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Challenging Authority: The Bounds of State Power in Hobbes' *Leviathan*

In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes discusses “the thoughts of man” from the vantage point of an observer who is not only privy to the power of words but also to the scope of that power in relation to state sovereignty and its claims to authority. His convictions are inspired by the logic of scientific reasoning and he attempts to apply the principles of geometry to his understanding of the Commonwealth and the unmitigated dimensions of authoritarian power. Despite the ambiguity found in Hobbes' work, there is a level of fearlessness behind his forthright definitions and categorical efforts that ought to be considered, particularly during a time when it was thought treasonous to educate civil society that they, themselves, may be the “judge of good and evil or that each person must be guided independently by conscience” (Arnhart 166). This essay aims to show that Hobbes' dimensions of state power calculated in the *Leviathan*, can be interpreted as an admonition for any worthy citizen seeking to challenge state authority. He uses the words “author”, “actor” and “covenant” to formulate the far-reaching capacity of these terms when being used in the context of political agreements to reveal the exploitation that can arise from these contracts. Hobbes' configuration of the “Rights of Sovereignes” is systematically arranged in ch.18, alerting his audience of the consequences to creating such institutions and is instrumental in his application of scientific methodology to orchestrate the sections of his knowledge.

Hobbes explains his definition of an “author” in ch.16, highlighting the level of

responsibility embedded into this title. He states that “He that owneth his words and actions is the author” therefore, “the right of doing any action is called authority” (296). These “authors” are bound by authority in Hobbes’ “social contract” and the subjugation that is, at once, born from state sovereignty. He defines a second category of “authors” which are those “that owneth an action, or covenant of another conditionally” (299), which are those that are instrumental in settling disputes particularly related to “debt, proedes; and for appearance before a judge, or magistrate, vades” (299). Once these definitions are equated to the process of covenants, the legally binding parameters of these contracts can be better understood, therefore, more easily called into question by those who are measuring this power from a more critical perspective. Hobbes moves on to measure the weighty distinction between the rights of the sovereign and its subjects, drawing the reader’s attention to the confines of individual freedom after a Commonwealth has been instituted. He used the word “author” to delineate the substantial levels of ownership rendered to the subjects when a sovereign is established, bringing awareness to both the responsibility and dysfunction worked into such agreements. Hobbes explains that because men elect their representative, consequently, they are also “authoriz[ing] all the actions and judgements of that man” (303) therefore, they must comply with all covenants set forth by the elected monarch. Moreover, when subjects consent to a sovereign who will lawfully exercise the highest power, they at once, forfeit their ability to accuse the state of injustices under the pretense that “every man is author of all the sovereign doth” (305) While many choose to interpret these statements as a reinforcement of state authority and its power over its subjects, they can also be regarded as cautionary statements, meant to deter civil society from entering into agreements that could potentially compromise their civil rights.

Hobbes uses the word “actor” to leverage his arguments about the nature of collective

agency which can be useful in any further interpretation of his work and more specifically, the intricacies shaping his vision of the *Leviathan*. Hobbes' sees the "actor" as an "artificial man" who is merely "representing the words or actions of another man, or any other thing to whom they are attributed, whether truly or by fiction" (128). These "actors" act by authority to those that "owneth his words and actions" (296) therefore, they bind the author, when a covenant is made. In contrast, he defines the "natural person" as someone who takes responsibility for his actions and owns their actions in every sense (128). When applying Hobbes' definitions and meanings to the parameters of political science and our natural surroundings, it can bring a new level of awareness to our interpretations about our own political landscapes and the unclaimed freedoms and liberties that potentially stem from this heightened awareness. His reflections on "authors" and "actors" within these binding agreements reinforce the levels of responsibility shared between subjects, in comparison to the sovereign, that is basically absolved from all formal appeals once it has been instituted. He states that "Because the right of bearing the person of them all, is given to him them make Sovereigne, by covenant only of one to another, and not of him to any of them, there can happen no breach of covenant on the part of the sovereign; and consequently, none of his subjects, by any pretense of forfeiture, can be freed from his subjection" (304).

From Hobbes' perspective, a "covenant" is something that cannot be valid without the existence of a state, since an arbitrary punishment is only lawful within the margins of state institutions. Respectively, in a state of nature where "all men are equal" such covenants are "void" as one could expect "no assurance the other will perform after...without the fear of some coercive power" (291) to propel him into action. He uses this definition to explain the logic worked into the social contract that allows a sovereign body the right to absolute rule over its

citizens and calls this the “mutual transferring of right” (291). Hobbes then connects this definition of “covenant” to his knowledge of civil law, systematically listing various scenarios that legally bind the citizen to their obligations under the Commonwealth.

Therefore prisoners of war, if trusted with the payments of their ransom, are obligated to pay it: a weaker prince, make a disadvantageous peace with a stronger, for fear, he is bound to keep it, unless, as hath been seen before, there ariseth some new, and just cause of fear, to renew the war. And even in Commonwealth, if I be forced to redeem myself from a thief by promising him money, I am bound to pay it, till the civil law discharge me...and what I lawfully covenant, I cannot lawfully break. (Hobbes, 291)

In my opinion, this quote is very skillful in conveying the darker consequences of an authoritarian monarchy, which heavily counteract the initial interest of peace that inspires one to forfeit their’ natural rights in the first place. Simultaneously, his passage works to display the profound bounds of state sovereignty by evoking fear, a tactic, that may have even earned him the acceptance he needed to have his literature approved for publishing in the late 1600s by those seeking to benefit from the absolute power that Hobbes outwardly supports in the *Leviathan*. However, it can be questioned whether Hobbes’ inwardly promotes these ideas or if, in truth, he is merely using this Machiavellian-inspired method to cryptically warn his readers of the many dangers that may ensue from unchecked authoritarian power.

Hobbes’ multiple, unabridged depictions of state authority that constitute sovereign power leaves one to question not only the extent to which civil society was being deceived by the Commonwealth during this time, but also, the true, depths of despair among society caused by such levels of deception. By clearly understanding the definitions integrated into Hobbes’

methodology, it can help to reveal the intentions behind his philosophy, which can greatly alter the way we conceptualize his work. Hobbes' eagerness to instill this level of consciousness among civil society, conveys an intense desire for public awareness while revealing the sheer extent of his knowledge and understanding regarding the sociopolitical dimensions of his time. In consideration to the fact that he was seriously ill around the time he wrote the *Leviathan*, he may have believed that he was someone with very little to lose from this somewhat extreme publication or could even suggest an experience of personal enlightenment, that had profound effects on his individual ambitions. Nevertheless, the desperation he was feeling, managed to stay alive within the pages of his literature, along with the imperishable truths hidden beneath his rash portrayal of the state. Regrettably, the relentless barriers he describes in his writing, has also generated a wide range of interpretations among spirited citizens, many of whom continue to interpret his work with their own self-interest in mind. It can be argued however, that a mix of interpretations, was both predicted and welcomed by Hobbes, in the hope of accommodating the interests of both the rulers, for his own safety, and its subjects at the time. While Hobbes philosophy does make clear the extent of state power and the unremitting forces that safeguard these institutions, his resourceful formulations are outstanding in their' ability to also educate and inspire the wills of the just, to challenge any government that abuses its power over its citizens.

Works Cited

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