

Introduction to Western Political Thought
Professor Mithilesh Kumar Jha
Department of Humanities and Social Sciences
Indian Institute of Technology, Guwahati.
Lecture No. 14

Hobbes – III: Political Obligation and Critical Assessment of his thought.

Hello and welcome everyone. This is the third lecture on Hobbes. In this concluding lecture, we are going to discuss his ideas on political obligation. In the second part, we will focus on the critical assessment of Hobbes in political thought. In the previous two lectures, if you recall, we have discussed his views on human nature, 'state of nature', and how he developed a theory of sovereign with absolute power without any scrutiny by the multitude.

This construction of sovereign exercise absolute power over the multitude that is the artificial construct. That is to say, human beings who were free and equal constituted this sovereign through a covenant. It was not based on the divine right theory of king or any given understanding of state and sovereign power. Thus, the sovereign power of the state in Hobbes and political thought was based on the covenant or contract of free and equal members. Therefore, this sovereign according to Hobbes was an artificial construct.

And that is reflective of his understanding of human nature as not just evil or bad. But also have some creative potentialities or enterprise to constitute something through their reflection, and reason to create a condition for life that would enable the civic life of citizens possible.

In that sense for Hobbes in political theory, human beings were enterprising beings reflectively and they used politics to construct in authority which would enable them to pursue their private interest or private lives without any threat to their life and liberty. That is the whole purpose of Hobbes's political theory and why we need absolute sovereignty that we have discussed in the previous lecture. Today, we are going to focus on his idea of political obligation.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:18)

- Hobbes developed his theory of politics based on a materialistic understanding of human nature. His theory of absolute monarchy or sovereign is based on rigorous, scientific, and self-evident propositions starting from human nature to state of nature, and finally to the making of a sovereign body through a covenant among the 'free' and equal member.
- To ensure the long term sustenance of the political regimes, Hobbes developed a compelling and persuasive account of political obligation based on individual consent rather than convention and religion. It explains in unambiguous terms, why must we submit to the will of the sovereign. And also, why the sovereign is not accountable for its acts to the people?
- Hobbes's political philosophy is subjected to various interpretations. In his lifetime, many regarded him as an atheist and heretic who had enemies in all camps – royalists, parliamentarians, and Church. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, the focus was in the last two books of *Leviathan*, i.e., 'Of a Christian Commonwealth' and 'Of the kingdom of Darkness'. However, the nineteenth and twentieth-century interpretations of Hobbes is based on the first two books – 'Of Man,' and 'Of Commonwealth' where his defense of absolutist monarchy or sovereign is antithetical to our modern democratic sensibilities.

As you recall that Hobbes in political thought or politics is based on a kind of materialistic understanding. That is to say that for Hobbes human beings are like matter in motion. And his conception of politics or sovereign or the making of the sovereign is based on this very materialistic approach to the question of politics to the question of desire, aversion, and everything that moves. So, in terms of the language that he deploys. The approach that he has is not a kind of a prior theory or preconceived understanding of human nature or ethical behavior or the purpose of life to lead a happy life.

If you recall his idea of human nature that is a bundle of desire and this desire signified the life in an individual. So long human beings are alive he or she will be guided by their desire and this desire is siezeless. Human life is a constant pursuit of desire and avoiding something which gives pain to their life. Now, how to create a condition where this kind of pursuit of human desire or fulfillment of human desire is possible is the purpose or center of his construct of this idea of the absolutist sovereign. Thus, Hobbes had developed his theory of politics based on the materialistic understanding of human nature.

And his theory of absolute monarchy or sovereign was based on rigorous, scientific, and self-evident propositions that started from the human nature to 'state of nature' Finally, to the making of a sovereign body through a covenant among the free and equal member. If you look at the artifacts of Hobbes and political theory, there was a kind of logical sequence. And the root of such sequence was how to create a condition where human beings could lead a happy life. And for him, happy life was the pursuit of one's desire without any threat to violent death or liberty.

In Hobbes, the concept of the absolutist sovereign was based on this hypothetical construct of this

idea 'state of nature' where there was a kind of perpetual state of war each against the all. And there was always a chance of violent death and to avoid that death and fear of death, human beings created a civil authority that had absolute power over them. So, if you look at the logic or arguments in Hobbes, it was a very convincing or compelling account of why we need an absolutist sovereign and why we should obey the command of the sovereign.

So, to ensure the long term sustenance of political regimes, Hobbes, developed a compelling and persuasive account of political obligation. And this political obligation, according to Hobbes, was based on individual consent. When human beings as a free assent or equal member gave their consent. Thus, the obligation of human beings or people to the sovereign was based on their consent which they give individually by coming together in a contract. And through that contract, they transferred their rights to the sovereign.

This obligation was not based on any conventional or religious explanation of the political regime. So, if you recall in the earlier times or medieval times or Christian political discourse, the temporal power or king was seen as the representative of god on earth. And if the whole public life or collective life of the individual and the community was guided by the religious or theological discourse, then the obligation came naturally by the fact that the king or monarch was the representative of god.

And we should obey him without any questioning. So, there was a kind of subject relationship with the temporal power or king. So, the individual as the subject should obey the monarch or king. Because the king was the representative of god on the earth. And there was also a kind of convention. Because we should obey the king or monarch. It was a convention. As a subject should obey your king.

But Hobbes gave a radically different interpretation of political obligation, where the obligation that individuals owe to the sovereign was not based on the convention or any religious understanding of political authority. But it was based on the consent of the individual. That they gave through a contract among the free and equal member. And that was the basis of a lot of discourse in modern political science about individual rights why a state should protect those individual rights. How these rights had been seen as right o life, liberty, property, and how it further developed into other kinds of rights.

