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Leviathan's Sovereign Liberal and Relativist?

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Thomas Hobbes is known as a political thinker advocating for absolute power of the government, consolidated in the sovereign. He is also known as an advocate for transferable natural rights for the sovereign's citizens. What is less known about Hobbes political philosophy, is the epistemological foundations undergirding the sovereign's sovereignty and authority. Because the sovereign is absolute, his command dictates what is right or wrong or true or false. This seems to fall into voluntarism and presupposes a theory of knowledge called "Perception Theory" (PT) which states that knowledge is simply whatever a person claims to be right or wrong or true or false.

The origins of this theory of knowledge and its consequences for political rule can be seen in Plato's critiques of relativism in the *Republic* and *Theaetetus* and Aristotle's analysis of the PNC in his *Metaphysics*. Drawing on these critiques, I propose an analysis of Hobbes's *Leviathan* through Hellenistic philosophy. I argue that at the heart of Hobbes's political philosophy is a paradox: the totalitarian sovereign who operates by relativism and voluntarism relies on transferable rights to prevent being called a relativist and voluntarist. Despite this, I will argue that the sovereign

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offers an illusion of the ideals of freedom, self-sovereignty, and truth he promises to his subjects. My argument has implications for understanding the liberal roots of Hobbes's political philosophy. In addition, this paper revives an ancient debate concerning epistemology that has been applied to ideas as far-ranging as cultural relativism, divine command theory, and now to political rule.

I. Defining Perception Theory through the Principle of Non-Contradiction

A foundational idea that Plato developed from the Presocratics is the Principle of Non-Contradiction (PNC),[1] which says that two propositions cannot both be true in the same respect at the same time. The Presocratics discovered this feature of logic because they were concerned with the ways fixed language can be used to describe the physics of the changing material world. The Presocratics were concerned with how language can accurately describe the world and, in particular, were struck by the question of how we can talk about things that change and yet remain the same. Plato's answer to this question, using ideas and arguments from Heraclitus and Zeno of Elea, is the PNC.

Heraclitus's statement that "we step and do not step into the same river [twice]" is a logical contradiction, but by applying PNC, we see that we step into the same river with respect to place/location (e.g., this specific spot in the river), but we do not step into the same river with respect to the time or discrete matter (e.g., this hour, or these specific H_2O molecules) (Waterfield 41).

In *Theaetetus*, Plato applies the PNC to various logical fallacies that are littered throughout his dialogues, including the *Republic*. Theaetetus defines knowledge as perception: "It seems to me that a man who knows something perceives what he knows, and the way it appears at present, at any rate, is that knowledge is simply perception" (Plato, 151e). This definition of knowledge can be termed Perception Theory (PT)[2] which claims

1 This terminology of course comes not from the Presocratics but from Leibniz in his various writings. Leibniz (1951, 400) first attributes a concept to the PNC as a logical structure (enthymeme) of our thought. Leibniz (1890, 309) refers to the PNC as one of the two principles of reasoning [ratiocinationum] (translation is my own):
"Itaque duo sunt prima principia omnium ratiocinationum, Principium nempe contradictionis, quod scilicet omnis propositio identica vera et contradictoria ejus falsa est... [And so there are two first principles of all reasoning, the first, the Principle of non-contradiction, which one knows that of all propositions identically true its contradiction is false.]"

2 This phrasing comes from Dr. Sarah Byers.

that all knowledge is perception. Perception in this case is defined not just as sensible data received through the sense organs but also as any judgment in the mind. Knowledge must be perception for Theaetetus, because if the material world and thus one's senses are always changing, the mind cannot make a proposition about what is. Indeed, knowledge for Theaetetus is about the world of becoming while for Plato and Aristotle knowledge is about what fundamentally *is*. This definition has three major implications for epistemology: first, it entails that every person's perception of reality is true (for a person cannot deny what one is seeing or judging); second, that the transfer of knowledge is impossible (for direct transmission of subjective perception to someone is impossible as it can only be indirectly transferred through a medium like words); and third, there is no greater understanding of knowledge (for perceptions are always true all the time in every respect). Protagoras's statement that "Man is the measure of all things" is another instance of PT (Plato, 151e). In *Theaetetus*, Socrates presents paradoxes similar to that of Heraclitus that show that the PNC is necessary and thus proves that PT leads to a logical contradiction. For example, Socrates argues that if PT is true, then someone could perceive PT to be false and thus negate PT as true. Socrates says:

