Hobbes' Theory of International Society

Dominika Klej

Considered to be one of England's most prominent philosophers of all time, Hobbes is recognized as one of the fathers of modern philosophy and political theory. He was, "both the founder of this school and a principal contributor to the realist tradition." In this realist tradition, he contributed to thought on security, human behavior, and the separation of ethics and politics. He was also very influential in idealist philosophy and law. Literary critic Nolan J. Cathal once stated, "As contradictory as they are original, Hobbes' ideas are debated to this day." Hobbes distinguished himself, gained immense recognition and inspired awe for centuries that followed. This was due in part to the meticulousness, originality, and inquisitiveness that characterized his works, but more so to the revolutionary ideas he advocated concerning the social contract, the Leviathan, government as well as the security dilemma. He continues to be regarded as the greatest classical figure of the contractarian tradition.

Hobbes was born on April 5, 1588 in Malesbury, England. He claimed that his mother gave birth to him when she heard that the Spanish Armada was set to destroy the nation. He insisted that she gave birth to twins: Himself and fear. The sense of fear and hostility that surrounded Hobbes was reinforced when the sacred bond of family was broken. This occurred when his father abandoned his family, forcing Hobbes into the care of an uncle. He continued to live in fear even after completing his education and publishing several of his works. In fear of persecution for his radical views Hobbes fled from his home, spending a major part of his life outside of England. It was this continuous, ever-present fear that was Hobbes' driving force, as it was the founding principle on which he built his theories. Although the influence of other thinkers and philosophers is great, it was fear that contributed most to the formation of his theories. It was fear that gave him the uniquely Hobbesian perspective. The political and social situation of instability and civil warfare in Hobbes' England instilled in him this continuing preoccupation with fear.

There were several other influential forces in Hobbes' life that become readily apparent. One of these was Galileo Galilei. He influenced Hobbes to be a mechanist: To view the world as a matter in motion, and man as movement of limbs. There was also a strong Machiavellian influence that may instantly be detected in Hobbesian thought. This is especially true with his insistence on looking at things as they are and not as they should be, and that lack of morality motivated political obedience. Hobbes dismissed Aristotle and his followers, declaring himself the creator of civil philosophy, which is presently known as political science. It was in the Leviathan that Hobbes wrote that man's life in nature was "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, short." This observation was the precursor and catalyst for all of Hobbes' political theories and ideas. It was on this very concept of fear that he constructed the theories of man and state that hold numerous implications for international society. Thus, through meticulous research of the nature of man and of the nature of the state, the main aspects of the philosophy of international society, as postulated by Thomas Hobbes, may be deduced.

Before being able to make a credible and accurate assessment of Hobbes' fundamental ideas on international society, it is essential to examine the smallest entity that it is comprised of, namely man. In his theories of the nature of man, Hobbes asserted his firm belief that once all of society's restraints are removed, the true nature of man emerges: One of cruelty, brutish egotism and unconstrained passion that is directed by insecurity and fear:
Hobbes insisted that regardless of how generous or charitable our actions appear to be, they are ultimately directed by egotism, self-fulfillment, and self-concern. He also asserted that the cause of the fear of men lies partly in their natural equality and partly in their temptation to hurt each other. Thus, Hobbes considered all men to be equal, both mentally and physically. Due to this equality, men are susceptible to conflict for three natural causes. These are competition for wealth and limited supplies, distrust, and man’s search for glory. The first assumption is illustrated in Hobbes’ insistence that “...all men are equal to each other by nature. Our actual inequality has been introduced by civil law.” The second assumption that “everyone is looking for profit, not friendship” is manifested in Hobbes’ belief that “...every voluntary encounter is a product either of mutual need or of the pursuit of glory.” Furthermore, he stated that there are no moral principles in the state of nature. The common conception of morality, as understood today, involves an individualistic duty of each man to adhere to what is right and noble, regardless of what others are doing or of what is most profitable. To Hobbes, this was unrealistic and unattainable. Morality was something achieved through the collective effort of all, for the benefit of all. In this definition, he captured the essence of what morality signified:

Morality is a system of rules that promote each person’s overriding interests, and hence to which each person has reason to adhere, only when everyone complies with them.

