

thomas hobbes on the citizen

thomas hobbes on the citizen presents a foundational perspective on the role and responsibilities of individuals within the state. Hobbes, a seminal figure in political philosophy, offers a distinctive view of citizenship grounded in social contract theory and the necessity of a strong sovereign to maintain order. His ideas emphasize the importance of obedience, security, and the transfer of certain natural rights to the governing authority. This article explores the nature of the citizen according to Hobbes, the social contract's implications, and the balance between individual liberty and state authority. It also examines Hobbes' influence on modern political thought and how his views contrast with other theories of citizenship. Understanding thomas hobbes on the citizen provides valuable insight into the origins of contemporary governance and civic responsibility.

- The Concept of the Citizen in Hobbesian Philosophy
- Hobbes' Social Contract and the Formation of Society
- Rights and Duties of the Citizen According to Hobbes
- The Role of Sovereignty and Authority in Citizenry
- Hobbes' Influence on Modern Political Theory

The Concept of the Citizen in Hobbesian Philosophy

Thomas Hobbes' conception of the citizen is deeply intertwined with his views on human nature and the state of nature. In his seminal work, *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes the natural condition of mankind as one characterized by competition, distrust, and a "war of all against all." In such a state, life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Against this backdrop, the citizen emerges not merely as a member of society but as an individual who consents to relinquish certain freedoms in favor of collective security.

For Hobbes, the citizen is defined primarily by their acceptance of the social contract and submission to the sovereign authority. Citizenship, therefore, is less about inherent rights and more about the acceptance of a political order that guarantees safety and peace. The citizen's identity is thus political and contractual rather than natural or inherent.

Human Nature and the Citizen

Hobbes' theory of the citizen is grounded in a pessimistic view of human nature. He argues that individuals

are driven by self-interest and a desire for self-preservation, which leads to conflict in the absence of centralized authority. This understanding shapes his view of citizenship as a practical necessity: individuals become citizens to escape the chaos of the state of nature.

Political Identity and Consent

The citizen's political identity is established through consent. Hobbes posits that individuals agree to form a commonwealth by contracting with one another to appoint a sovereign power. This consent is the foundation for political obligation and loyalty. Without this agreement, Hobbes believes that no legitimate political order can exist.

Hobbes' Social Contract and the Formation of Society

The social contract is central to Thomas Hobbes on the citizen, serving as the mechanism by which individuals transcend the anarchic state of nature to form a peaceful society. Hobbes' social contract theory explains how citizens collectively agree to surrender certain freedoms in exchange for security and order provided by a sovereign.

Unlike more optimistic contract theories, Hobbes emphasizes the absolute authority of the sovereign as essential to prevent a return to disorder. The social contract, therefore, is not a mutual agreement between equals but a transfer of power to a single ruler or assembly.

From State of Nature to Commonwealth

In the state of nature, individuals possess natural rights, including the right to all things, leading to conflict. The social contract involves individuals mutually transferring these rights to a sovereign, who then enforces peace and laws. This process creates the "commonwealth," a political body designed to protect citizens by controlling their natural impulses toward violence and disorder.

Unconditional Sovereignty

Hobbes insists that the authority of the sovereign cannot be divided or questioned once established. The social contract requires citizens to obey the sovereign unconditionally to maintain peace and prevent civil war. This absolute sovereignty is a defining characteristic of Hobbesian citizenship.

Rights and Duties of the Citizen According to Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes on the citizen outlines a unique balance between rights and duties, wherein citizens

surrender many natural rights but retain the fundamental right to self-preservation. Citizenship, in Hobbes' framework, is marked by a duty to obey the sovereign and an expectation of protection in return.

Rights Retained by the Citizen

While Hobbes argues for significant transfer of rights to the sovereign, he acknowledges that citizens retain the right to defend their own lives if the sovereign fails to protect them. This right to self-defense is the ultimate safeguard against tyranny, although it is narrowly defined.

Duties of Obedience and Loyalty

Citizens are expected to obey the laws and commands of the sovereign without resistance. This duty arises from the social contract and serves to maintain civil peace. Loyalty to the sovereign is paramount, as rebellion would dissolve the commonwealth and return society to the state of nature.