This understanding is a radical departure in political discourse which we see in Hobbes where he defines political obligations based on individual consent. It explains in unambiguous terms and that is another characteristic of Hobbes, where he does not give any subjective account of why we

should do certain things in politics. Why we should obey? And when we should rebel against the sovereign? His explanation of all these things was nearly mathematical or in unambiguous terms. Thus, the language that Hobbes used was different from Aristotle, Plato, or Machiavelli which we have done.

It explains in unambiguous terms why must we submit to the will of the sovereign and also why the sovereign is not accountable for its acts to the people? So, the political obligation contains two sides of the theory. One is why an individual should always obey the sovereign and the other side is why the sovereign is not limited by the terms of the contract or not accountable to the people for its actions. And the explanation that he gives is a kind of unambiguous without any kind of subjective biases or interpretation of these terms.

We are going to discuss these explanations in a moment. But here, we need to understand that the logic that he provided for the sovereign was not being accountable to the terms of the contract. It was the idea that the sovereign was the result of covenant among the free individuals. So, the free and equal members being party to the contract had obligation to obey the sovereign. But the sovereign who was constituted or instituted by this contract was not a party to the contract. And if he was not a party to the contract, then he could not be forced by the terms of the contract in the covenant. It is a very logical and mathematical or unambiguous explanation of political obligation that we have in Hobbes.

So, Hobbes's political obligation which we are going to discuss in the second part of the lecture is subject to various kinds of interpretations. On the one hand, he gave certain inalienable rights to the individuals certainly his right to preserve life or do everything that could prevent any threat to his death or opportunity to exercise his liberty to the maximum. On the other hand, he created an absolutist monarch that was a constant threat to individual life and liberty. That led to many kinds of interpretations of Hobbes.

In his lifetime, many regarded him as an atheist. Because of his religious views and certainly from the Catholic Church and their authority, Hobbes was regarded as a heretic. So, as an atheist and heretic, Hobbes had enemies in all the camps and this connected with our previous lecture. Particularly in the first lecture, when we discussed the context of Hobbes. Where there was a kind of tension between the monarch and the parliamentarians, the parliamentary forces claimed to represent the interest of the emerging middle class or landlords and monarchs claiming to represent the interest of the people.

And in between, there was a kind of Catholic Church where there were protests and atheist or

Catholic ideas on the temporal power and religious war. How it leads to some kind of understanding of how to provide legitimacy to the monarchy or absolutist regime. Nonetheless, when Hobbes was developing his theory, all these three camps were at constant loggerheads and there was no settled answer to these different positions about temporal power and authority. And how to ensure the legitimacy of these authorities. So, what you have as a result was Hobbes considered as an atheist and heretic who had enemies in all camps.

Thus, the royalist, parliamentarians, and Church in all these camps, Hobbes had enemies. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the focus was on the last two books of *Leviathan* that is 'Of a Christian commonwealth' and 'Of the kingdom of Darkness'. So, much of the interpretation in the seventeenth and eighteenth-century focused on these last two parts of Hobbes, *Leviathan*. That is where he discussed the Catholic Church or the 'Christian commonwealth' and the 'Kingdom of darkness'. That is how human or civic life was impossible in the absence of commonwealth or civic authority.

So, much of the discussion or interpretation of Hobbes in the seventeenth and eighteenth century was based on these two texts, where Hobbes was seen as a religious, atheist, or a heretic. However, the nineteenth and twentieth-century interpretation of Hobbes was based on the first two books that are 'Of Man', and 'Of Commonwealth'. Where his defense of absolutist monarchy or sovereign was antithetical to our modern democratic sensibilities. Now, we have a sense of authority, I state which should be accountable to people. The power of the state should be separated among the three organs of the state. For instance, the legislative, executive, or judiciary power. And these three organs should be separated and independent from each other. That is the modern democratic sensibilities of the state and its power.

However, when we read Hobbes, today, it appears that he was defending absolutist monarchy which was very antithetical to the democratic sensibilities. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Hobbes was regarded as religious or atheist, or heretic. Scholars who questioned the religious authority or authority of the god. So, there was a kind of different interpretation of Hobbes and we are going to discuss in the second part of the lecture, today. That how different thinkers had interpreted Hobbes differently.

But certainly, Hobbes's contribution was in the idea of the individual as the basis of state or polity and the existence of the state and polity was to protect the right to life and liberty of individuals. And in protecting that life and liberty, he justified the absolutist individual sovereignty. And it had its echo in many other theorists of sovereignty as well as the state was seen all-powerful within the territory of the nation-state.

Hobbes had numerous contributions in the field of modern political science and yet there was a kind of difference in terms of interpretation of Hobbes as a political theorist, where he was a democrat or an individualist or he was the supporter of the monarchy or absolutist sovereign.

(Refer Slide Time: 17.35)

Political Obligation

- Hobbes's greatest contribution to a systematic theory of politics is his unambiguous justification for political obligation.¹ Many scholars have focused more on his defense of absolutist sovereign or monarchy than his theory of political obligation. However, Hobbes's primary concern was on how to secure the obligation of the individuals based not on the idea of the divine right of the king but their consent.
- For Hobbes, it was necessary for the peace and order to prevail that the sovereign – as an individual body (monarch) or as an assembly of body should not only be absolute and indivisible, but it was equally necessary that the subjects or the citizens obey the command of the sovereign unconditionally and without any scrutiny. However, there is a debate about the basis of such an obligation.
- Scholars like Nagel and Watkins have argued that Hobbes provides prudent and materialist explanations of political obligation. That is to say that human beings will obey the sovereign because of fear. As the sovereign wields power and could punish those who disobey or transgress his/her commands. Second, there is a fear of going back to the violent state of nature – a perpetual state of war – that forces the individuals to obey the sovereign. In contrast, other scholars have argued about the moral and rational basis of such obligation. That is, they must obey the sovereign as they have submitted to the will of the sovereign as a 'free' and equal member through a covenant. In this way, the sovereign is the representative of the will of the multitude. And he/she is authorized by the same multitude to act on their behalf. Hence the command of the sovereign is binding on the people.

