

## HOBBS AS A PHILOSOPHER OF POWER

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This essay is devoted to a critical analysis of the theory of power of Thomas Hobbes, as he presented it especially in his masterpiece, *Leviathan* (1651). Considering new contributions to this theme (M. Weber, B. Russell, C. W. Mills, A. Goldman, S. Lukes, etc.), I strive to explicate Hobbes's ideas by means of such concepts as desire, interest, causation, as well as the right of nature and liberty. Special attention is being paid to the question of social contract and sovereign power, in which I see a danger of a totalitarian grip on power.

**Key words:** Power – Sovereign power – Natural rights – Liberty – Social contract – Civil society – Max Weber – Efficient causality – Human intentions – Objective and subjective desires

*M. Oakeshott, C. B. Macpherson, and other students of Thomas Hobbes agree that Hobbes's philosophy is pre-eminently a philosophy of power.<sup>1</sup> The famous quotation from Hobbes's masterpiece Leviathan about a restless desire of power in all men ([1], 64); has been exploited by many authors, often with a bitter disapproval. Of course, the critics tend to forget Hobbes's own qualification attached to man's limitless craving for power, according to which striving for power is evil if directed by pride, while pride is a man's false estimate of his own powers ([1], vi, 36; „Introduction“, liv, xxxiv). In addition, Hobbes believed that man's restless desire for power could be checked and set into healthy limits by the social contract protected by the legitimate sovereign power. Yet Hobbes's use of the term „power“ is ambiguous and open to various interpretations, especially in connection with other typically Hobbesian terms, such as „liberty“, „the state of nature“, or „natural right“. As customary in the literature of his time, Hobbes often used the term „power“ instead of „cause“, but most frequently power would mean for him a capacity or disposition. Quite explicitly, he defined the power of a man (i.e., an individual power) as „his present means, to obtain some future apparent good“ ([1], x, 56), recognizing both original (natural) and instrumental powers in this respect. This definition refers to „the eminence of the faculties of body or mind“ ([1], x, 56), not just to their mere presence in man. Individual power would thus be measured by the degree in which the faculty or capacity operates in a person, although the terms which reflect upon*

<sup>1</sup> M. Oakeshott, „Introduction“ to *Leviathan* ([1], xxi); C. B. Macpherson, „Introduction“ to *Leviathan* ([11], 9f).

*the individual differences might still be qualitative, and not at all quantitative (notice Hobbes's examples: prudence, nobility, riches, good luck, etc.). Hobbes's distinction between the original (natural) and instrumental powers of an individual is rather arbitrary, traditionally coinciding with person's internal possessions and capacities (body and mind) and his external means for the satisfaction of desires. In addition, Hobbes also introduced the notion of a social power, which is „compounded of the powers of most men, united by consent, in one person, natural, or civil...“ ([1], x, 56). The mechanism of such group (collective) power is left open, unspecified. However, while the social power results from a summation of the participating individual powers, the sovereign power – a crucial Hobbesian conceptual device – is to be characterized in a different way: as a power created by the transfer of certain individual rights to one or several persons, with the idea of general protection guaranteed by mutual agreement.*

**Interpersonal power relations.** Hobbes's definition of individual (personal) power suggests that power is a commodity which is possessed by individuals and which can be utilized for securing the individual's intended goals. The emphasis put on the concept of „power to do something“ rather than „power over somebody (something)“ makes an impression that Hobbes lost sight of the relational aspects of individual power that are demonstrated in various power relations. This objection, however, does not hold water, for Hobbes's main goal of every individual, namely self-preservation (avoidance of death), makes every person aware of the competing forces which try to achieve the same goal, possibly in ways harmful to the person in question. Thus, in the hypotheticalal state of nature as well as in the real social context, interpersonal relations affect exercises of the powers of those involved, creating situations of conflict and struggle. As Hobbes states it, from nature all men have about equal power ([1], xiii; M. Oakshott, „Introduction“, xxxv), so that nobody has too much of an advantage over others. Yet the conflicting desires lead to interpersonal clashes, to a „war of every one against every one“. This restless competition between people endangers, in turn, their personal security and forces them to enter into civil societies governed by the sovereign power which is established by a social contract. Hobbes's scheme for social organization is well known and widely discussed. The connection between person's power (as a collection of means for the attainment of his/her intended goals) and interpersonal conflicts deserves, however, closer attention.

