

POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

The Need for Sovereign Authority

Instructions

When doing the reading for this class, there are the two basic kinds of information you need to understand:

1. What are the main points or conclusions that an author accepts with respect to a particular issue?
2. What are the reasons, important considerations, and evidence that lead the author to accept that conclusion?

For our purposes, *it is information of the second sort that will be our primary concern* since our most basic task is to *evaluate the reasons and evidence* that are offered to support accepting one possible position on an issue, rather than another.

Reading

Hobbes, T. (2006, July). [Chapter 16]. In J. Bennet (Ed. & Trans.), *Leviathan*, part 1: Man (pp. 74–76). Early Modern Texts. <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hobbes1651part1.pdf> (Original work from 1651/1668)

Hobbes, T. (2007, August). [Chapter 17–19]. In J. Bennet (Ed. & Trans.), *Leviathan*, part 2: Commonwealth (pp. 77–79). Early Modern Texts. <https://www.earlymoderntexts.com/assets/pdfs/hobbes1651part2.pdf> (Original work from 1651/1668)

Questions

As you read, keep these questions in mind:

1. In chapter 16, Thomas Hobbes adopts a broad notion of personhood that he then uses to explain the nature of authority. In later chapters, this will then be used to explain the nature of sovereignty in a state or a commonwealth.
What does Hobbes mean by a “person” (p. 74)? On this account, what sorts of entities count as a person? What types of persons does Hobbes consider?
On this account, what is the difference between an actor and an author (p. 75)? How does this explain the nature of authority (p. 75)?
Towards the end of this chapter, what sort of problems does Hobbes see in democracy—that is, when “the representative consists of many men” (p. 76)?
2. In chapter 17, Hobbes argues that we (unlike, say, bees and ants) need to form a state or a commonwealth.
What is Hobbes’ definition of a commonwealth (p. 79)? Ultimately, what is the purpose of forming a commonwealth?
When comparing us to other animals (like bees and ants, pp. 78–79), what six reasons does Hobbes give to defend the necessity of a commonwealth?
Based on all this, does the commonwealth have intrinsic or instrumental value?
3. In chapter 18, Hobbes discusses a whole host of rights and powers held by the sovereign ruler of the commonwealth.
How is the sovereign chosen? What authority and powers over others does the sovereign have? (Hobbes lists out 12.) Why does Hobbes believe that it is acceptable to give the sovereign such great power over everyone else?
4. Finally, in chapter 19, Hobbes compares “how serviceable” (p. 86) are different forms of government.
According to Hobbes, how should we assess the serviceability of a commonwealth? (Hint: this is related to the purpose of a commonwealth from question 1 above.)
Of the three forms of government he considers (monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy), which one does he seem to believe is generally the best? (He does not seem to come out and actually say this, but the implication should be pretty clear.) Why is that?

To answer these questions you will have to reflect critically on what you have read and possibly re-read important passages.

Although I strongly suggest that you write out brief answers to these questions, you do not have to turn in written responses. You do, however, need to be prepared to speak intelligently about these issues at our next class meeting.