> ...suppose he [Protagoras] believed it [PT] himself, but the majority of men do not agree with him; then you see—to begin with—the more those to whom it does not seem to be the truth outnumber those to whom it does, so much the more it isn't [true] than it is?...Protagoras admits, I presume, that the contrary opinion about his own opinion (namely, that it [PT] is false) must be true, seeing he agrees that all men judge what is. (Plato, 171a-b)

Here we see that a perception theorist is not only disproven if one person disagrees with their view, but also if multiple people disagree with their view. Socrates's argument shows that PT is disproven if just one person disagrees with the perception theorist, and if multiple people disagree, it only makes the problem worse for PT. This has implications for political theory, particularly in Hobbes, who must combat the problem of majoritarian relativism inherent to PT.

Aristotle was also well informed of these debates and commented on them in his *Metaphysics*, arguing that the PNC is a first principle of

all reasoning.[3] Without the PNC, Aristotle thinks one cannot talk about being or that which is because names could not signify anything if a contradictory definition could signify the same referent. For example, if it is true that man is a biped, then it cannot also be true at the same time and in the same respect that man is not a biped. Aristotle writes that those who follow Protagoras's argument fall into monism, whereby "if all contradictories are true at the same time about the same thing, clearly all things will be one. For the same thing will be a trireme and a wall and a man" (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV, 1007b20-30). In other words, if to signify an object by the word "man" is equally as true as to signify the object as "trireme," then nothing can have a distinct identity and no substance can be said to have a fixed essence.

PT also has consequences for the moral and political life, as a perception theorist is unable to perform ordinary life functions without cognitive dissonance or contradiction.[4] For example, Aristotle asks that if I am walking to a city (in this case, Megara), why do I not stay put, for it is equally as true that I am walking as that I am not walking (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* IV, 1008b10-20). If it is equally as true that when I am running late, I am on time, then why do I rush to the meeting I am late for? PT, as Aristotle shows, is practically, and by extension, politically impossible.

Before moving to the political implications, it is important to note that even though PT leads to logical contradictions, it does not mean that all subjective knowledge is false. The problem with PT is not that it argues that sense knowledge can provide subjective truths, but rather that it claims that all knowledge is subjective. Socrates (Plato 159c-160c) and later Augustine will argue that judgments about subjective sensory perceptions are forms of knowledge we can be certain of. For example, Augustine argues that even so-called sensory illusions are knowledge we can be certain of. Take his example in *Against the Academics* (3.11.26) of the perception of a bent oar in water (Augustine 75-76). The senses accurately depict what is to be seen, namely that the oar looks bent when placed in water. Furthermore, it cannot be denied that it seems to be bent to the perceiver. The main point is that if I see an oar bent in water or if I taste something to be sweet, it cannot be the case that at the same time and in

3 The PNC is a first principle because it cannot be demonstrated but must be posited. If it were to be demonstrated the demonstration would be ad infinitum (See Aristotle, Metaphysics IV, 1006a).

4 As Byers (2017, 115) has argued, perception theorists cannot claim that there are intrinsically evil or good acts since an action is only determined good or evil depending on the intention of the perceiver.

the same respect that I do not see an oar bent in water or that I do not taste something to be sweet (so long as I judge it to be the case). This demonstrates that even though *some* knowledge is subjective (namely, judgments about sensory perceptions), this fact does not negate the fact that some knowledge is certain and objective.

Finally, all of these debates can be applied to a political society. similar arguments used above to counter PT are used by Socrates to dismantle Thrasymachus's definition of justice in *Republic* Book I that "justice is nothing other than the advantage of the stronger"[5] (*Republic*, 338c). Socrates suggests that if justice is "nothing other than the advantage of the stronger," then how could the ruler, acting in what they believed to be their advantage, inadvertently enact a policy that proves disadvantageous? This could occur if a ruler proposes a policy that they thought would be advantageous but does not lead to the intended result. In this case, the supposed "advantage of stronger" leads to a disadvantage. At this point, Thrasymachus must concede that a ruler can propose a policy that is disadvantageous to them. This, consequently, renders justice equally valid whether it benefits the ruler or disadvantages them. Caught in contradiction, Socrates shows that Thrasymachus is a perception theorist who believes that justice is whatever the ruler *perceives* to be to his advantage and therefore susceptible to contradiction (*Republic*, 338c). The epistemological critique of relativism in Plato's *Theaetetus* and *Republic* sets the stage for analyzing Hobbes's *Leviathan* and his sovereign as a perception theorist.