Although conflicts between people are generally recognized as standard ingredients of the situations in which human power is exhibited, the concept of conflict is not always incorporated into the definition of power. Hobbes's definition, quoted above, leaves conflict out; as does also B. Russell in his famous work on power, when he defines it as „the production of intended effects“ ([2], 35). Yet the fact of competition and struggle between men is Hobbes's point of departure and it can be claimed with justification that the influential definition of power offered by Max Weber ([3], 152) is historically rooted in the Hobbesian tradition. In his definition Weber stresses the

actor's ability „to carry out his own will despite resistance...“ Several contemporary students of power use different modifications of Weber's definition; this is for instance the case of C. Wright Mills, R. Dahl, even A. Goldman ([4], 9; [5], 202 – 203; [6], 231). It is nevertheless remarkable that the authors of various definitions of power share the basic core of their definitions with Hobbes. Isn't, for example, A. Goldman's statement that „power is the ability to get what one wants...“ ([6], 231) a remote product of Hobbes's thinking on this subject? Or take a similar definition formulated by a distinguished Hobbes scholar, S. I. Benn, according to which „power is an ability to determine the actions of persons in intended ways“.<sup>2</sup> Seemingly Benn's definition goes far beyond Hobbes's characterization of man's power as his present means to obtain some future apparent goods. But, again, it follows from the context of Hobbes's *Leviathan* that the determination of the actions of others is precisely what is here at stake, since the security and well-being of an individual in question hinges upon them. In other words, satisfaction of one's desires frequently depends upon the person's ability to prevent others, or eventually to induce others, to perform or abstain from certain actions. If only one person can be the king, all other rivals must be eliminated from the competition, though the identity of the winner may still be uncertain. Of course, the question of ability is tied up with the estimated projection into the future; with the possible or probable performance under certain future contingencies. Again, unlike the Weberian tradition, Hobbes did not explicitly incorporate probabilistic estimations of the power struggle outcome into his conceptual framework. But he was vitally interested in maximizing the survival chances of all members of a civil society, which operates under contractarian laws protected by a sovereign authority. All other nuances of the power struggle outcome would then be subordinated to this main goal and apparently almost obliterated. Likewise, Hobbes did not emphasize the importance of decision-making ([8], 18, 25, etc.)<sup>3</sup> in the power struggle; the main decision of the members of a social group to transfer some of their natural rights to the sovereign power again overshadows anything else in this respect.

**Man's abilities and inclinations; satisfaction of desires.** Let us now analyze those aspects of Hobbes's definition of power which are connected with man's projections of the desired future apparent goods. It seems that Hobbes expresses a teleological situation: the interplay between the individual's available means (both natural and instrumental) and his intended ends-in-view. Of course, the chief conceptual device that bridges the means and end-in-view (apparent goods) is efficient causality. The difference between the above mentioned Hobbes's and Russell's definitions of power hinges upon the fact that Russell stresses the results of this working efficient causality („the production of intended effects“), while Hobbes puts the emphasis on

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<sup>2</sup> The Uses of „Sovereignty“. In: ([7], 79).

<sup>3</sup> Or also non-decision making; see S. Lukes's treatment of the so-called two-dimensional view of power, in his *Power*.

the potentiality of the power agent, i.e. on what the agent can do (his present means).<sup>4</sup> Naturally, neither Hobbes nor Russell would worry too much about enumerating all possible present means or all intended effects in connection with a particular power agent. In fact, Hobbes has a tendency to offer some important general samples of the agent's means, such as extraordinary strength, prudence, eloquence, etc., with a possible hope that one can extend such list by analogy – by virtue of the description and analysis of man's natural and social conditions, as well as his standard life goals. This requires, however, an account of man's inclinations, especially those which are universally shared. Ironically, „a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death“ ([1], xi, 64) is put by Hobbes at the peak of man's natural inclinations. At any rate, man's conscious inclinations can be translated into his desires, which in turn have their targets (apparent goods, intended effects) and tools for reaching those targets (i.e. the person's present means or „powers“). This situation can be schematically expressed in the following way:

(i) (A desires  $o$ ) and ( $o$  is within the reach of A's causal efficacy).