Obligations Beyond Obedience

Beyond mere obedience, citizens have a responsibility to uphold the social order by respecting laws, paying taxes, and participating in civic duties as required. These obligations reinforce the stability of the political community and the sovereign's authority.

- Right to self-preservation
- Obedience to sovereign laws
- Rejection of rebellion
- Participation in civic responsibilities
- Respect for social order

The Role of Sovereignty and Authority in Citizenry

Central to Thomas Hobbes' view on the citizen is the concept of sovereignty. Hobbes argues that a strong, undivided sovereign authority is essential for the emergence and maintenance of citizenship and civil society. The sovereign's power is absolute and indivisible, creating a clear hierarchy between ruler and

subject.

Characteristics of the Sovereign

The sovereign may be an individual or an assembly endowed with ultimate authority. Hobbes stresses that the sovereign's legitimacy stems from the social contract and that the sovereign is not a party to the contract but the recipient of the citizens' transferred rights. The sovereign's role is to enforce laws, adjudicate disputes, and ensure security.

Limits on Sovereign Power

Although the sovereign's power is absolute, Hobbes concedes that it is limited by the sovereign's obligation to protect the lives of citizens. If the sovereign fails in this primary duty, citizens retain the right to self-defense. However, resistance or rebellion is otherwise forbidden, as it threatens the stability of the commonwealth.

The Citizen-Sovereign Relationship

The relationship between citizen and sovereign is contractual and hierarchical. Citizens grant authority to the sovereign and, in return, receive protection and order. This relationship defines the nature of citizenship in Hobbesian thought, emphasizing submission for collective well-being.

Hobbes' Influence on Modern Political Theory

Thomas Hobbes on the citizen has had a profound and lasting impact on the development of political philosophy and modern theories of the state. His ideas about social contract, sovereignty, and the role of citizens continue to inform contemporary discussions on governance, authority, and civic duty.

Legacy in Social Contract Theory

Hobbes' articulation of the social contract laid the groundwork for later philosophers such as John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. While differing in their assumptions and conclusions, these thinkers built upon Hobbes' insight that political order arises from an agreement among individuals to form a society.

Impact on Concepts of Sovereignty and Citizenship

The notion of absolute sovereignty introduced by Hobbes influenced the development of the modern state,

particularly in emphasizing centralized power and the rule of law. His view of citizenship as contractual and conditional challenged earlier notions of divine right and hereditary rule.

Critiques and Contemporary Relevance

While Hobbes' emphasis on absolute authority has been criticized for justifying authoritarianism, his framework remains relevant in debates about security, civil liberties, and the limits of state power. The tension between individual rights and collective order highlighted in Hobbesian citizenship continues to resonate in modern political discourse.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who was Thomas Hobbes and what is his significance in political philosophy?

Thomas Hobbes was a 17th-century English philosopher known for his work on political philosophy. He is most famous for his social contract theory and his book 'Leviathan,' where he discusses the structure of society and legitimate government.

What does Thomas Hobbes mean by 'the citizen' in his political theory?

In Hobbes' political theory, 'the citizen' refers to an individual who agrees to surrender certain freedoms to a sovereign authority in exchange for security and order within society. Citizens consent to the social contract to avoid the chaos of the 'state of nature.'

How does Hobbes describe the 'state of nature' and its impact on citizens?

Hobbes describes the 'state of nature' as a pre-political condition where there is no government or laws, leading to a 'war of all against all.' In this state, life is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,' prompting citizens to seek peace through a social contract.

What role does the sovereign play in Hobbes' concept of citizenship?

The sovereign holds absolute authority to maintain peace and security. Citizens grant the sovereign power to enforce laws and protect them from the chaos of the state of nature, thereby legitimizing the sovereign's rule through their consent.

How does Hobbes justify the absolute authority of the sovereign over

citizens?

