their sole interpreter; he cannot, therefore, be subject to them. Since the sovereign ruler is the product of the covenant and does not owe his power and authority to heredity, he is not bound by any constitutional law. The laws of nature, according to Hobbes, are not laws in the strict sense of the term; they are mere counsels of reason and have no compulsive force. They also do not constitute any restrictions upon the authority of the sovereign. (The law of God also does not constitute any check upon him for he is its sole interpreter.) Individual conscience cannot be pleaded against him, because law is the public conscience by which man has agreed to be guided. In this way Hobbes brushes aside all the limitations and restrictions upon sovereignty found in the system of Bodin and propounds the theory of absolute and unlimited sovereignty.

From what has been said above it follows that the subjects have absolutely no rights against the sovereign; they cannot call him to account, threaten to punish or depose him and choose another ruler in his place, or put him to death. The covenant, once made, is irrevocable; opposition to the sovereign or resistance to his authority is a breach of the contract and therefore wrong.

This leads us to another important feature of sovereignty. In the state of nature there can be no distinction between right and

wrong, just and unjust, moral and immoral, and no property rights. These distinctions first come into existence with the establishment of civil society and the setting up of the sovereign authority. Whatever is in conformity with the laws made by the sovereign is just and right ; whatever is against them is unjust and wrong. Morality can exist only in a civil society. The sovereign is also the creator of property. What people have in the natural state is mere possession which confers no rights. Legal property rights with their protection by society come into existence only with the establishment of sovereign authority. Sovereignty is thus the source of the distinction between good and bad, moral and immoral, and just and unjust, and also of property rights. Since property is the creation of the sovereign, he can take it away whenever he likes in the interest of the state. Taxation does not require the consent of the people. Another restriction imposed upon sovereignty by Bodin is thus removed. It is worth remembering that though the sovereign is the source of the distinction between moral and immoral, he himself is above morality. No action of his can be described as immoral or unjust. All that one can say is that what he does may sometimes be iniquitous ; but iniquity is not injustice.

In the fourth place, it may be said that the sovereign is the source of justice and has the power to make and declare war. He has supreme command of the militia, and determines what doctrines and opinions are to be permitted and what disallowed. By making the sovereign the source of justice and describing the judges as lions under the throne, Hobbes sought to repudiate the theory of judicial independence upon which writers like Coke had laid great stress. Hobbes thus concentrates full executive, legislative and judicial power in the sovereign. The theory of separation of powers and checks and balances can have no place in his system. Supreme command over the armed forces of the commonwealth is absolutely necessary for the sovereign ; in its absence he cannot possibly exercise full control over the acts of the subjects.

In the last place, attention may be drawn to another feature of sovereignty which is closely connected with its absoluteness. It is indivisible, inseparable and incommunicable. The sovereign authority cannot divest itself of any attribute of sovereignty without destroying it ; nor can he share its exercise with others. The

object of a civil war cannot therefore be to place any restriction upon its exercise or to share in it ; its aim is to determine who shall possess and exercise it.

Hobbes's theory of absolute and unlimited sovereignty has been subjected to hostile criticism from two points of view. Some persons reject it as unreal, as untrue to facts ; they hold that no actual sovereign wields such absolute and unlimited power as this theory ascribes to him. Hobbes himself admitted that sovereigns do not for the most part exercise such vast powers and are not acknowledged to possess the right to exercise them. The objection does not seem to be validly urged. It can be maintained that the purpose of Hobbes was not to give a factual description of the powers actually wielded by the sovereign monarch in seventeenth-century England, but to determine the powers which *should be vested* in the sovereign authority, if it is adequately to discharge the functions for which civil society is instituted. The attributes of sovereignty are 'deductions from the need and designs of men in erecting the commonwealth and putting themselves under monarchs or assemblies with power enough for their protection' ; they should not be taken as describing what actually existed at any time in the past or may be expected to become a fact in the future.

Critics like Vaughan reject the theory as 'pernicious and impossible'. It is condemned as pernicious in so far as it leads to despotism, pure and simple ; in so far as it gives the subjects no defence against oppressive and tyrannical rule, and reduces 'the whole herd to slavery'.* It may be rejected as impossible, because according to it 'the sole bond of union between the members of Leviathan is a common terror, the fear of relapsing into the state of nature. Or to speak more correctly, between one member and another there is no bond at all. The only cement provided is that which binds each of them, singly and separately, by sheer terror to the tyrant who stands above them all.'† If it is admitted that the only force which keeps the members of the commonwealth together is the terror of the sovereign's sword, the objection is well-grounded. It is a fundamental error to find in common subjection to the terror of the tyrant the sole cohesive element of the

* Vaughan : *History of Political Thought*, Vol. I, page 55.

† *Ibid.*, page 57.

body politic. It has to be admitted that there is sufficient justification for believing that in the system of Hobbes the tie which binds members of the commonwealth together is subjection to the sovereign authority which itself ultimately rests on force. As has been stated earlier, the sovereign authority of the monarch would melt away like ice under the summer sun in the absence of his supreme command over the state militia. It must also be conceded that the entire trend of his political philosophy is towards absolutism; the *Leviathan* was written with the purpose of justifying and defending absolute rule as the only remedy for civil wars which were ruining England. His definition of Law as the command of the sovereign backed by force also strengthens the same view. But there is an aspect of his thinking which shows that his defence of absolutism is not wholly unqualified but contains germs of the constitutionalism which he vigorously combated. He defends absolute sovereignty in the interests of security and welfare of the individual, and concedes to the people the right to disobey the ruler when he is not in a position to realise these ends. To justify absolutism on utilitarian grounds is to tread on the road which leads to revolution. From this point of view there is greater community of spirit between Hobbes and Locke or Sidney than between Hobbes and Filmer. It may be recalled that it was this sort of justification which gave offence to the supporters of the royal cause. In the next place, it is necessary to remind ourselves that the sovereign ultimately derives all his powers and authority from the people; they transfer to him all their natural rights, and by the social compact every individual owns and acknowledges himself to be the author of whatsoever the person chosen by them to be their representative does for common peace and security. Hobbes thus bases government virtually on the consent of the people; through the fiction of the contract and the idea of the corporation Hobbes is trying to express the idea of self-government, though in a very clumsy manner. Our aim here is not to defend Hobbes's absolutism or his arguments in support of absolutism, but merely to draw the attention of the reader to an aspect of his political philosophy which was later on developed by the nineteenth century utilitarians. This liberal aspect of his philosophy is also implied in his conception of Civil Law about which a few words may be added.