Here „A“ stands for the power agent; „ $o$ “ for the (conscious) objects of A's desires, or for the apparent goods as to A. The concept of causal efficacy in general and A's causal efficacy in particular would need a careful explication, for the boundaries of A's causal efficacy will also be the limits of A's power. Obviously, Hobbes's use of temporal parameters (present means – future apparent goods) would require us to incorporate them into our schema (i), as follows:

(ii) (A desires  $o$  at  $t$ ) and ( $o$  is within the reach of A's causal efficacy at  $t$ ),

where „ $t$ “ stands for temporal parameters (slices of time, moments, intervals, and so like). Then the concept of A's causal efficacy could be explicated as the possibility of a sequence (sequences) of causal factors  $\langle c_1, \dots, c_k \rangle$  ( $k$  is a positive integer) which can bring about the desired  $o$ , due to the agent's direct or indirect intervention. The fact of A's essential involvement in the causal sequence  $\langle c_1, \dots, c_k \rangle$  – a possible sequence that can bring about the desired  $o$  – is indeed crucial: some of A's present available means must be necessary components of the sequence, usually figuring as its originating links. One can imagine various complex ramifications of such sequences, for instance presented in the form of tree-diagrams. It is also conceivable that there would be rich hypothetical variations, contingent upon the satisfaction of other desires of A, for instance, on his acquirement of wealth in the meantime. Apparently, these questions were not central to Hobbes's program and one can only speculate how he would have treated them to his satisfaction. I rather try to avoid technical complications which would be encountered in pressing these issues into some of the contemporary molds (e.g. decision theory, game-theory, in tensional logic, logic of actions, etc.). There are, however, some problems which are worthy of discussion in this context.

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<sup>4</sup> The difference between Hobbes and Russell is obliterated whenever Russell talks about love of power, which he deems as „the desire to be able to produce intended effects“ ([2], 262); italics mine.

(a) Hobbes's objects of desire *o* (desired by A at the present time *t*, but acquired – hopefully – by him at a later time) are possible, intentional objects with regard to A. It can be assumed that A is conscious of them at *t* if he pays attention to them at that time; or that A can be made conscious of them at *t* by stimulating his interests and attention in this direction. In short, there is no discrepancy between A's objective and subjective desires, or perhaps even between his objective and subjective interests.<sup>5</sup> The possibility of a discord between objective and subjective desires is not so far-fetched if one thinks about the Freudian or Jungian postulated human unconscious desires that operate outside the conscious, rational control of the person. In such frameworks, it is quite feasible that A desires *o* (i.e. the desire of *o* is „objectively“ present in A ) and also that A possesses present means to obtain some future apparent good (from the standpoint of his unconscious desires), which means that A has power to achieve such *o*, even if such power is not exercised.<sup>6</sup> The question of objective and subjective interests, which is of crucial importance, will be treated in a separate section.

(b) According to Hobbes, „reputation of power, is power“ ([1], x, 56). This quote suggests that any positively appraised attribute ascribed to the person's power enhances the present means of this person for obtaining future apparent goods. In this respect, power has a self-reproductive or self-generating tendency. But even more interesting is the case in which the desired object *o* self is power. Here the agent's power (his present means) is utilized for gaining (increasing, or at least maintaining) power: in one sense, power is instrumental; in another, goal in itself. Hobbes seemed to be uneasy about this situation, even if he recognized in it the most distinguished natural inclination of people. The question is, for him as well as for others, what to do with it, how to tame power.<sup>7</sup> In any event, there are natural constraints imposed upon human power, determined by the pressures coming from man's natural environment as well as from his own physical-biological set-up. But these constraints are almost universally shared by all people, as it had been already noticed. So, again, the decisive constraints on individual power come from the social sphere, by virtue of social laws and institutions. Without these restrictions, agreed upon by the social contract, Hobbes sees a very bleak picture, full of bloody struggle, insecurity, cunning, exercises of brute physical force – in short, a magnified territory of the Thrasymachian conception of „might is right“.