Hobbes argues that absolute authority is necessary to prevent a return to the state of nature. Citizens relinquish their rights to the sovereign to ensure social order and protection, making absolute power essential to maintaining peace and preventing civil war.

According to Hobbes, what rights do citizens retain after entering into the social contract?

Citizens retain the right to self-preservation and, in some interpretations, the right to resist the sovereign if their life is in imminent danger. However, generally, they give up most rights to ensure collective security under the sovereign's rule.

How does Hobbes' view of the citizen differ from later political thinkers?

Hobbes emphasizes security and order over individual liberty, advocating for a strong, absolute sovereign. Later thinkers like John Locke emphasize natural rights and limited government, with citizens having more active roles and protections against sovereign power.

What relevance does Hobbes' concept of the citizen have in contemporary political discourse?

Hobbes' concept highlights the balance between security and freedom, a central issue in modern politics. It informs debates on government authority, citizens' rights, and the justification for state power in maintaining social order against threats like crime or terrorism.

Additional Resources

1. Leviathan

Thomas Hobbes' seminal work, "Leviathan," lays the foundation for his political philosophy, focusing on the structure of society and legitimate government. It explores the social contract theory and the necessity of a powerful sovereign to ensure peace and prevent civil war. The book also discusses the nature of human beings and their motivations, emphasizing the importance of order and security in the citizen's life.

2. The Citizen

Often considered a complement to "Leviathan," "The Citizen" delves deeper into Hobbes' ideas about political society and the role of the citizen within it. Hobbes examines the concepts of sovereignty, law, and the relationship between the individual and the state. This work highlights the duties and rights of citizens and the importance of obedience to the sovereign for maintaining social order.

3. Hobbes on the Foundations of Political Obligation by Jean Hampton

This book analyzes Hobbes' views on why individuals owe political obedience to the sovereign. Hampton explores how Hobbes justifies political obligation through the social contract and the fear of violent death. The author also discusses the implications of Hobbes' theory for understanding citizenship and civic responsibility.

4. *The Social Contract Theories: Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau* by John C. Reitz

Reitz provides a comparative study of social contract theories, with a significant focus on Hobbes' contributions. The book explains Hobbes' perspective on the citizen's role in ensuring political stability and the rationale behind absolute sovereignty. It offers critical insights into how Hobbes' ideas contrast with those of other social contract theorists.

5. *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition* by Jean Hampton

In this comprehensive study, Hampton situates Hobbes within the broader social contract tradition, emphasizing his influence on the concept of citizenship. The book discusses Hobbes' argument for the necessity of a strong sovereign to protect citizens from the state of nature. It also addresses the tension between individual freedom and political authority in Hobbesian thought.

6. *Thomas Hobbes and the Natural Law* by A.P. Martinich

Martinich explores Hobbes' interpretation of natural law and its significance for his political theory. The book examines how Hobbes defines the duties of citizens under a sovereign and the importance of law in maintaining social order. It provides a detailed account of Hobbes' ideas about rights, obligations, and the moral foundations of citizenship.

7. *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis* by Leo Strauss

Strauss offers an in-depth analysis of Hobbes' political philosophy, focusing on the development of his ideas about the citizen and the state. The book discusses Hobbes' views on human nature, social contract, and the justification of political authority. Strauss also considers the implications of Hobbes' thought for modern political theory.

8. *Hobbes's Leviathan: Reprinted from the Edition of 1651* with Introduction by J.C.A. Gaskin

This edition of "Leviathan" includes a scholarly introduction that contextualizes Hobbes' ideas about citizenship and sovereignty. Gaskin's commentary helps readers understand Hobbes' arguments about the citizen's role in the commonwealth. The work serves as a valuable resource for those studying Hobbes' political thought in its historical and philosophical context.

9. *The Citizen and the State: Essays on Thomas Hobbes* edited by Tom Sorell

This collection of essays brings together contemporary scholars who discuss various aspects of Hobbes' ideas on citizenship and the state. The essays cover topics such as political obligation, sovereignty, and the nature of the social contract. It provides diverse perspectives on Hobbes' relevance to modern political philosophy and the understanding of the citizen's role.

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