

## An Ethical Evaluation of Thomas Hobbes' Political Authority

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**Abstract:** There is no country or society in the world where political authority does not exist, individuals or groups have either accepted the legitimacy of the political authority that grants this power for the sake of necessity or are often forced to abide by it. The important question is, can 'necessity' morally justify the exercise of power over us? One of the questions discussed in political philosophy and ethics is, should we accept political authority where there are sometimes undesirable conditions for us? Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) in his book *Leviathan*, stated that human nature is selfish and human life would be lonely, poor, inferior, wild, and short-lived if there is no controlling disciplinary legislative authority which is a need for us and also morally valid. This paper will figure out some limitations of these views of Hobbes in the light of eclectic theories and practical aspects, including Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke in the first strand. Immanuel Kant and J. S. Mill's views have been used to ethically evaluate Hobbes' position of political authority in the later strand.

**Keywords:** Political Authority, Political Morality, Political Philosophy, Ethical Standard, Sovereign Authority, Chairman, Thought Academy, Dhaka, Bangladesh,

### Introduction

Is political authority ethically justified? To answer the question there arises another question, how does modern society operate? There can be multiple answers to this question. There may be some policies in place that we follow or we create some code of conduct that is convenient for us and we think those are right. But can we always follow our own principles or rules that we think are right? Don't we ever face obstacles? Surely, we see principles that we didn't create or we don't think right and that contradicts our belief. But here comes the question, "Who had given this policy?" "On what basis they make such rules that our lives are being forced to follow?". In answering this question we can say that the state is influencing us in multiple ways through different policies.'(Miller, 2003: 19). The state often regulates this through various institutions as a central power body, where the presence of a type of authority is noted. This system is governed by the political authorities. In modern society, we cannot find a nation that is not controlled by any political power. "Political authority is a distinct form of authority by contrast, for example, with parental or divine authority, in that it is, historically, at least, attached to the power of governments and their various extensions (such as the laws, officials, courts, the police, etc.). Specifically, political authority is the power held by a political entity to require action and claim obedience to its rules. This power can be either de facto or de jure (normative). De facto political authority is the actual ability of a political entity to rule and be obeyed."(Landemore, 2011: 850–853). In other words, political authority is a singular or collective force that sets forth the various principles in our life that are compulsory for the members of society. They are recognized by society

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or they are controlled by their power. The question that is being discussed in political philosophy is, how morally supported these central authorities and governance are? If we have to accept central control as a necessity, how much authority can exercise it morally? Whether the political authority has sovereign power? The modern political philosopher Thomas Hobbes thinks in answer to this question that such political central authority is an essential prerequisite for our civil society and the political authority reserves the right to exercise sovereign power. He later showed that this sovereign authority is also fully supported morally. Even he thinks, morality depends on the central power. One of his main claims is, that human being is selfish, and for the sake of social peace, the central sovereign authority is needed. But this view is being criticized from many perspectives, such as: According to John Locke it is excessive authoritarianism or there is no room for revelation (Locke, 2012); According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau it is an exaggeration of human nature (Rousseau, 1754); or John Rawls' understanding there is an overemphasis on security (John Rawls, 1971). This article discusses several practical and principle limitations of Hobbes' position; especially from the ethical perspective.

### **Sovereign Political Authority in the Light of Leviathan**

Thomas Hobbes' famous book *Leviathan* (1651), discusses political philosophy. About human nature, he stated that internal mechanism influences human behavior and there are two types of internal motion within humans and animals: *vital Motion*, which is one of the physical processes that occur without human desire. (e.g., heart rate) and *voluntary motion*, activities that one does on own will. (e.g., walking, talking) (Hobbes, 1651: 27). Again, two things work for the optional motion (voluntary operation), appetites and aversion. He says,

“Of appetites and aversions some are born with men, as appetite of food, appetite of excretion and excretion' (which may also and more properly be called aversions from somewhat they feel in their bodies) and some other appetites, not many. The rest, which are appetites of particular things, proceed from experience and trial of their effects upon themselves or other men. For of things we know not at all, or believe not to be, we can have no further desire than to taste and try. But aversion we have for things, not only which we know have hurt us, but also that we do not know whether they will hurt us or not.”(Hobbes, 1651: 32–33).