II. Leviathan's Sovereign as a Liberal and Perception Theorist

The 17th-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes is often viewed as an early proponent of liberal thought for his ideas on freedom, the sovereignty of the individual, and advocating for a basic concept of rights (i.e., self-preservation) within the *Leviathan* (Courtland, et al). While Hobbes's view of rights differs from the modern understanding of inalienable[6] rights, he nonetheless originated a liberal conception of grounding a sovereign's rule based on rights, rather than divine rule or pure democratic vote. The

5 Plato will again argue against PT and its fallacies in his *Euthyphro*. A revival of this debate in a Judeo-Christian context of divine command theory is seen in Norman Kretzmann's "Abraham, Isaac, and Euthyphro: God and the Basis of Morality." In Donald V. Stump, James A. Arieti & Lloyd Gerson (eds.), *Hamartia: The Concept of Error in the Western Tradition. Essays in Honor of John M. Crossett*. New York: Edwin Mellen Press. pp. 27-50.

6 Instead, Hobbes views rights as capable of being renounced and transferred to other people. See *Leviathan*, Chapter 14, Section 7.

grounding for a sovereign starts with a group of individuals with the assumption of transferable rights. Hobbes's *Leviathan* was first published in 1651 in the aftermath of the English Civil War and the continental Thirty Years' War. Against this backdrop of religious and political fragmentation, Hobbes was well aware of the deadly effects of contradictory dogmatic beliefs with seemingly no resolution or common ground. In the face of political and epistemological uncertainty and relativism, Hobbes sought to develop a stable political regime founded upon the absolute certainty of political rulers' authority and laws. However, Hobbes's desire for absolute certainty and power in a political sovereign, paradoxically, reproduced the relativism he sought to avoid.

Hobbes's argument for a sovereign authority is as follows: the human condition is in a natural state of war of "every man against every man," so a government is needed to offer protection for humans from other humans (ch. 13, sec. 8). Instead of living in a state of paranoia and scarcity of natural resources and land, the goal is for subjects to live in a state of apparent peace and justice under a sovereign (ch. 8, sec. 16). Hobbes's *Leviathan* does offer freedom from the natural state of war to an extent. Having a sovereign with absolute authority over the law, judgments, and punishments in society also offers an efficient and powerful system to protect subjects from the paranoia of violence from their neighbors. However, an absolute sovereign does not protect his subjects from the sovereign himself, who might infringe on their freedoms, given that the sovereign, as a political perception theorist, is structurally capable of willing harm on his subjects. The problem with the sovereign is that the basis for his power and actions lies solely in his perceptions, independent of whether they are true or not, precisely because he is the sole arbiter of power and, consequently, truth. Thus it is fitting to claim that the *Leviathan*'s sovereign operates by means of PT because nothing but the sovereign's perception dictates what is right or wrong, true or untrue. The sovereign, if allowed to argue against the charge of being a perception theorist, would echo Socrates's mimicry of a perception theorist in the *Theaetetus*, "How then, if I am thus unerring and never stumble in my thought about what is—or what is coming to be—how can I fail to be a knower of the things of which I am a perceiver?" (160c-d). This idea would also be expressed by the sovereign if they were to be challenged by their subjects on the rightness or wrongness of any law or policy.