(c) Among the privileged objects of human desire, felicity – to use Hobbes's term – is the most cherished one. Here Hobbes sounds like John S. Mill when the latter claims that „happiness is desirable, and the only thing desirable, as an end; all

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<sup>5</sup> Notice how important this distinction becomes in the so-called three-dimensional view on power, advocated by S. Lukes in his *Power*, especially chapter 4.

<sup>6</sup> It might be exercised in a distorted way, say, neurotic; take for example the Freudian Oedipus complex.

<sup>7</sup> See B. Russell, *Power*, chapter 18 entitled „The Taming of Power“; however, Russell recognizes many kinds and forms of power, which he views predominantly as a social phenomenon.

other things being desirable as means to that end“ ([9], 438).<sup>8</sup> This would mean that behind every *o* desired by A is the ultimate object of anybody's desire, i.e. happiness. Of course, people are not constantly aware of this desire, in spite of the fact that such desire aims at the satisfaction of every man's highest interests. In his theory of human nature, Hobbes does not support any idea of a death-wish, so characteristic for the later Freudian development. On the contrary, death is for him the greatest evil, the avoidance of which is deeply desired by everybody. Naturally, felicity cannot be identified with the mere avoidance of death, i.e. with self-survival; one might say that self-survival is a minimal, however necessary, condition for achieving happiness. The circumstances of Hobbes's life account very well for his concern about this minimal condition of felicity.

(d) Evidently, people desire that which lies within the realm of their interests. Self-survival and felicity are respectively the minimal and maximal limits of such realm. No sane person, Hobbes believed, would desire the opposite of self-survival and felicity. Yet people do make mistakes in desiring objects which are the wrong means for the achievement of these highest goals. Hence the projected „apparent goods“ from Hobbes's definition of power often stimulate improper powers in people, execution of which may contribute to human misery rather than felicity. Obviously, Hobbes was aware of the frequent discrepancy between person's objective interests (the achievement of felicity) and subjective interests (the actual objects of desire at a certain time). Yet he seemed to be quite naïve in underestimating the possible gulf between these interests, for to him felicity is a „continual success in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desireth...“ ([1], vi, 39). Recent literature on power, influenced by Hegel, Marx, Freud, Foucault, etc. strongly emphasizes such possible discrepancies in interests. S. Lukes, in presenting his radical or three-dimensional concept of power, claims that „men's wants may themselves be a product of a system which works against their interests ...“, so that a question arises what „they would want and prefer, were they able to make the choice“ ([8], 34).<sup>9</sup> This problem is interestingly intertwined with Hobbes's notions of man's natural rights and liberties.

**Man's natural rights and liberties.** In chapter xiv of *Leviathan*, Hobbes gives explicative definitions of the right of nature and of liberty as a basis for his further treatment of natural laws, social contract and sovereign power.

The right of nature is defined as „the liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature...“

Liberty, in turn, is defined as „the absence of external impediments: which impediments may oft take away part of a man's power to do what he would...“ ([1], vi, 39).

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<sup>8</sup> „Utilitarianism“, chapter iv. In: [9].

<sup>9</sup> J. Plamenatz suggests that Hobbes was very much aware of this possibility; see his paper Mr. Warrender's Hobbes. In: ([10], 74).

In both definitions the concept of power plays a crucial role. It is interesting that liberty is delimited negatively, as the absence of external impediments, but, oddly enough, not as the absence of man's internal impediments.<sup>10</sup> In the (hypothetical) state of nature to which these definitions apply, man would be „permitted“ to use his entire power potential. The term „permitted“ has here neither legal nor moral connotations; in fact, its meaning comes close to a sheer tautology: „A can do what he can do.“ Of course, the definition of the right of nature contains more than that: (1) a reference to man's will; (2) an implicit main goal of man's striving. In general, man can do more than he is aware of, and he usually does not want (will) to do everything he knows he can do. In addition, the repertoire of man's possible actions is socially determined, since man is a member of some social group and learns from other members of the group operations which he otherwise would not acquire. Nevertheless Hobbes's hypothetical model of man's natural state is a helpful abstraction that has been widely exploited in social-political, legal and moral philosophies.<sup>11</sup> Using our previous schemata (i) and (ii), we may express the situation dealing with natural rights of A as follows:

(iii) If (A desires *o*) and (*o* is within the reach of A's causal efficacy), then (A has a natural right to get *o*).