Although often misunderstood and taken out of context, Hobbes did not deny that objective ethical principles do exist. He recognized that they were simply suspended when overshadowed by the greater concern for survival. Striving to become a good person, which includes the relevance of being honest and forgiving in one’s life, should not be an objective that stands in the way of a person’s safety:

In essence, according to these laws, people have a “duty” only to preserve themselves. Seeking peace is a corollary of this, as are, consequently, “duties” to be fair and forgiving; but the primacy of self-preservation dictates that individuals are required to take no significant risks to comply with them.

Because of the prevailing condition of chaos and anarchy, each man has the right to protect his life and possessions by any means he deems possible or necessary. This was clearly stated in Hobbes’ work, De Cive. In it he states: “Each man has the right of self-preservation, he has also the right to use any means and to do any action by which he can preserve himself.” To Hobbes, this right of self-preservation is a most sacred right and one, which no man may be denied. Any man who is denied this most human and fundamental right not only can, but must, do anything in his power to regain it. Thus, war initiated by this man is justified, whereas war initiated for any other cause is inexcusable:

Every man is not only right, but naturally compelled, to make every effort to win what he needs for his own preservation, anyone who tries to thwart him for the sake of luxuries will be to blame for the war which breaks out, because he was the only one who had no need to fight.

Hobbes was adamant in his insistence that this perpetual state of competition and war could not be altered by the introduction of an individualistic and loosely-enforced set of rules, for any set of conventional rules followed by some, but not all men, would restrict man’s behavior and limit his ability to defend himself. Clearly, this was not only inadequate but also unsafe for any man, “for that were to expose himself to prey, which no man is bound to do.” This unstable setting in which man must carry out his life is further perpetuated by ambitious schemes and cunning approaches: “Each man’s hope therefore of security and preservation lies in using his strength and skill to stay ahead of his neighbor,
either openly or by stratagems." It may be thus concluded that in the state of nature, "nothing can be just or unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place."

Aside from his theory of the nature of man, Hobbes has also been greatly recognized for providing the "first organizational and juristic model of a state, equated with coercion and authority." The state was Hobbes' main concern, because it was the method through which, he believed, that the state of war could be tamed and lessened. Man, as an individual is alone, exposed and endangered: "Now, if no man can be safe during the Hobbesian war of every one against every one, it is because no man has the power to cancel out the threat of the other." However, all is not lost; the situation can be remedied. Even though the threat posed by each man cannot be canceled out by anyone else, the institution of a state can overcome this menace. It is through the social contract that Hobbes proposed the elimination of fear and danger. It is through the social contract that each individual surrenders natural liberty to the state in order to gain physical safety and a new civil liberty in return. This social contract is established through consent, and not imposition. It is only in a collectivity that a social contract may be applied. However tempting and inviting it may be to view the social contract as the ultimate solution to the problem of fear, it must be recognized that there are several faults inherent within the social contract. Primarily, man cannot give up his right to self-preservation or self-defense because that is the very reason he entered into the contract. Secondly, because people are selfish, each person will see it as advantageous to violate the contract. Where there is no government, there is no reason to comply. It is illogical to adhere to a set of morals when there is no assurance that others will do the same. However, these faults are not irreparable. In order to reconcile them, Hobbes suggested the institution of a political sovereign to enforce and uphold the social contract.

Thus, the social contract is the method by which individuals voluntarily come together in political decision. This contract is only effective if it is upheld by an appointed political sovereign: The Leviathan. The Leviathan is an absolute, but not totalitarian, authority that ensures security of the individual and of property without intervening in economic activity and personal autonomy. Like Machiavelli, Hobbes insisted that both fear and love for the ruler allow him to sustain his subject's loyalty and obedience. The sovereign's primary duty is to protect himself and his subjects at all cost: "The sovereign may, without injustice, inflict any harm whatsoever on 'innocent' foreign persons in the pursuit of state interests, also in peacetime." The Leviathan is almost like a 'mortal god' who defines justice; thus, his actions cannot be either just or unjust. For this reason, there is no right of rebellion against the Leviathan.