Hobbes argued that passion is created from appetites and aversion and named it *power*. ‘Power exists in the present, with which one desire to achieve something in the future good.’(Hobbes, 1651: 50). It acts as the means to fulfill one's purpose by applying as much as one can. Each exercises power and wants to achieve the desired outcome (worth). “The value or WORTH of a man is, as of all other things, his price, worth. That is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his power.”(Hobbes, 1651: 51). Moreover, desired outcome (worth) is relative for which conflict arises many times when people exercise powers. He believes stability will only be there in exercising power over one another if person dies. He identified selfishness as a natural character of man and claimed that people are always selfish and greedy; they always try to ensure their self-interest. For which, man cannot ensure a situation where his beautiful life isn't in doubt.

This dreadful life is the *state of nature*<sup>2</sup> where there is no security in life, honor, or Freedom; we all are a threat to each other's freedom.

According to him,

“I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death. And the cause of this is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight than he has already attained to, or that he cannot be content with a moderate power, but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more.”(Hobbes, 1651: 58).

To avoid this threat, we need to contract with each other; to achieve peace, one must get through society, where life and liberty are protected. In this way, he shows how people have entered the life of society from the state of nature. Through these agreements, he speaks of establishing discipline in society, which will be the “Commonwealth”<sup>3</sup>. According to Hobbes, “...is one person, of whose acts a great multitude, by mutual covenants one with another, have made themselves everyone the author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their peace and common defense.”(Hobbes, 1651: 109). For Commonwealth to be created through the social contract, we must follow the principles of nature. We can look into three principles primarily. *Firstly*, one has the freedom to do whatever is necessary for his own safety (Naturally everyone has the Right to everything). In the state of nature, one can do whatever he wants for his security which leads to war. *Secondly*, one can practice freedom as much as he allows others to practice it. Both policies come with a kind of consensus on the use of power, which is essentially a contract. Hobbes argued, that the contract is effective only if there is a central authority exercising power. *Thirdly*, he stated that we should stick to these contracts for our benefit.(Hobbes, 1651: 79–89).

In his way, he demonstrates the necessity of a *Common Central Authority* exercising power to uphold the social contract that the Commonwealth creates. Because without common power is consequent to a time of war, he says,

“Hereby it is manifest that during the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe they are in that condition which is called war, and such a war as is of everyone against every man. For WAR consisteth not in battle only, or the act of fighting, but in a tract of time wherein the will to contend by battle is sufficiently known”(Hobbes, 1651: 76).

He even claimed that the ‘truth’ is a social construction and determined by common authorities. One can only know some external knowledge through the sensible organ and

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<sup>2</sup> By the state of nature, he means the antecedents of social life. Where there are no rules, everyone considers their own interests like everyone else. In the state of nature, one's interests are constantly threatened by others.

<sup>3</sup> The Commonwealth is a chain under the central authority where everyone behaves according to social contract. Here everyone's interests are safe for everyone.

they can be compared to logical social organizations. People can never enter into material truth and gain knowledge apart from some that human beings know by sensation. He thinks that the truth is not what we believe or is historically true; the truth is when people reach a consensus on a matter. Through it, he argues that when a great (larger body power) is acknowledged, it becomes legal and valid. So, the idea of Truth can only be established by general authority (common authority). Everyone comes to a decision based on consent, thus everyone establishes sovereign power.

The amount of wealth is limited and the distribution of these limited resources requires common authority. Without these authorities, it would become a state of nature and the state of nature would be nothing but an ongoing war. In such situations,

“...there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continually fear, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”(Hobbes, 1904: 84).

People control their behavior for fear of a common Authority. He explains how people enter into society in the first portion of his book ‘Leviathan’. So, the contract creates an artificial man, which is essentially the commonwealth.

Such authority is created only when some people acknowledge that “‘I give power to the person or Association to govern me’. Again they give the formula of submission in the following form: ‘I make myself the author of all the actions of that man to whom we have granted supreme power’”(Hobbes, 1651: 141). Such a person or authority impartially acts according to the existing contract among all. *Artificial man*<sup>4</sup> will enjoy all forms of freedom to establish the Commonwealth from the state of nature as a result, sovereign authority is being created.