3

Now, we will move on to his idea of political obligation, where it was regarded that Hobbes's greatest contribution to a systematic theory of politics was his unambiguous justification for political obligation. And the theory of political obligation was different from Aristotelian or the Platonic idea of politics or even Machiavellian conception of politics. There you have politics as a domain, where individuals live their fullest life or realize their true potentiality. So, the guide for political participation was the understanding that human beings could lead a truly happy life or realize his true potentialities only in the life of a community or associational life with others.

But in Hobbes, we have a scientific and unambiguous explanation of political obligation, why we should obey the state? And here, as I have said in the previous lecture, Hobbes's understanding of human life was life in private. A kind of passive life. It was very different from the Aristotelian conception of being able to rule and being ruled in turn.

Here, it is okay for the individual to live a civil private life different from the public and political life of the state, and as a private or civic citizen, why we should obey the sovereign? What is the justification for political obligation? And why we should submit to the will of the sovereign? And that explanation, Hobbes gave was a very radical departure from the earlier understanding of political obligation.

Many scholars, however, Hobbes focussed more on his defense of absolutist sovereign or monarchy

than his theory of political obligation but for many other scholars, the contribution of Hobbes to political science is his unambiguous theory of political obligation. Hobbes's primary concern was on how to secure the obligation of the individuals based not on the idea of the divine right of the king. But on the consent. So, there was a kind of voluntary action associated with his theory of political obligation. Human beings obeyed the sovereign not because there was a divine right of the king or a convention to obey the monarch. But because human beings were voluntary as free and submitted to the will of the sovereign. Therefore, he must obey the sovereign.

For Hobbes, peace, and order needed to prevail in a society that enabled the civic life possible. That the sovereign is said as an individual or it could be an assembly of individual, assembly of men body or men. It might be in singular, in plural or Hobbes chose monarchy as preferable than the assembly of the body or men. For Hobbes, the peace and order needed to prevail that the sovereign was an individual body or assembly of men.

So, not only the absolute individual. But it was equally necessary that the subject or citizens obey the command of the sovereign unconditionally and without any scrutiny. Thus, the individual subject or citizen must submit to the will of the sovereign unconditionally. That means without any scrutiny. Unlike the modern democratic state, where every action of the government or state is subjected to public scrutiny.

In Hobbesian political theory, he denied such rights to the citizens. So, once they constituted the sovereign, they had no right to question the acts of the sovereign. And they must submit to their will unconditionally and without scrutiny. However, there was a debate among scholars about what is the basis of this political obligation. So, scholars like Nagel and Watkins have argued that Hobbes provided a prudent and materialistic explanation of political obligation. And this prudent and materialist understanding or explanation of political obligation was based on the fact that human beings would obey the sovereign because of fear. For Hobbes, fear was the driving force of human action in a sense.

There was a fear of sudden death from violent action or war in the 'state of nature' that drives them in the first place to create the authority which enabled the pursuit of private life or desire possible. So, the fear was the guiding force or human action, in a sense in Hobbesian political theory. And Nagel and Watkins argued that human beings would obey the sovereign not because of any moral and ethical considerations. But because of their fear that if they do not follow the command of the sovereign there will be coercive action against them.

One of the reasons you have to understand that in the 'state of nature', there was a sense of natural

law or natural rights of the individual. But those laws and rights were not forcible in the absence of absolutist authority or monarch. The existence of authority was a pre-condition for the realization of any natural law or natural rights.

And therefore, Nagel and Watkins argued that human beings would obey the sovereign. Because of fear as sovereign wields power and perceived power. It could punish those who disobey or transgress his or their command. That means, the sovereign in singular or plural exercise certain power and could punish those who transgress its command or violate the terms of the covenant. The reason for human beings to obey the sovereign was based on this fear of sovereign that if they transgress or violate the terms of the covenant, there was the sovereign authority that would punish them.

And second, there was a fear of going back to the violent 'state of nature' that is the perpetual state war of each against the all. And human beings in their rational calculation of which action would protect his life and put their lives in danger would realize that it was better to obey the sovereign than going back to the 'state of nature' where there would be a constant threat to their life and liberty. And they could not live peacefully or pursue industry, trade, and other life skills. So, the realization of liberty was possible under the command of the sovereign. Thus, why they obey the sovereign was because there was a threat that if they did not obey the contract or violate the terms of the contract, there was the sovereign authority to punish them.

And second, if they do not obey the sovereign they may go back to the state of nature and the state of nature is worse than the submission to the will of the sovereign. So, in that sense, you have a very materialistic or prudent explanation of political obligation, according to Nagel and Watkins in Hobbes. In contrast, however, other scholars have argued about the moral and rational basis of such political obligation. So, it is not just because of the prudent consideration that human beings obey the sovereign. But also because human beings are also reflective.

They have the creative energy to constitute something which will enable the larger life or the peaceful life or the pursuit of trade, industries overall prosperity in the society possible. So, in Hobbes and 'state of nature', we have discussed there is the argument that it is the condition of life in the 'state of nature' that makes human beings behave nasty, brutish, and short. Human beings are not essentially good or bad. They behaved in an immoral way or do all kinds of things to preserve their life because of the condition of the 'state of nature'.

But if they live in a situation where there is a civil authority, there is the monarch which controls or the sword of the monarch or the coercive apprenthice of their state is necessary for the

implementation of the law. For the pursuit of private life or the pursuit of the desire of the individual. So in Hobbes, you have a kind of positive or alternative understanding of human beings which is neither essentially good nor essentially bad. As in Machiavelli, where human beings are essentially wicked. And only the force can compel them to behave in a certain manner.

In contrast to this prudent or materialistic explanation, you have other scholars who argued about the moral and rational basis of political obligation in Hobbes. That is, they must obey the sovereign as they have submitted to the will of the sovereign voluntarily. As a free and equal member through a covenant. So, the obligation of the individual to the sovereign is not based only on fear but on their reflective moral consideration that as a free individual or equal member they have submitted to the will of the sovereign through a contract.