Thus far, Hobbes seems to be reformulating an ancient fallacy (i.e., PT) but upon closer inspection, it is actually a unique political and epistemological argument. Interestingly, the reason the sovereign is a perception theorist stems from the covenant with his subjects, not simply because the

sovereign has absolute power to make arbitrary decisions.[7] Without the covenant between him and his subjects, the sovereign has no power over perception or truth. This idea is expressed when Hobbes argues that the sovereign can do no harm or injustice to his subjects because the sovereign acts with authority from his subjects:

> ...because every subject is by this institution author of all the actions and judgments of the sovereign instituted, it follows that, whatsoever he doth, it can be no injury to any of his subjects, nor ought he to be by any of them accused of injustice. For he that doth anything by authority from another doth therein no injury to him by whose authority he acteth; but by this institution of a commonwealth every particular man is author of all the sovereign doth; and consequently he that complaineth of injury from his sovereign complaineth of that whereof he himself is author, and therefore ought not to accuse any man but himself. (ch. 18, sec. 6).

Thus, we see that the sovereign's laws are deemed as true, just, and conducive to peace, not because they are founded in reason, sanctioned by a vote of the majority, nor imposed by absolute force, but rather by the sovereign's perception that is granted to him by his subjects' will through the covenant. When a subject makes a covenant with the sovereign by saying, "I authorize and give up my right to govern myself to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner", he is transferring his faculty of deliberation and therefore judgment to the sovereign (sec. 13). This follows, for how could the sovereign accept his subjects' perceptions if they could potentially invalidate his? This would then invalidate the sovereign's claim to absolute sovereignty. The answer is that he does not and cannot accept his subject's perceptions. The sovereign must somehow remove the deliberative power from his subjects so as to make his perceptions identical to those of his subjects.[8] This solves the majoritarian relativism mentioned above by Socrates in the *Theaetetus*. In theory, if the sovereign's perception is also the subjects', then there is no possibility of an opposing view and therefore no contradiction by the PNC. Interestingly, Hobbes thinks this transferring of powers through a covenant constitutes

7 A covenant is defined as a contract of obligations for both parties to uphold over a period of time (See *Leviathan*, ch. 14, sec 11).

8 All of this is said to be true analogically in the same way that a subject says "I give up my right" without giving any material thing.

freedom and self-sovereignty in his subjects. For only by the freedom and self-sovereignty of the subject and their rights is the covenant initiated in the first place. However, as we will see, the subject, by the loss of deliberative powers, also forfeits his right to determine truth and exercise personal sovereignty. Having established that Hobbes's sovereign is a perception theorist, we can now analyze the consequences for the sovereign's subjects.

III. The Illusion of Sovereignty and Truth in the Sovereign's Subjects

We can understand Hobbes's view of freedom by examining his concept of deliberation and its role in his action theory. In the state of war, "every man has a right to anything" without being punished, but in the *Leviathan*, that right is transferred to the sovereign (ch. 14, sec. 4–11; ch. 18, sec. 1–2). Although this may appear to diminish freedom, it fits logically within Hobbes's *Leviathan*. Before anyone chooses what action to take, they deliberate. Deliberation for Hobbes is a tyranny of the mind "because it is a putting an end to the *liberty* we had of doing [acting] or omitting [not acting], according to our own appetite or aversion" (ch. 6, sec. 50). It follows from this that true freedom is the ability to act without having to deliberate and is simply following one's passions or immediate instinct without fear of punishment.

Deliberation is not absent in the *Leviathan*, but a subject does give up their deliberative power in matters of moral action and transfers it to the sovereign.[9] The subject must now conform their desires and aversions to those of the sovereign. The will, according to Hobbes, is the last "appetite or aversion immediately adhering to the action" (ch. 6, sec. 53). Subjects then must conform to the desires of the sovereign's will. Hobbes has essentially made a shortcut in the deliberative process and has freed the subject from the so-called tyranny of choice. As we mentioned, through the covenant, the subject gives up any notions of right or wrong and true or false to the sovereign.

This asymmetrical relationship ensures that genuine personal sovereignty––over action, truth, justice, etc.––is only possessed by the sovereign. Likewise, while the sovereign has absolute freedom, their subjects have the illusion of being free. Both their freedom and their status as subjects are in a state of flux, given the constant fear of being treated as mere objects by