States are formed to escape the state of insecurity and war, and to enforce order domestically. These states, however, remain in the state of nature among themselves. This state of nature is of course, the state of war. This state of hostility and danger makes it justified for states to defend their interests by any means they deem necessary. Hobbes wrote that states indulge in their defense, "and, in fact, do so justly." This state of war, however, has one main advantage: it eliminates the possibility of a dictatorship or empire rising in the state of nature. This is simply because no actor is strong enough to dominate the others. According to Hobbes, the state is sovereign: "sovereignty meant absolute power above the law, and states therefore were actually outside the law."

Just as man is faced with uncertainty and danger, a state is faced with continuous insecurity. It is the duty of the Leviathan to maintain a high level of security and safety for all within the state. In governing, the Leviathan must realize the necessity to follow national interest. It must also be recognized that other states will do the same, for they may even use force when necessary, in a manner that is unrestricted by consideration for other states. Thus, "the powers that wrestle with one another act in a zone that is continuously in danger." Since there is a continuous danger that other states may use force, it is the Leviathan's duty to maintain adequate armaments. Because the issue of security is not only
important but also imperative for the existence and functioning of a state, the priority of the *Leviathan* must be to do whatever can be done to undermine the power of other states.\(^47\)

In examining the nature of man, it becomes very clear that it is virtually impossible to obtain a thorough and accurate understanding without prior comprehension of the nature of the state. Even though it is important to examine man in isolation, examining man, as part of a collectivity is far more effective: "Men in the state of nature are a multitude, a collection of particular individuals."\(^48\) The two concepts are intricately inter-linked. The same holds true for a complete understanding of international society. Theories concerning Hobbes' fundamental views on international society cannot be examined in isolation. It is important to keep this in mind when examining Hobbes' philosophy of international relations.

As previously proven, Hobbes' preoccupation with insecurity caused him to postulate that both man and state are submerged in an ever-present, inescapable state of war. It is no surprise that Hobbes carried this insistence further into the international setting. Primarily, it is necessary to clarify what he meant by characterizing international society as being in a "state of war". This state of war in international politics that Hobbes wrote of does not imply an incessant battle, but rather, as stated in the *Leviathan*, "the known disposition thereto, during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary."\(^49\) Perhaps it is in this widely cited quote that Hobbes himself gave a clear depiction of the war that governs international relations:

> But though there have never been any times, wherein particular men were in condition of war against each other; yet in all times, kings, and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators, having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their torts, garrisons and guns upon the frontiers of their kingdoms, and continual spies upon their neighbors; which is a posture of war.\(^50\)

What was the explanation that Hobbes offered for the state of war that prevails within international relations? How did he support this claim? Can the state of war be somehow controlled, or lessened in degree, or made more predictable? If so, how did Hobbes propose this be done? How did he view international law, the role of alliances, treaties, and covenants? How did he view security, peace and war? Finally, what are the modern implications of these theories? These are the issues that will be tackled in the following portion of the essay.

It was once noted that the application of Hobbes' conception of the state of nature to international relations yields two main characteristics. These two provide a simplified view, which allows a brief understanding of the international setting. The first application of Hobbes' view of the state of nature to international relations provides an analytical model that helps to prove that wars are a result of the structural properties inherent within relations among states.\(^51\) Because of the absence of a superior power capable of enforcing regulative rules, a conflict arises between international actors, causing a state of war.\(^52\) Secondly, the state of nature provides an explanation for the model of moral justification.\(^53\) Prior to tackling the remainder of Hobbes' theories, it must be realized that the state's compliance with moral rules must appeal to those interests that states hold in common.\(^54\) In a state of war, each international actor has a reason not to comply. This reason is that compliance would cause this actor to be taken advantage of by other actors in the system. Just as the social contract among men makes compliance beneficial only if all men follow a set of cooperative rules, so too will states abide by rules that all other states observe.