And this contract has a moral obligation on them then to obey the sovereign. So, because of fear or prudent consideration. But this reflective understanding or a rational understanding of human's moral obligation to the sovereign. Because the sovereign is representative of their will is constituted by the covenant of free and equal member. Therefore, as a party to the contract, they have the moral obligation to obey the sovereign.

In this way, the sovereign is the representative of the will of the multitude. So, once sovereign is constituted through the covenant then this institutionalized form of a sovereign or the artificial construct is representative of the will of the multitude. Therefore, the power that it exercises over the multitude is authorized by the same multitude.

Through the covenant when they transfer the power, remember the terms of the covenant which we discussed in the previous lecture that every individual transfer their rights to this body of sovereign as in singular or in plural on the condition when other members in the society are also willing to transfer their right to govern themselves to this body.

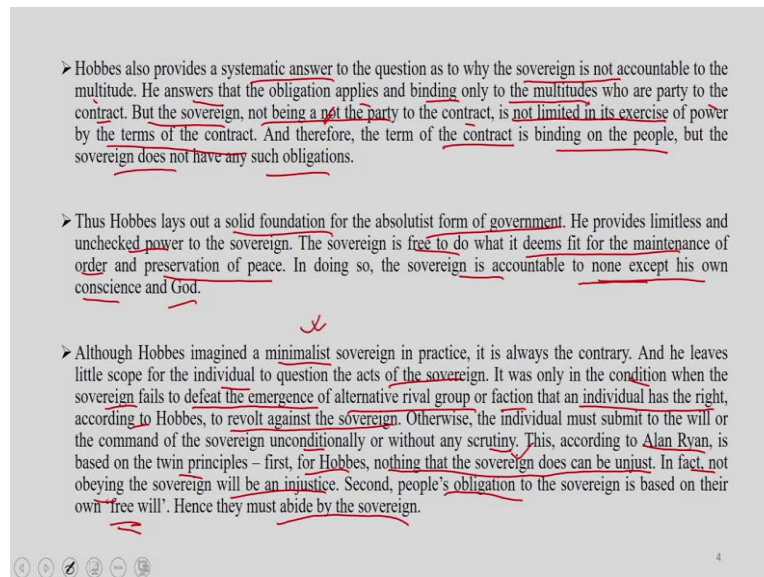
There is a kind of give and take among the party in the contract. So, once the sovereign is constituted, the power it exercises over the multitude is authorized by the multitude themselves. Therefore, they have a moral obligation to obey the sovereign which is representative of their will and exercise power on their behalf. So, the power of the sovereign is therefore then authorized by the people themselves.

And this is very true in the modern understanding of the republic. So, the authority of the government or the state of power, its exercises are derived from the people. Thus, any modern constitution, we the people of India or we the people of United States, so the power and authority is sovereign or the state exercises in a modern democracy are legitimized or derived from people

themselves

So, in Hobbes, you will have a similar explanation of the sovereign as a representative of the multitude or the people and the power that it exercises is authorized by the same people. Therefore, it has a moral obligation on the individual to obey the command of the sovereign.

(Refer Slide Time: 31:29)



- Hobbes also provides a systematic answer to the question as to why the sovereign is not accountable to the multitude. He answers that the obligation applies and binding only to the multitudes who are party to the contract. But the sovereign, not being a not the party to the contract, is not limited in its exercise of power by the terms of the contract. And therefore, the term of the contract is binding on the people, but the sovereign does not have any such obligations.
- Thus Hobbes lays out a solid foundation for the absolutist form of government. He provides limitless and unchecked power to the sovereign. The sovereign is free to do what it deems fit for the maintenance of order and preservation of peace. In doing so, the sovereign is accountable to none except his own conscience and God.
- Although Hobbes imagined a minimalist sovereign in practice, it is always the contrary. And he leaves little scope for the individual to question the acts of the sovereign. It was only in the condition when the sovereign fails to defeat the emergence of alternative rival group or faction that an individual has the right, according to Hobbes, to revolt against the sovereign. Otherwise, the individual must submit to the will or the command of the sovereign unconditionally or without any scrutiny. This, according to Alan Ryan, is based on the twin principles – first, for Hobbes, nothing that the sovereign does can be unjust. In fact, not obeying the sovereign will be an injustice. Second, people's obligation to the sovereign is based on their own 'free will'. Hence they must abide by the sovereign.

Hobbes's theory of political obligation explains why the sovereign is not accountable to the people. So, we have discussed so far that why an individual should obey the sovereign. There is a difference in interpretation whether that political obligation is based on the prudent calculation of fear or it is a moral obligation on the part of an individual. Nonetheless, human beings are supposed to have a moral obligation that they must fulfill. Because the sovereign is their representative and the power it exercises over them is authorized by the people. Therefore, human beings should obey the sovereign in all the conditions without any scrutiny.

Hobbes also provided a systematic answer to the questions as to why the sovereign was not accountable to the multitude or why the sovereign was not accountable to the people. He ensured that obligation applied and binding only to the multitude who were party to the contract. But the sovereign, not being a party to the contract was not limited in its exercise of power by the terms of the contract to covenant. So, human beings should obey the sovereign. Because they were party to the contract. But the sovereign was constituted by the covenant. They were not a party to the covenant or contract. Therefore, in its exercise of power, the sovereign was not limited by the terms of contract or covenant.

Therefore, the terms of the contract were binding on the people. But the sovereign did not have any

such obligation to the term sovereign. So, once the sovereign was constituted, the sovereign knew best how to protect order, how to maintain peace, and in the protection of order and peace, the sovereign was free to do anything without any scrutiny by the people. Even the sovereign was not limited by the terms of the contract. Hobbes laid out a solid foundation for the absolutist form of government.

