

Politics: Justifying the State

1. Hobbes

- By nature, humans are equal; physical strength can be compensated with ingenuity. ‘From this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends. And therefore if any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies’ (*Leviathan*, XIII ¶3).

Consequences: distrust, insecurity, competition, and conflict. For if there is no common power, there is no law; and where there is no law, there is no injustice: hence, anything goes. This is a problem if resources are scarce.

“Hereby it is manifest, that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as if of every man, against every man. [...] In such condition, there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is the worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” (*L XIII ¶¶8–9*)

- *Right of Nature*: the liberty of self-preservation by all means.
Law of Nature: commands grounded in reason. (i) We must endeavour peace if possible, but if not, we may defend our right in any way (*L XIV ¶4*); (ii) if others are prepared to do this too, we should forgo this right and hence some of our liberty to attain peace (Golden Rule) (*L XIV ¶5*).
- To establish enduring peace, a ‘common power’ must be established. This authority’s power must be absolute and supreme. Hence individuals transfer their authority to the state. Social or political contract: everybody agrees to relinquish the right for self-government to the sovereign and to become a subject (*L XVII ¶¶13–4*).

2. Spinoza

- *Natural Right* (cf. Reading [1]): like Hobbes, unrestrained pursuit of self-interest and self-preservation. Right is might or power in the long run. This is an echo of Thrasymachus’s challenge: justice or right = the interest of the stronger (*Republic* 338c).
- We create political institutions that force or constrain (or perhaps entice) us to act in a way that increases our power: so, political institutions can be empowering and hence lead to more individual freedom and flourishing (cf. Mill, *On Liberty* III ¶4, tree analogy).

- A *minimal* state guarantees security and peace (Reading [2] §6). The state is an *individual* with its own power and conatus. It has more power than any one individual.
- Balance: between too repressive (disempowering individuals, disallow freedom of thought, lack of tolerance) and not repressive enough (lack of cohesion, threat of subversion and fragmentation) (cf. Mill, *On Liberty* I ¶9, ‘harm principle’).
- *Religion* is dangerous to the state because it fosters irrationality (superstition, fear, hatred) and undermines its authority. But harnessed, religion can be beneficial for minimal moral guidance: to love one’s neighbour as oneself. This is the true and only message of Scripture (*Treatise* 14.3).
- The optimal state is a *democratic republic* (Reading [1] §§8, 11): political power is maximally distributed. Government is ‘in the hands of all’, and ‘laws are made by common consent’. Hence people are free because they act by their own consent rather than under the authority of someone else. Ideally, laws are such that we are ‘restrained less by fear than hope of something good’ which we can desire (cf. *Treatise* 5.9).
- *Freedom of thought*: the state has no power to make us believe something, and hence no right either. But the state can influence what we believe indirectly (cf. Locke’s *Letter on Tolerance*).
- Potential problem: paternalism and patronising totalitarianism. Authorities might claim that they know what is best for us: if only we knew what we really wanted, we would see that they coincide with what *they* have in view for us (cf. Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty*).

3. Leibniz

- Naturally, humans are unequal. Hence contractarianism is wrong. But ‘divine right’ theory (political obligation derives from divine authority) is wrong too. It violates the PSR (revelation and will instead of reason and intellect).
- Two main strands. (i) Plato’s ‘guardian rulers’: “If several men found themselves in a single ship on the open sea, it would not be in the least in agreement with either reason or nature, that those who understand nothing of seamanship should claim to be pilots; thus, following natural reason, government belongs to the wisest” (*Letter to Burnett*, in Jolley, *Leibniz*, p. 191) (cf. Plato’s simile of the beast in *Rep.* 493). The ideal state is hence an *aristocracy*. (ii) Augustine’s divine providence: given that God chooses the best, we should *conserve* the established order unless we are forced by extreme necessity.
- Against Hobbes: PSR in action. (i) Authority is grounded not in power but in wisdom or reason. (ii) Law is not based in actual command (purely formal), but in (objective) natural justice derived from divine reason, but not divine will (for if something is right only because God wills it, justice becomes arbitrary) (cf. Euthyphro dilemma).