Upon comparing Hobbes' theories concerning man with his theories concerning relations among states, it must be noted that there is a logical connection between them. There are certain characteristics that apply to both the individual and the international states of nature. According to author Charles R.
Hobbes’ Theory of International Society

Beitz, there are four main aspects that qualify for both man and the state. The first of these is that in both settings, there are actors of a single kind. Secondly, these actors possess relatively equal power. Thirdly, they, both in the individual and international setting, are independent of each other. Lastly, they hold no reliable expectations of reciprocal compliance in the absence of a common superior. Beitz argued that none of these four similarities holds true in the modern international setting. It is quite clear that there are actors of various kinds including non-state actors, international organizations and mediators, such as the United Nations. Power is not distributed equally among all actors within the international setting. Also, there is a significant degree of interdependence and a fair degree of international reciprocity in the absence of an effective central authoritative figure. Even though Hobbes’ theories may have several grave shortcomings when applied directly to the modern world, it would be unreasonable to dismiss them altogether since they provide valuable insight and raise valid questions.

According to Hobbes, what are the fundamental causes for the state of war among nations? This state of war is caused, primarily, by the anarchy that prevails. The anarchy of international relations creates competition. Anarchy, whether it be among individuals or states, leads each actor to fear the worst from others. This fear will cause him to undermine his competitors to ensure his own safety. Thus, relations between states “remain in the natural condition of hostility and war, which justifies states in defending their interests by any means they judge appropriate.” If this logic is followed through, it may be observed that all moral duties in international relations are dissolved. This anarchy, or lack of a unitary society among states, may also be viewed differently. States are not subject to the same opportunities for destruction as are individuals and strong states do not fear the weak. For this reason, states have always preferred to ensure their safety by treaties and alliances rather than by a resignation of their sovereignty. Author Howard Warrender provides a clearer explanation of what Hobbes considered to be the cause for the war among nations:

The chief source of instability and distrust in international relations, as in Hobbes’ state of nature, is not that men will act to meet patent danger, but that they will also act to meet hypothetical danger. States do not merely fight when they are actually attacked; but follow what are sometimes called in diplomatic language, abstract principles of precaution. It is with such action designed to meet potential danger, that Hobbes’s theory is centrally concerned, and it is these actions which are only conditionally excused in his ethical theory.

Thus, it may be stated: “The international state of nature is a state of war, in which no state has an overriding interest in following moral rules that restrain the pursuit of more immediate interests.”

As it may be observed, the rationality of acting on moral rules is one that provides an adequate assurance of the compliance of others. Only a government with power to regard compliance and to punish noncompliance can provide this assurance. Thus, it seems only logical that Hobbes would advocate a world government. This supranational authority, would resolve the state of war. Although it seems like a logical explanation, Hobbes did not advocate or recognize the need for an international Leviathan, which is most intriguing. Why did Hobbes not step forward to propose the creation of a Leviathan among Leviathans? Why did he deny the existence of a universal ruler in relations between states?

Hobbes was adamant in his insistence that “world politics is incapable of erecting an equivalent Leviathan,” to counteract the ‘war of all against all.’ Hobbes

...was a minimalist about permanent solutions to the problems of anarchy and war. States fought wars and conducted their affairs with a certain prudence and the life of states was not as fearful as the lives of individuals in the state of nature. Hobbes did not believe that there was the same urgency to establish a social contract among states since their insecurity could never be as great as that of individuals. The absence of government in the
international context does not lead to the same chaotic outcome as it most evidently would for individuals: “Anarchy in its international context is, therefore, not as intolerable as in its domestic context.” Thus, it may be concluded that Hobbes had little, if only a glimmer, of hope in the ability of states to cooperate and respect each other. This minimal level of respect and consideration would not be enough for the total elimination of the state of war. The observation of common rules of conduct is, at times, reasonable although states lack what Hobbes viewed as an essential feature of the law: Enforcement. Nonetheless, it is an important element governing international relations:

Far from being a bleak, unrelenting battle for daily survival, interstate relations are capable of sustaining communal, cooperative endeavors based on reason and mutual respect for law.

On the one hand, the state cushions and protects the individual from the worst consequences by taming and lessening the war within the individual’s state of nature. The reason being that the state is strong enough to survive in the international setting, whereas individuals within the domestic setting are not capable of surviving without the social contract. The urgency to institute a social contract between states is eliminated. A central government is no longer a necessity. This was stated most eloquently by author Terry Nardin, “Ironically, states remain in a state of war of all against all at the international level because the state has successfully eliminated that war at the domestic level.”