This sovereign power can be established in two ways. (A) Acquisition, where sovereign power is established through the use of power. (B) Institution, where sovereign power gets acknowledged voluntarily. Hobbes then says that the Authority created by the use of force has the right to exercise the same power as the institutional authority. Here again, the power control mechanism can come in two ways. (I) Through generation or paternal dominion. Children are subordinate to their parents. Here the child obeys the parents' rule not because he was given birth by them, but because he will be nourished through them. By this kind of exchange, the generation continued to be "subject" to sovereign authority. (II) Through conquest. It implies, being a sovereign authority, whether occupied or forced, it is not meant to be accepted without anything in return. The condition that everyone agrees that it will give us security. That is, sovereign authority can be created in any way.(Hobbes, 1651: 118–120).

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<sup>4</sup> He refers to artificial human beings as representing or controlling human beings in society. That is the commonwealth.

He thinks the subordinate subject can enjoy three kinds of Freedom. (a) Protect yourself: "Subjects have the liberty to defend their bodies, even against them that lawfully invade them", (b) Avoid hurting others, and (c) Avoid being a criminal. (Hobbes, 1651: XXI).

All other freedom will depend on the Sovereign Authority which relies primarily on contract values. He then made morality like truth, dependent on society and *Central Authority*, without any control of the center. He considered the *Common Authority* as the greatest factor in society. By explaining twelve particular and different areas, he has given the common authority the power of omnipotence. These are:

"The subjects cannot change the form of government; Sovereign Power cannot be forfeited; No man can without injustice protest against the Institutions of the Sovereign declared by the major part; The Sovereign's Action cannot be justly accused by the subject; Whatsoever the Sovereign doth is unpunishable by the Subject; The Sovereign is judge of what is the necessary for the Peace and Defense of his Subject. And Judge of what Doctrines are fit to be taught them; The Right of making Rules, whereby the Subjects may every man know what is so own, as no other Subject can without injustice take from him; To him belongeth the Right of all Judicature and decision of Controversies; And of making War, and Peace, as he shall think best; And of Choosing all Counselors and Ministers, both of Peace and War; And of Rewarding, Punishing, and that (where no former law hat determined the measure of it) arbitrary; And of Honor and Order." (Hobbes, 1651: 115)

He thinks that where there is no central authority there is nothing wrong. (Hobbes, 1651: 78). Human behavior can be assessed only if the authorities have a policy in place and peace will come by following the principles. Every subordinate (subject) will be obliged to follow these boundaries. (Hobbes, 1651: 112). The sovereign authority will decide the boundaries of right and wrong which are called *Civil Law*. Everyone is obliged to obey this law. He believes that the authority should apply this law to everyone equally. Otherwise, there will be dissatisfaction among some people which will serve as a threat to the sovereign. In Hobbes's political structure, the sovereign authority has absolute power. So, the representatives (judicial, financial, medical) will have certain controlling powers. Also, the ownership and value of the property will be dependent on the sovereign authority. Whatever he decides, will be final, he will distribute it to everyone and all these exchanges will make everyone loyal to him (authority). (Hobbes, 1651: 135). In the overall discussion of Hobbes, there are three important points to note.

*Firstly*, He identified the cause of the chaos and showed that human nature is selfish and self-centered; they come against each other to earn their interests. That concludes self-interest is responsible for all the chaos; *Secondly*, he showed the process of entering society. According to him, when people are involved in conflicts of interest, the interest of each other becomes insecure. That is why people need sustainable interests<sup>5</sup>. Whom

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<sup>6</sup> Sustainable interest guarantees his interest and ensures that his claim is not harmed for any other reason.

David Stuart called the "enlightened self-interest".(Stewart, 1996: 1). So, to ensure Sustainable interest, people have to make a contract which is named after social contract; *thirdly*, demonstrated Disciplinary Process, when conflicts of interest arise between multiple people, the central power will intervene for coordination. Thus, the discipline of society will be established.