He provided limitless and unchecked power to the sovereign and it was free to do what it deemed with for the maintenance of order and preservation of peace which would provide the condition for an individual to lead their civic life without any threat to life and liberty. Thus, the responsibility of the sovereign was to maintain order and peace and to maintain order and peace the sovereign was free to do anything without any public scrutiny. The sovereign was accountable, according to Hobbes, to his conscience or god. Although Hobbes imagined a minimalist sovereign yet it was always contrary in practice.

Hobbes thought that the sovereign was absolute and exercise limitless power would govern little and leave maximum out of life for the individual to govern themselves. So, the only rule of the sovereign was to maintain order and peace. Everything should be left for the individuals to lead their life and pursue their desire that would lead to prosperity. That would lead to industry, trade, business, and overall development of life peacefully without any threat to their life and liberty.

Hobbes imagined the sovereign would be minimalist. But this is contrary to the actual practices. All sovereign and government would try to accumulate more power or unchecked or unaccountable power. And he left a little scope for the individuals to question the acts of the sovereign. It was only in the condition when the sovereign failed to defeat the emergence of an alternative rival group or faction that an individual had the right according to Hobbes, to revolt against the sovereign. So, there was no question of disobeying the sovereign. And no question of submitting the acts of the sovereign to any public scrutiny.

It was only possible when the sovereign failed the primary responsibility of maintaining order and peace that was checking or defeating the rise of any rival groups in the territory. So, when the states or sovereign failed to do that then the individual had the right to replace the existing sovereign with the one which could control the rival factions, rival groups and institute peace and order in the society. Otherwise, human beings must submit to the will of the sovereign unconditionally and without any scrutiny. According to Alan Ryan, it was based on the twin principles. First, for Hobbes, nothing that the sovereign did be unjust. As the sovereign was representative of the will of the multitude could not do wrong.

All the actions that the sovereign committed was for the preservation of peace and order. And that is the reason that of the state. So, the reason for the state was best known to the state, not to the people or not to the government. Accordingly for Hobbes, the sovereign as representative of the multitude could not do any wrong. There was no question of scrutinizing or holding the sovereign power accountable. In fact, not obeying the sovereign would be injustice, according to Hobbes. Second, people's obligation to the sovereign was based on their own free will. Hence, they must abide by the sovereign without any scrutiny. That is his theory of political obligation.

(Refer Slide Time: 37:50)

Critical Assessment of his Thought

- Hobbes does provide a new science and paradigm of politics. It is much more systematic, unambiguous, and materialistic. Influenced by Euclidean geometry, he wanted the theory of politics to be based on self-explanatory propositions. Thus It provides a logical and coherent theory of absolutist state and political obligation based on the materialistic explanations of human nature. His hypothetical conception of the state of nature becomes the basis for political argumentation for many theorists in social-contract traditions.
- For many scholars like Leo Strauss and M. Oakeshott (*Hobbes on Civil Association*, 1975), Hobbes was a very systematic theorist of politics who provided a very pragmatic and objective science of politics. It is based on prudence and materialistic understanding of human beings and their behaviors based on observations rather than any *a priori* understanding of their moral or ethical conduct and purpose of life. Hobbes treated politics as a creative enterprise on the part of reflective individuals. And thus, for Oakeshott, Hobbes's '*Leviathan*' is the greatest, perhaps the sole, masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language.
- His theory of politics and sovereignty has guided the international relations and the foreign policies of the sovereign nation-states. In the absence of an arbitrating authority in the international arena, the sovereign states tend to operate like the individuals in the Hobbesian state of nature.

Now, we will move on to a critical assessment of Hobbes's political thoughts. In Hobbes, we have the new science and paradigm of politics that was much more systematic, unambiguous, and materialistic. This you can see as a very different approach to politics than in Plato, Aristotle, and Machiavelli. It was very systematic in the sense that the whole idea of the sovereign was based on the understanding of human nature or 'state of nature'. And why sovereign should have absolute power was explained in a very systematic and materialistic manner or unambiguous term.

Thus, influenced by Euclidean geometry, Hobbes wanted the theory of politics to be based on a self-explanatory proposition. Therefore, Hobbes claimed to be the first political scientist. Before them, there was a kind of subjective contemplation or speculation about the political life of the individual in the state or police. But Hobbes claimed to have a first systematic or scientific understanding of politics. And this was based on his reading of Euclidean geometry which he considered as the master science. Therefore, it played excessive importance in defining something.

Let us start with human nature which he defined as a matter in motion in pursuit of desire and guided by aversion. That means, the human being as a matter in motion would constantly pursue

desire and this desire was insatiable one after the other. So, this understanding and definition of human nature were very materialistic and deterministic in Hobbes and political theory. It was the basis of his understanding of human nature, sovereignty, and life under civil authority. So, it provided a logical and coherent theory of absolutist state and political obligation that was based on this scientific understanding. That we obey the sovereign not because there was divine right or convention. But because we voluntarily through contract submitted through the will of the sovereign.

The political obligation derived from our submission to the will of god, not on a convention or religious understanding. His theory of absolutist state and political obligation was based on a materialistic explanation of human nature. His hypothetical conception of the 'state of nature' becomes the basis for political argumentation for many theorists in social contract traditions on basis of natural rights or that leads to an understanding of inalienable fundamental rights of the individual that a state must protect.

For many scholars like Leo Strauss and Michael Oakeshott, particularly Oakeshott's book, *Hobbes on Civil Association*. Hobbes was a very systematic theorist of politics who provided a very pragmatic and objective science of politics. It was based on a prudent and materialistic understanding of human beings and their behaviors based on observation rather than any a priori understanding of their moral, ethical conduct, and purpose of life. So, the life of a human being or pursuit of happiness was not guided by any moral-ethical consideration.