By analogy we can apply the schema (ii) and obtain:

(iv) If (a desires *o* at *t*) and (*o* is within the reach of A's causal efficacy at *t*), then (A has a natural right to get *o*).

Now our schema (iii) expresses, in an atemporal fashion, that if a man wants and can achieve something, then he has an unhindered natural right to achieve it. Here it is possible that, though A desires *o*, there exist external (or internal?) obstacles which prevent him from successfully reaching *o* (i.e., he is not at liberty to get what he wants), yet his natural right to get *o* is not impaired. This is perhaps the sense of Oakeshott's remark that „might and right are not the same thing“ ([1], „Introduction“, p. lix). The schemata (iii) and (iv) also permit that A has power to achieve certain *o* without desiring it: for instance, if A can kill another man, but he does not want to, while he would have a natural right to commit such action and sometimes it would be imprudent not to do so (say, in self-defense). Of course, Hobbes did not accept as rightful those actions of A that are harmful to A's main goal – to the preservation of his own existence. Evidently, the delineation of this goal is by its nature very obscure; in particular with regard to the clashes between objective and subjective interests, discussed above.

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<sup>10</sup> See discussion of this issue by J. R. Pennock, „Hobbes's Confusing ‚Clarity‘ – the Case of ‚Liberty‘“. In: [10], 101 – 116).

<sup>11</sup> See, e.g., J. Rawls's conception of the original position, in his book *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971), together with his scattered references to Hobbes and the state-of-nature. See also R. Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), especially chapters 1 and 2.

**Sovereign power and social contract.** As Hobbes stated it, „where is no common power, there is no law: where no law, no injustice“ ([1], 83). The „anarchic“ state of nature is thus replaced by a civil society that operates under a social contract and introduces civil laws safeguarded by a sovereign power. Only then the legal or moral categories of obligation (duty), prohibition and permission (right) are applicable to human actions. Our schemata (iii) and (iv) are no more valid in this kind of situation, for not everything that A desires and has power to obtain will be assigned to A as his right. In fact, Hobbes expected that people will voluntarily and mutually transfer certain rights; i.e. by reasoning out the beneficial consequences of such actions, enter into a social contract. This transfer of rights also incorporates the transfer of the means for enjoying them, which means giving away of certain powers. For instance, if the right of killing another man is contractually transferred, A's present means for killing another man are being transferred in this procedure as well (of course, Hobbes was not so naïve that he would believe in automatic elimination of homicides). While A may still retain the physical force or skill required for killing another man, by contract he would commit himself to give up the use of such powers (both natural and instrumental ones), unless the self-defense or a breach of the contract prudentially orders the opposite course of action.

Hobbes called the power needed for the protection of the social contract and its laws by different names: coercive power, civil power, common power, and chiefly the sovereign power ([1], xvii, 112; xviii; xix; xxix; xxx). How many natural rights should an individual transfer to this sovereign power that is created for the protection of each individual's security? Macpherson claims that Hobbes was thinking about handing over all rights and powers of individuals to a sovereign [11].<sup>12</sup> This would indeed be a very drastic price to be paid for the release from the insecurity of the state of nature! Of course, the idea that all the former competitors would do the same in this act of transference, might outweigh such a tremendous loss. Yet this total submission to the sovereign power seems utterly unrealistic. In addition, the sovereign power will ultimately create its own new rights, which are not merely transferred to it by the individuals. Will these new rights and powers stay under the control of the individuals involved? This is an issue which Hobbes, with his mechanistic and atomistic attitude, could not have settled to the satisfaction of the future political thinkers, such as John Locke, J. J. Rousseau or Thomas Jefferson.

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<sup>12</sup> C. B. Macpherson, „Introduction“, p. 44; compare, to the contrary, with ([1], xiv, 86).

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