### **Limitations through Ethical and Practical Consideration**

This paper examines the limitations of the idea of Hobbes about sovereign political authority by explaining seven particular significant aspects. This section holds an in-depth explanation of those arguments base on relevant theories, thoughts, and practical examples.

*The very first one* looks into the behavior of people, examining these contextually. Hobbes thinks the standard of morality will be what the authorities decide. As a result, it can be seen that whenever a sovereign authority doesn't have a policy, the individual can behave in any way, whether it is right or wrong. He claims human behavior would be moral or immoral, subject to sovereign authority. So, in life where sovereign authority's power does not reach, moral evaluation of human behavior is not possible. As a person who is harming his body, we cannot call him wrong unless the power of sovereign authority is exercised. In this case, it is seen that even destroying people can be a bad thing that Hobbes has failed to catch on. Again, when a criminal commits a crime, many times after organizing the crime, there occurs a kind of intense pursuit inside him. He repented even though he had no witnesses to his crime. Though there is no fear of getting punishment from authorities, he can suffer from self-loathing and often corrects himself from such remorse. But if we agree with Hobbes, people do good only when they are controlled by others. But the above discussions show the authorities are only able to observe the external behavior of human beings. Only by measuring morality with the outward appearance of man, human's self-development is never possible. Some qualitative change takes place in a person through the practice of moral principles or disciplines. "The norms of morality must be by and large consistent with human biological nature because ethics can only exist in human individuals and in human societies."(Francisco J. Ayala, 2010). If we assume that people will do good only because of the rule of authority, then our efforts to build this moral society will be completely meaningless. So, Hobbes's idea of a civilized society and the way he speaks of establishing it lacks the process of human civilization.

Though Hobbes thinks that man has greed, selfishness, and self-centeredness and he will never do good if we do not control him, this idea can be challenged through various perspectives. We see people doing good things without control. There are no laws in society for helping disadvantaged people, so we just do them all by ourselves. But he thinks, where there is no law or policy there is nothing good or bad; when such a decision is reached there is no evaluation of the voluntary work of the society. For example, 'Man (Adams) found \$17,000 in cash on the sidewalk in Chicago but didn't scoop the money and bolt, gives it back. He said "there was no dilemma on me returning it, my parents raised me, to be honest."'(Reuters Staff, 2011). Without honesty, he would not have returned the money. Again, animals live in an orderly manner, despite no contract or sovereign authority. Thomas says that human nature is competitive. The competitive

spirit among the people has come because of their intellectual development and this intelligence indicates that people will solve such problems without any control, at their will by using their morality. Thus, by specifying the nature of man, Hobbes has denied the possibility. Even when looking at human history we can see that without central control at first, people were cooperating and sympathetic to themselves. Even Many anthropological studies, such as Margaret Mead's work *Coming of Age in Samoa*, show that: 'sympathy, social attachment, and cooperation can exist even in the absence of a strong central authority.' (Mead, 1928). So, it is no longer a privilege to say that people are naturally selfish.

The third one is about the idea of giving consent to the authorities. Hobbes believes that sovereign power, however, established, is legitimate; obeying those who receive authority according to generation, is the same as obeying those who receive authority based on contract or agreement. He claims we accept their authority because we take advantage of them. But when we are born, we can't give an opinion as to who is the ruler. And if I take the privilege from nature, it should be given to me as my birthright, or I am obliged to accept this privilege. So compelled to take and giving consent is completely different. A person applies for citizenship of a developed country to live a life of luxury, so voluntarily and consciously signs the policies that exist for the citizens of that country, through which the person will receive the benefits and will be obliged to fulfill his responsibilities. Here, the person aspiring for citizenship and the authorities of that country have entered into a consensual agreement. When it comes to compliance, there is the question of compulsion. In contrast, if a person is born in a country and starts living thereby using the resources of a geographical area, the individual is not bound by an agreement with the authorities as per his choice. Therefore, it would not be appropriate to say that sovereign authority is created on the basis of consent according to the generation. For example, giving consent by signing the rules of an organization and giving consent by taking the wealth of the country is not the same thing. (Miller, 2003). Obedience is not provided by expecting anything under compulsion.