9 See note 11.

the sovereign's voluntaristic will and perceptions.[10] What follows from this is that the sovereign has the power (in principle) to transfer and take away rights at any point.[11] Essentially, the Leviathan's sovereign is a modern Protagoras who is the measure of all things. Further, within this free state, Hobbes proposes that every subject has limited personal sovereignty. For "the power of a man is his present means to obtain some future apparent good"(ch. 10, sec. 1). The benefit of this is that a subject can pursue what they desire or avoid what they fear without the paranoia and scarcity in a state of war. While this appears to approximate an ideal liberal state, in reality, this ideal is an illusion. A subject in Hobbes's view can live however they want to with no regard for justice or morality as long as their desires or aversions do not conflict with the will of the sovereign. Hobbes suggests that in the Leviathan, the sovereign can enact any law or pursue any action as long as it contributes to the peace of society, for "whoever has right to the end [peace and defense of society] has right to the means" (ch. 18, sec. 8). However, only the sovereign can determine what contributes to the peace of society and what does not. Therefore, the subjects' reality is limited by what the sovereign deems as the reality of laws, morality, justice, and truth. Hobbes's definition of law, morality, justice, and truth within the *Leviathan* echoes Thrasymachus's definition of justice. Thus, the only person who can freely exercise their sovereignty is the sovereign, as he is synonymous with the law. A subject's reality remains theirs only insofar as it aligns with that of the sovereign, raising the question as to the degree to which a subject is really a subject—that is to say, possessing personal sovereignty or autonomy—under the Leviathan.

Hobbes's *Leviathan*, then, can be said to offer the power of truth and sovereignty for the sovereign and the illusion of truth and sovereignty for its subjects. Hobbes believed that every subject should live out their reality, but this reality is determined in part by the sovereign. It becomes clear that the sovereign, through possession of the rights of others, is capable of using his subjects as mere political objects. However, at the same time, without the concept of covenant, individual rights, and the consensual transferring of them by the subject, there is no valid way for a sovereign to have a true

10 This follows from our point earlier that for a perception theorist, every moment of perception of reality is true.

11 See (Hobbes, 116) quoting from Opera Latina in note 9. "But the commonwealth can neither act nor speak except through its person, i.e., him who has the supreme power. There are other lesser rights belonging to the sovereign, which differ in different commonwealths and can be lost without the power of protecting the citizens being lost. Such rights can be transferred to private citizens..."

claim of absolute power through PT. In this case, if a sovereign refuses to grant his subjects true self-sovereignty, he seems to enter into a state of war with them. Subjects in the Leviathan then have one thing to fear, and that is the absolute or arbitrary power of the sovereign. What John Locke calls "absolute arbitrary power" is exactly the illusion of sovereignty and truth that Hobbes's Leviathan presents to his subjects. In the end, only the sovereign has the true right and power to self-sovereignty, and Locke rightly points out that the only way for the sovereign's subjects to actualize their self-sovereignty is through justified rebellion.[12]

While the liberalism of Hobbes is markedly different from contemporary liberalism, often associated with liberal democracy and the idea of inalienable rights, this analysis has significant implications for any intellectual historian of Greek philosophy, Hobbes, and liberalism. This paper is also a continuation of a long tradition of thinkers arguing against relativism and skepticism (most notably Plato, Aristotle, and Augustine). These ancient debates have been applied to ideas such as cultural relativism, divine command theory, and now to political rule. Further research is needed to explore the materialist epistemology of Hobbes and its implications for PT and his political theory. Furthermore, a historical comparative study between the political theory of the ancient Greeks and Hobbes might illuminate how each philosopher's epistemology impacted their political theory.

I have argued that even though Hobbes's sovereign avoids the theoretical contradiction of PT through his covenantal relationship with his subjects and the transfer of deliberative powers, this does not prevent the negative epistemological and political consequences of PT. PT, under Hobbes, results in the subject's loss of deliberative powers, restricted freedoms, perpetual paranoia of the sovereign, arbitrary decisions, and, arguably, the potential state of war against him. This analysis demonstrates that Hobbes's sovereign is both a liberal and a relativist who fails to offer the stable freedom, self-sovereignty, and truth that Hobbes desired.

12 Locke, *Second Treatise on Government*, Chapter 11. However, interestingly, the one right that cannot be transferred to the sovereign is the natural right of self-preservation. This, Hobbes admits, implies that there can be some form of resistance within the Leviathan (cf. *Leviathan*, Chapter 14, Section 8). However, it could be argued that this "right" would seem to end as soon as preservation of life can be maintained, and does not in the slightest justify political revolution.

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