But a materialistic understanding of human beings as a bundle of desire constantly tried to fulfill one desire after the other. And death was the association of human desire. When human beings have no desire then that is death. It is the end of the human being as a matter in motion for Hobbes. His understanding of happiness and pursuit of life was very different from the ethical and moral concentration of human life or the full realization of human potentiality that we have in Aristotle or Plato.

Hobbes treated politics as a creative enterprise on the part of reflective individuals. So, human reason or capability to calculate actions would help in the preservation of life. And avoiding those actions would pose threats to human life. It was the basis of the reasons. And this reason for Hobbes was not in it. Human beings, for Hobbes, if you recall our lecture on human nature was guided by their desire. The reason is the development of human experience while living with others in society or an assessment of the circumstances of their life.

So, they guided their action based on their rational calculation and consequences of their action

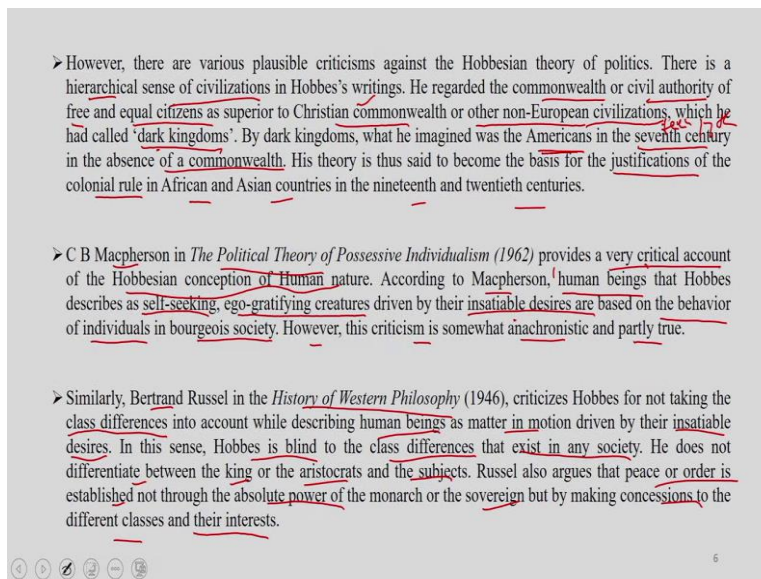
whether that action would strengthen their life or pose a threat to their life and liberty. The calculation that human beings would develop the reasoning faculty as a result of the experience. It was not in it to human beings. What was in it to human beings, for Hobbes was their desire to fulfill those desires that would give them pleasure and avoid those actions that gave them pain. That is the natural understanding of human beings. But human beings were capable of creating enterprises such as the construction of sovereignty pursuit of industries, trade, and business.

Hobbes treated politics as a creative enterprise on the part of reflective human beings and state or sovereign as an artificial construct is the biggest testimony of human creativity, according to Hobbes. And this for Oakeshott, Hobbes's *Leviathan* was the greatest perhaps, the sole masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language. His theory of politics and sovereignty had guided international relations and the foreign policies of the sovereign nation-states. In the absence of arbitrating authority in the international arena, the sovereign states tend to operate like the individuals in the Hobbesian 'state of nature'.

Hobbes and political theory for a very long time guided foreign policy for the international relation among sovereign nation-states. And the reason being in the international arena unlike in the domestic sphere of the nation-state, there was no civic authority. There was no arbitrating authority. Therefore, every nation-state and sovereign nation-states pursue their foreign policy, according to their national interest. And in that pursuit, they are guided by the Hobbesian individual in the 'state of nature', where there was an absence of political authority or civil authority and the individual was rightful in pursuing anything that preserves their life.

Similar is the case with the sovereign nation-states in the international arena, where civil authority was absent and all the sovereign states were free to pursue those courses of action that would help them in the pursuit of their national self-interest.

(Refer Slide Time: 45:34)



- However, there are various plausible criticisms against the Hobbesian theory of politics. There is a hierarchical sense of civilizations in Hobbes's writings. He regarded the commonwealth or civil authority of free and equal citizens as superior to Christian commonwealth or other non-European civilizations, which he had called 'dark kingdoms'. By dark kingdoms, what he imagined was the Americans in the seventeenth century in the absence of a commonwealth. His theory is thus said to become the basis for the justifications of the colonial rule in African and Asian countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
- C B Macpherson in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* (1962) provides a very critical account of the Hobbesian conception of human nature. According to Macpherson, 'human beings that Hobbes describes as self-seeking, ego-gratifying creatures driven by their insatiable desires are based on the behavior of individuals in bourgeois society. However, this criticism is somewhat anachronistic and partly true.
- Similarly, Bertrand Russell in the *History of Western Philosophy* (1946), criticizes Hobbes for not taking the class differences into account while describing human beings as matter in motion driven by their insatiable desires. In this sense, Hobbes is blind to the class differences that exist in any society. He does not differentiate between the king or the aristocrats and the subjects. Russell also argues that peace or order is established not through the absolute power of the monarch or the sovereign but by making concessions to the different classes and their interests.

Second, there were various plausible criticisms also against the Hobbesian political theory. There was a hierarchical sense of civilization in Hobbes's writings, where he regarded the commonwealth or civil authority of free and equal citizens as superior Christian commonwealth or non-European civilization which he called the dark kingdoms. If you remember four parts of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, two-part are what Christian commonwealth and also, the kingdom of darkness or dark kingdoms. By dark kingdoms, what Hobbes imagined was the Americans in the seventeenth century in the absence of commonwealth.

So, how a civilization governed itself in the absence of a commonwealth or civic authority. He regarded it as the dark kingdom. There was some kind of hierarchy in terms of the Hobbesian conception of civilization. His theory thus said to become the basis of justification for the colonial rule in African and Asian countries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. We need justification for the colonial regime. It Derived inspiration from the Hobbesian hierarchical understanding of civilization.

C B Macpherson in *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism* provided a very critical account of the Hobbesian conception of human nature. And according to Macpherson, human beings and the behavior of human beings that we have in Hobbes as self-seeking or ego gratifying creatures driven by their insatiable desires were based not on a universal understanding of human nature or a historical understanding of human nature.