*The fourth aspect* is about the discussion of morality, whether it's necessary or not in Hobbes' perception. According to Hobbes, 'there will be confusion when it comes to differencing morality with the law. Because society has a voice through which he speaks and there is only one will with which he can exert force -the Sovereign Power which grand society.' (Sabine, 1988: 438). We know, that morality varies in different contexts and Philosophers want to determine the standard of morality through reasoning. (Appiah, 2007). If only obeying the principles and contracts made by the king is morality, then there is no need for various philosophical discussions. We often see that when the rulers of society and the state formulate laws or policies for the welfare of the people, there are many protests and demands for changes. There, policymakers criticized the law, highlighting its harmful aspects; and social workers pressured the authorities for a new or moderate version of the rules. In these aspects moral discussion became much more relevant, also significant; even, this is how society develops. However, if we accept Hobbes' view that the decision of the authorities is fair and must be obeyed, then the importance of our moral discussion is denied and the process of a positive version of the law will be missing.

The idea of moral standards is assessed in *this fifth part*. Since Immanuel Kant's moral standards are very relevant here we can draw his idea of ethics in this discussion. According to Kant, motives are most important in moral matters. To him, there are three conditions for an action to be ethical. (1) Principle of Universality: "Kant's first formulation of the Categorical Imperative is that of universalizability"(Driver, 2007: 87). (2) Principle of Respect: "Kant's second formulation of the Categorical Imperative is to treat humanity as an *end in itself*"(Driver, 2007: 90). (3) Principle of Autonomy. (Kant, 2002: 48). According to the *first principle*, morality should be Universal. Moral rules cannot be relative to any individual. Morality is equally applicable to all human beings. "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."(Rachels, 1999: 124). Here, morality is moral in itself, in no way moral order can be changed from person to person. But the idea contradicts in sovereign authority, depending on Hobbes's discussion. *The second principle* speaks of human dignity. It means people cannot be seen as a means of action. "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your person or the person of another, always at the same time as an end and never simply as a means."(Driver, 2007: 90). Humans will always be the target of any work, but here we see Hobbes saying that for the sake of discipline in society, the freedom of the people has to be limited, some other big power has to be put in charge of human management. It disturbs a person's dignity. People are being used as a way to benefit the wider society which is not morally justified. *The third principle* states that people should perform their duties as inhabitants of the civilized world. People won't do any good to expect any results. Kant puts a lot of emphasis on human intellectuality, he thinks people are members of a moral society and as a member of this moral society, they should complete the moral works. "Precisely on account of this autonomy, every will, even every person's own will directed to himself, is restricted to the condition of harmony with the autonomy of a rational being"(Kant, 2002: 112). Doing good deeds in the hope of gaining profit is not a moral act. According to him, moral people do not show off for fear of punishment or in the hope of reward. They commit moral work as responsibilities.

Hobbes' views on this policy are conflicting. Hobbes argued that obeying the law is the means of maintaining peace and order in our society. If there is no contract in this society, then there won't be any concept of moral behavior, where there is no obligation of the individual in the society without the self-demand there a person's moral worth is denied. So, we can't morally support Hobbes' views in light of Kant's criteria.

*The sixth discussion* studied the utilitarian moral aspects. Hobbes stated that if society does not have sovereign authority, it will be a state of nature where the lives, resources, and freedoms of most people are uncertain. We need sovereign authority to ensure all these things, which will lead us to a more convenient and secure life. On the other hand, since Hobbes wanted to establish discipline through sovereign authority, we could call this idea a utilitarian or consequential one. Accordingly, the moral value of the work will be determined by evaluating its results. The better the outcome of the work, the better the job will be considered more ethical. (Mill, 2009: 2). It is ethical to bring better results for maximum people. He had legitimized any type of power exercised by the central authorities of the society because the absence of such an organization would result in War. The focus of the argument is that the power-driven in the organization will produce a good outcome for everyone. So, this organization has the moral right to exercise power.