Although Hobbes provided no guidelines for international behaviour, his theories are extensively adopted in international law. While he did not emphasize the importance and efficacy of a set of international rules of conduct, Hobbes did believe that international relations are capable of sustaining a certain level of cooperation. He observed that “International law is substantially weaker than intranational moral bonds precisely because of the absence of supranational political authorities.” Since there is no authority to enforce international law, any possibility of its success lies within the decisions of the state: “All order and legal guarantees of the system of international law reside in the concept of the state.”

Since security exists only in the state, everything outside the state is a “state of nature”. Thus, the major challenge of international law is that states face each other in a ‘state of nature’. Due to this, there is nothing that can absorb all rationality and legality. Author Martin Hollis clearly illustrated this situation:

States are judges in their own causes, with their location within a situation of anarchy imposing a security dilemma on them. This means no prospect of completely enforceable international law, or of universal moral code to guide the actions of leaders.

Although creating the conditions necessary for widespread compliance would be difficult, it would not be impossible. In order for officials of states to conform their official actions in international affairs to moral principles, there would have to be a reliable expectation of reciprocal compliance. Only under this condition, does international law not impinge upon the national interests and security of each individual state. Hobbes himself asserted that above all else, states will hold their own benefit in the highest regard:

In states and commonwealths not dependent on one another, every commonwealth, not every man, has an absolute liberty to do, what it shall judge, that is to say, what that man or assembly that representeth it, shall judge most conducive to their benefit.

What did Thomas Hobbes postulate about the key issue of the balance of power in international relations? Quite clearly, Hobbes resisted the creation of a Leviathan among Leviathans precisely because he feared this would endanger and distort the balance of power. He viewed the balance of power as, “a pursuit of national interest rather than as a cooperative and mutually beneficial institution of international society.” Because each state has taken the law into its own hands, there exists a balance of forces. A balance of power is essential in international relations. Power is the governing force between states: “a thirst for power after power which only ceases in death.” Hobbes insisted that the security and
prosperity of a state depends on the security of some or of all other states. A state will be lost if it cannot correctly distinguish between a friend and an enemy. In this balance of power, each must maintain a high level of autonomy, and cannot search for security with another state, for he will become the subject of that state.  

War and peace, having always been a fundamental concern between nations, also intrigued Hobbes: “Hobbes was preoccupied with establishing political and legal conditions of peace, even at the risk of war among sovereign states, which he saw as a necessary outcome of the institution of Leviathans, but overall the lesser evil.”  

War is the result of a breaking of the balance of power. It may often be justified if it is used to distribute rights to international actors. Also, war and violence may often be a very rational strategy for survival, which is morally permissible. This is because each individual state has a right to do whatever is necessary for its security. Thus, in this state of nature, nothing can be just or unjust. International law must take this condition into account and must be modified: “What is therefore essential to international law, which governs relations between states is that law that does not distinguish between just and unjust, a nondiscriminatory concept of war.” Therefore, it may be concluded that because there is no state above the state, there can be no legal war and no legal peace. This creates “an extralegal state of nature in which tensions among Leviathans are governed by insecure covenants.”

Hobbes’ ideas concerning covenants and treaties, coalitions, alliances and secondary associations demonstrated his thoughts on diplomacy. He allowed for the possibility of coalitions and alliances. However, he argued that they would not be stable. He insisted that these would increase the chances of violence, and that the shared interest, which would lead to their formation, would not be long lasting. He also stated that forming alliances increases the chances of war instead of stabilizing a balance of power and making credible the threat to attack. Treaties, alliances and coalitions and all universal organizations short of a world government are unlikely to be long lasting. Covenants can be made as binding obligations to perform even when performance cannot be shown to be in the interest of the state. Thomas Hobbes provided an analogy to illustrate the inefficiency of covenants:

Hobbes’ discussion of the ransomed soldier, in which he claims that such a soldier, having been released on promise of subsequent payment of a ransom, thereby incurs an obligation to make good on the promise even though there may be no common power to enforce it.