But such behavior of human nature was rooted in the Bourgeoisie society or industrial society. So, according to C B Macpherson, the conception of human nature that we have in Hobbes was not a universal understanding of human nature. It was very specific to the individual behavior in

bourgeois society or industrial society, where their action was guided by their self-interest or that self-interest was for the gratification of their ego.

So, the human being as self-seeking creature guided by their insatiable desire was the characteristic of bourgeois society or industrial society, and not the universal understanding of human nature. However, this criticism of C B Macpherson was somewhat anachronistic partly true. The reason being the rise of bourgeois and industrial society was much later in the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth-century when Hobbes was writing.

Secondly, Bertrand Russel in the *History of Western Philosophy* criticized Hobbes for not taking class differences into account while describing human beings as matter in motion driven by the insatiable desire. Unlike Plato or Machiavelli or Aristotle, you do not have any class differentiation. So, in Hobbesian understanding of human nature as a bundle of desire was equally applicable to a king or aristocrat or the subject. There was no difference in classes that were developed more fully in the Marxist conception.

Bertrand and Russel criticized Hobbes for not considering this class differences that existed in society. In the sense, Hobbes was blind to the class differences that existed in society and he did not differentiate between the king or aristocrats and the subjects and their conflicting interests. And if you recall Machiavelli's discourses, where he wanted to maintain order in the republic by giving some kind of permanent existence of this conflicting interest and managing these conflicting interests required the role of politics.

The politics were about managing those class differences and that management of class differences would ensure the longevity of republics. Here, in Hobbes, there was a kind of absence of such class differences. Hobbesian human nature was universal without any differentiation of classes. So, whether the plebeians or patricians or noble or subject, they were all constituted of the same desire and their life was the pursuit of those desires. There were no such class differences in Hobbesian writings.

And Russell argued that the peace and order in the historical sense in any society was established not through absolutist power or sovereign as Hobbes argued. But by making consensus to the different classes and their respective interest. So even the English history, if you look at there was a kind of concentration from monarchy to the parliament and from the church to the monarchy. Thus, the actual history of any society had evolved by making concessions to different interests and the rise of democracy in different parts of the country, world was the result of such concessions to the different sections of society.

Thus, human beings were not the same. Their interests were not the same. It was depended on their class positions, economic positions, and the peace and order were restored or maintained by making concessions to different interests rather than on the creation of absolutist monarchy or sovereign as Hobbes had prescribed. That is the criticism of Bertrand Russell against the Hobbesian political theory.

(Refer Slide Time: 52:13)

➤ Carole Pateman in *The Sexual Contract* (1988) presents a feminist reading of Hobbes's theory of social contract. She argues that in the state of nature, Hobbes argued about equality among men and women. Women played a more significant role in nurturing the child. However, the covenant which constitutes the sovereign is exclusively among the 'free' and equal males from which women are excluded.

➤ According to Pateman, in the Hobbesian conception of public and private life, women are further confined to the private lives, and even in the household, the male head of the family enjoys the absolute power like the sovereign in the state. This, according to Carole Pateman, is based on what she characterized as the original or the sexual contract that is prior to the social-contract and which subordinate the role of women to that of men.

Concluding Remarks

➤ Hobbes provides a scientific and materialistic theory of politics based on the objective understanding of human nature - the basic unit of the politics or state. Hobbes is generally regarded as an atheist, but he did not disregard religion in totality. His theory of the state as an artificial, corporate-legal entity is rooted in his belief in the human reasons and their creative enterprise in instituting the sovereign, which would make the civic lives of the individuals possible.

Carole Pateman in the *Sexual Contract* presented a feminist reading of the Hobbesian theory of social contract. She argued that in the 'state of nature', Hobbes had a conception of men and women as equal partners. And there was equality between men and women. The act women played were more significant roles in nurturing the child in the 'state of nature'. However, the covenant constituted the sovereign. It was exclusively among the free and equal males from which women were excluded.

In the covenant that constituted the sovereign, Hobbes did not give any role to the women. In what Pateman, argued in the Hobbesian conception of public and private life. He made a very sharp distinction between these two, where the individual should be free to pursue whatever he or she thinks was good for them in their private life. And Hobbesian individual happiness depended on their pursuit of desire in the private or civic life. The public life was the life of state or sovereign. So, in this distinction of public and private in the Hobbesian conception of politics, the women were further convinced of private lives. In the household, the male head of the family enjoyed absolute power like a sovereign in the state.

So, there was a feminist criticism against the Hobbesian conception of politics, where women were subjugated to the male and according to Carole Pateman, this subjugation was based on what she

characterized as an original or sexual contract which was before the social contract. That subordinated the women and their role in private and public life to that of man. That is the feminist criticism of Hobbes.

Now, if we conclude Hobbes's contribution to political philosophy, we have to acknowledge his contribution in terms of providing a scientific and materialistic theory of politics based on the objective understanding of human nature. It was the basic unit of his whole understanding of state sovereignty and politics. Hobbes was generally regarded as an atheist. But he did not disregard religion in totality. So, if you read *Leviathan*, one of the parts was on the Christian covenant. He considered life as such was the result of the god creation. So, you have some difference in terms of whether Hobbes was an atheist or religious.

Or there is a reflection on god or soul or life after death but those things are in the material which could not be proved scientifically. Hobbes did not go into details about those questions of god, religion, and its permanence. But there was sufficient reason to believe that Hobbes had acknowledged the role of religion and god when he talked about the sovereign being accountable to their conscience or god.

So, there was the invocation of religious terms. In Hobbes largely, his theory was objective, materialistic, or scientific. His theory of the state as an artificial corporate legal entity was rooted in his belief in human reason and their creative enterprise in instituting the sovereign. The sovereign was institutionalized by the people not given or divine. It would make the civic life of an individual possible and that is why he provided the absolutist theory of sovereignty.