However, according to the consequential view, Hobbes' views are not acceptable. Hobbes believes that society is bound to be chaotic without total control of the sovereign authority. This claim is not completely true. This is because we see that when people are without any restraint, ethics work in them. As we have seen in previous discussions, people do good work without any control. We cannot say that any person will make chaos whenever he gets a chance. It cannot be said that the welfare of all in society is ensured by the method by which Hobbes seeks to bring order to society.

Because there is no place for human freedom in the system he has shown, the exercise of power by the authority is legitimate in any of his methods. Here the loss of the people to the arbitrariness or selfishness of the king or power is absent in Hobbes' discussion. Abuse of power by those people in power can be detrimental to the maximum number of people. That is the idea that which Hobbes relies on is not entirely correct.

Lastly, the impact of Hobbes' views is a significant factor to discuss. If we need many fields for governance, such as the security sector, and the service sector; two things are very important to be present in them. (a) Harmony between them, through multi-faceted coordination, the authorities of a society or a state can become effective. Where the policies from the center will reach different levels and their applicability in particular cases will be measured. Again, the particular unit will take the necessary policy considering its advantages or problems which also have practical value. (b) The balance of responsibility and power between them, the unit and center will complement each other, if one is ever misdirected the other will monitor. In this way, power will become useful and orderly. Branches need to be balanced with the center. (Kittilson and Schwindt-Bayer, 2010). Balance is absent in Hobbes' given method as he says, these Branches exercised only limited power, and all the power will be in control of the central authority. The only job of these units will be to follow the instructions of the center. If the center here makes any irregularities, they are obliged to comply, or no way to evaluate the work of the center. Hence, central authorities have no place for accountability. Which in no way brings holistic good for most of the citizens. Even Hobbes' approach is detrimental to both the authorities and the public because, if the authorities consider themselves above any kind of accountability and behave arbitrarily, then the interest of the people may be less assured. It can lead to extreme authoritarianism and the abuse of power. (Locke, 2012). Again, when they commit extreme arbitrariness, rebellion will appear in the society, where both the authorities and the general public are likely to suffer. Otherwise 'it can make little room for justified defense against a tyrannical ruler' (Locke, 2012). That will affect the process of state development. Additionally, applying certain policies and controlling the regulator cannot always achieve an accurate result. Because when it comes to rules, we face many complexities that can't be controlled by a specific policy. Then, from the weaknesses of the rules, people will find all the means of wrongdoing. The reason is that according to Hobbes, obeying rules is fair, so people will want to find a way to commit wrong, which doesn't break the rules either. (Stewart, 1996: 12). As we see in different business organizations they hire lawyers to identify the weaknesses of the rules. And try to find a way to trick the government or the people as much as possible. So, it cannot be said that everything will go smoothly if there are laws and authorities. Also, people can be harmed by the sovereign power. Hobbes sees people

as greedy and selfish. Now the person who holds the sovereign power will also be possessed of human nature; such as greed and selfishness. If that person uses sovereign power to ensure his interests by harming everyone then that will be the greatest loss for the people of the state.

## Conclusion

Any kind of necessity cannot justify Hobbes' sovereign political authority as a whole, especially in the light of ethics, also from the practical perspective. This paper supports this stand through seven particular strands which are all co-related. Hobbes' idea can only be implied to a human's external behavior, while the psyche is important for one's self-development which can't be assisted by rules only; The way Hobbes declares human nature is not the entire portrait of human, so it limits the study and also hinder the actual maintenance of society; Apart from these human dealings Hobbes' idea of sovereign power is also critiqued widely. Such, he acclaimed that people consent to the exercising of power of this authority generationally, which is not an accurate fact; From the Utilitarian view of ethics, his idea cannot ensure the maximum good; Even his idea lacks from the three principles of Kant's ethical discussion either; The moral discussion becomes unnecessary if we follow the idea accordingly; Lastly, a society run just by authoritarian power or regulations creates oodles of loopholes for human which endure chaotic situation. Undoubtedly, to run society properly law and authority is a must. We must have a definite law to govern society and a well-organized administration to govern that law. That concludes both morals and regulations are simultaneously significant for running a state or society's card well. But Hobbes' idea lacks these concerted processes. This paper finds the lacks and limitations within a variety of examples, along with relevant theories accordingly.

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