In his work, On the Citizen, Hobbes wrote about agreements. They are instrumental to securing peace since, through the agreement, one is agreeing what should or should not be done. Agreements would be useless if one did not stand by them. In The Leviathan, Hobbes discussed the relevance of covenants:

Covenants, without the sword, are but words, and of no strength to secure a man at all... If there be no Power erected, or not great enough for our security, every man will, and may lawfully, rely on his own strength and art, for caution against all other men.

Hobbes has been most criticized for his denial of the existence of other actors within international relations. He denied that there are non-state actors that mediate interpersonal conflict, insulate individuals from the competition of others and share risks or encourage the formation of friendly attitudes. Given that it cannot be denied that such coalitions, alliances and secondary associations have existed at various times throughout history, one may need to reject this aspect of Hobbesian thought. Coalitions have persisted throughout history for sufficiently long periods of time to render the Hobbesian claim misleading. Hobbes’ insistence that states are the only actors in international relations also “denies the possibility that transnational associations of persons might have common interests that would motivate them to exert pressure for cooperation on their respective national governments.” In the modern sense, it must be observed that this is not the case. Since the Second World War, the number, variety and relevance of transnational groups have increased significantly. Economists, labor union leaders and social
activists often bond together to form influential, non-state actors. There are many other downfalls, contradictions and shortcomings that may be encountered upon a careful examination of Hobbes’ political philosophy. The ones aforementioned are but a few but to discredit or discard other Hobbesian predictions and postulates due to a few imperfections would not only be unreasonable but also ridiculous. They are far too valuable and insightful to be eliminated altogether.

In conclusion, Thomas Hobbes’ theories concerning man and the state hold many implications for international society. Although he never formally composed anything on the subject, many of Hobbes’ theories on the nature of man and the nature of the state can be viewed in light of international relations. Thus, through a careful analysis of Hobbes’ fundamental theories, the nature of international society may be deduced. Although imperfect in many ways, these theories certainly offer insight for the modern world. For example, where, in the modern world, does one find Hobbes’ type of sovereignty in a democracy? One theorist proposed: “The people personally embody sovereignty but they do not actually rule or always possess the greatest power, even in a democratic state.” Hobbes’ influence continues to be felt throughout the centuries: “Thomas Hobbes’ view of the need for an absolute sovereign-this train of thought could become distorted to serve extreme nationalism, totalitarian government, and the glorification of war, an apparently natural development of the XX century.” Sadly, Hobbes’ theories are often taken out of context, ridiculed and misinterpreted by many. However, the lifetime achievement of this great political philosopher has not gone unnoticed. It continues to exert an incredible influence on our world, even today.

Notes

1 Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel, eds, Traditions of International Ethics (Cambridge: the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1992) 75.
2 Ibid, 75.
7 Ibid, xv-xviii.
14 Ibid, 25.
16 Ibid, 22.
17 Ibid, 23.
18 Ibid, 25.
19 Ibid, 29.
20 Fred Greene, Dynamics of International Relations - Power, Security and Order (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964) 188.
21 Ibid, 48.
22 Ibid, 48.
23 Ibid, 27.
24 Ibid, 27.
31 Ibid, 721.
Hobbes’ Theory of International Society

32 Ibid, 721.
33 Ibid, 721.
34 Fred Greene, Dynamics of International Relations - Power, Security and Order (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964) 188.
37 Ibid. 187.
38 Ibid, 187.
41 Ibid, 76.
43 Ibid, 46.
52 Ibid, 35.
53 Ibid, 35.
54 Ibid, 35.
56 Ibid, 75.
57 Ibid, 76.
58 Ibid, 76.
59 Ibid, 75.
61 Ibid, 119.
64 Ibid, 72.
66 Terry Nardin and David R. Mapel, eds, Traditions of International Ethics (Cambridge: the Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1992) 188.
67 Ibid, 188.
68 Ibid, 188.
74 Ibid, 32.
79 Ibid, 41.
80 Ibid, 10.
81 Ibid, 187.
83 Ibid, 49.
85 Ibid, 38.
86 Ibid, 30.
87 Ibid, 30.
91 Ibid, 37.
92 Ibid, 37.
94 Ibid, 366.
Works Cited