(Refer Slide Time: 56:22)

- Skinner in *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (2008) argues that Hobbes presents a negative conception of liberty as freedom from physical impediment. Hobbes's definition of human liberty, life as a bundle of desire and aversion, and division of life into public and private spheres became the basis of modern discourse on politics.
- His outlining of natural laws and inalienable rights of the individual for self-preservation is the basis of the formation of modern states. However, his absolutist defense of sovereign power presents a threat to individual life and liberty. Similarly, his idea of a minimalist sovereign is imprudent. Hobbes's conception of the absolute sovereign with unrestrained power is against the very democratic idea of accountable government and separation of power among the different organs of the state.
- Hobbes seems to have combined the virtues of the monarchy with that of democracy. Thus in his conception, the existence and legitimacy of the sovereign or the monarch are based on the contract among the multitude of free and equal individuals. However, once the sovereign is constituted, it exercises absolute, indivisible, and limitless power over the multitude. This leads to serious criticism of Hobbes by the later social-contract theorists and many democratic theorists such as Locke and Rousseau.

Skinner in Hobbes and Republican liberty argued that Hobbes presented a negative conception of liberty as freedom from physical impediment. The negative conception of liberty started from Hobbesian thinking where human beings as a matter in motion and his liberty was denied when there was an external impediment that prevented the free movement of matter in motion. This was the basis of negative and positive liberty in other theorists, particularly, in Berlin. So, the Hobbesian conception of liberty had a negative connotation. That means the external impediments that obstruct the movement or free movement of the human being as a matter in motion was a threat to their liberty.

And human beings could realize that liberty under the rule of the absolute sovereign in the 'state of nature'. But it was not realizable in the absence of civic authority. Because there was a threat to life and liberty. There was no possibility of realizing liberty in the 'state of nature'. A human being could realize it under a justification of sovereign rule. It was to provide the maximum condition of liberty to the individual. So that trade and business flourishes. And there is overall prosperity in the life of the nation.

Hobbes's definition of human liberty and life as a bundle of desire and aversion and division of life into public and private spheres became the basis of modern discourse on politics. So, much of the modern understanding of politics was based on this understanding of human beings, division of life between public and private. His outlining of natural laws and inalienable rights of individual or self-preservation was the basis of the formation of modern states.

So, the responsibility of the state was to protect the life and liberty of the individual and then provide them the condition of relative peace and order, where they could perceive their civic life. Where they could perceive their desire or what they think was good for them. However, his absolutist defense of sovereignty and power presented a threat to individual life and liberty. Similarly, his idea of the minimalist sovereign was imprudent and Hobbes's conception of the absolutist sovereign with unrestrained power was against the very democratic idea of accountable government and separation of power among different organs of the state.

And that was the valid criticism against Hobbes's defense of absolutist monarchy or sovereign power. However, in Hobbes, what you have is a kind of combination of monarchy or an absolutist sovereign with the democratic ideal. Hobbes seemed to have combined the virtues of the monarchy with that of democracy. In his conception, the existence and legitimacy of the sovereign or monarch were based on the contract among the multitude of free and equal individuals.

When we look at the legitimacy of the sovereign, its creation and authority of its power were all

based on free and equal individuals coming together and institutionalizing this sovereign through a contract, covenant. That is the kind of combination of how the justification for the sovereign and its power is not on divine right or convention. But on the human beings and their voluntary action of coming together and transferring their rights to this body of sovereign.

In Hobbes, you have a kind of monarchy or an absolutist sovereign with that of democracy. So, multitude or the people legitimize the rule of sovereign and their action. Nonetheless, this sovereign in Hobbesian conception was absolute and not subjected to public scrutiny or accountability that we have today in a modern democracy. And there is valid criticism against Hobbes. However, once the sovereign was constituted, according to Hobbes, it exercised absolute, indivisible, and limitless power over the multitude.

And this leads to serious criticisms of Hobbes by later social contract theorists and many democratic theorists such as Locke and Rousseau. That we will do in subsequent lectures in this course. Thus, that is all in Hobbesian political theory.

(Refer Slide Time: 61:22)

References

Boucher, David and Paul Kelly (eds). 2003. *Political Thinkers: From Socrates to the Present*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Browning, Gary. 2016. *A History of Modern Political Thought: The Question of Interpretation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Forsyth, Murray and Maurice Keens-Soper. 1988. *A Guide to Political Classics: Plato to Rousseau*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Hobbes, Thomas. 1996. *Leviathan*, ed. by J C A Gaskin, Oxford: Oxford University Press

✓ Jha, Shefali. 2018. *Western Political Thought: From the Ancient Greeks to Modern Times*, Delhi: Pearson.

✓ Ryan, Alan James. 2012. *On Politics: A History of Political Thought from Herodotus to the Present*, New York/London: Liveright Publishing Corporation.

Tuck, Richard (ed.). 2003/1991. *Leviathan*, Revised Student Edition, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

On the topic that we have covered, today, that is political obligation and critical assessment of Hobbes political thought, you should refer to these books by David Boucher and Paul Kelly's, *Political Thinkers from Socrates to the Present*, Gary Browning's, *A History of Modern Political Thought: The Question of Interpretation*. Then Murray Forsyth and Maurice Keens Soper's, *A Guide to Political Classics*, you should refer to and you can also refer to Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, edited by J C A Gaskin from the Oxford University Press.

And also, Shefali Jha's, Alan Ryan's, and these two books, we have been referring to in all these

lectures that we have covered. And also, you should refer to Richard Tuck's, *Leviathan*, revised student edition from the Cambridge University Press in 2003. These are some of the texts, you should refer to understand Hobbes and his contribution to political science, his understanding of human nature or description of 'state of nature' or sovereignty and political obligation. That is all in today's lecture. Do share your comments and feedback. Thanks for listening. Thank you all.