



A Comparative Study of the Origin of Sovereignty from the Perspective of Mohammad Hossein Tabataba'i and Thomas Hobbes

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ABSTRACT

The endeavor to ascertain the cause and origin of sovereignty is among the issues that have engaged political philosophers. Mohammad Hossein Tabataba'i and Thomas Hobbes offer similar interpretations of humanity and social life, and the origin of sovereignty is derived from their theories. In this research, employing an exploratory-descriptive methodology, the question of "What is the origin of sovereignty from the perspectives of Mohammad Hossein Tabataba'i and Hobbes?" has been investigated. The research findings indicate that Hobbes, emphasizing the natural and equal rights of humans, seeks to formulate a theory concerning right, power, and the connection between right and power. He locates the origin in the social contract and the necessity of absolute security. The Hobbesian human is one devoid of social bonds, dominated by instinctive and irrational forces, existing in a savage state (state of nature) from which there is no escape except through a conditional social contract in favor of a third party (the Sovereign), entailing the surrender of all rights and authorities. From Tabataba'i's perspective, humans are inevitably bound to social life, which is founded upon a practical contract—namely, the contract of mutual employment and social justice. In his view, early humans were under the influence of natural forces, and the dominion of these natural forces encompassed even reason. However, through social progression, reason attains perfection, is reinforced by revelation and prophethood, and comes to govern the natural forces. The findings reveal that the fundamental difference in the anthropology and legal philosophy of these two thinkers leads to two distinct analyses of politics and government. The results of this research can contribute to the development of a comparative understanding of Islamic and Western political philosophy.

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1. Introduction

The origin of sovereignty is one of the fundamental issues in political philosophy that shapes the foundations of political legitimacy and power. Various theories concerning the origin of sovereignty have been proposed, each resting upon a specific philosophical worldview and anthropology. Examining the issue of the origin of sovereignty from the perspectives of Tabataba'i (1902-1981 CE) and Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679 CE), as political philosophers, is significant because these two thinkers, with their specific views on the origin of sovereignty, have been the source of significant developments in the theories of subsequent thinkers.

Hobbes, by analyzing the issue of power – one of the primary concerns of the modern world – seeks on the one hand to understand power and possession, and on the other hand to restrain it through right. After Machiavelli, and with a more systematic method than any other thinker in this field, he revealed the intrinsic characteristics of power; whereas thinkers who addressed this issue before him had only discussed the origin of sovereignty or the form of government in a cursory manner. The concept of consent and the social contract in Hobbes, influenced by the particular characteristics of his thought, led to his ideas becoming part of the mainstream of political thought in England. To such an extent that, in the view of some critics, the channel he dug later became the main course for the body of political thought.

Tabataba'i, like Hobbes, speaks of humans before social discord and after social discord. However, these two interpretations and situations are entirely different from one another; because the human in the state of nature according to Hobbes is an isolated individual, a human without family and non-social; whereas Tabataba'i believes that humans, from the very beginning of creation, are social and rooted. This human possesses the experience of social life; therefore, the social contract envisioned by Tabataba'i differs from that of Hobbes. This fundamental difference in anthropology and the philosophy of law has led to divergent views in the realm of political legitimacy.

Given the influence of the ideas of these two philosophers on the theories of subsequent thinkers, the necessity of examining the theories of both thinkers to extract the similarities and differences in their views became apparent. In this regard, the main question of this research is: What is the origin of sovereignty according to Hobbes and Tabataba'i, and what approach have these two philosophers adopted concerning the origin of sovereignty?

The hypothesis of this treatise is that Hobbes, relying on physiological and naturalistic psychological anthropology and emphasizing natural and equal human rights, introduces the contract as the origin of sovereignty, with the characteristic that he presents a concept of contract and consent that has a specific and distinct meaning from the concept of contract held by other thinkers, leading to the formation of a specific type of government. In Tabataba'i's thought, primordial humans were also influenced by natural forces, and the dominance of natural forces encompassed reason as well; however, reason, in the natural and social trajectory, becomes perfected, strengthened by revelation (wahy) and prophethood (nubuwwah), and gains dominance over instincts and natural forces. It is this very reason that is the recipient of revelation and has the capacity to receive and evaluate the message of revelation. The differing anthropologies in the thought of these two thinkers, Hobbes and Tabataba'i, lead to two different analyses of politics and government. Hobbesian anthropology leads to the civil state, absolute government, political despotism, and state religion; whereas Tabataba'i's anthropology leads to mutual utilization, cooperative society, social government, and social religion. The aim of this research is a comparative and analytical examination of these two perspectives on the origin of sovereignty to identify their differences and points of commonality, thereby providing a foundation for a better understanding of both Islamic and Western political philosophy.

This research centers on the primary question: “How is the origin of sovereignty explicated in the thought of Tabataba'i and Thomas Hobbes?” Under this overarching inquiry, it seeks to answer the following sub-questions: “What differences and similarities exist in the anthropology and philosophy of law of these two thinkers?” and “How have these fundamental differences impacted their theories of political legitimacy?”

2. Methodology

This article employs an exploratory-descriptive method to examine the status of the origin of sovereignty in the thought of the two philosophers. The research data has been collected through documentary and library-based research. Furthermore, in addition to independently examining the theories on the origin of sovereignty in both thinkers, the study adopts a comparative-analytical approach to recognize and explicate their philosophical and legal differences and similarities within a coherent and scientific framework.

3. Findings

The culmination of these two perspectives reveals a fundamental distinction between Western and Islamic political philosophy:

In Hobbes' theory, government is formed through a social contract aimed at providing security and order, with its legitimacy dependent on the absolute power of the sovereign.

Whereas in Tabataba'i's thought, government arises from innate human nature (fitra), reason, and divine revelation, deriving legitimacy solely through the realization of justice, morality, and the preservation of human dignity.

Consequently, while government for Hobbes is an instrument to curb chaos, in 's intellectual system, it bears a divine mission for human development, justice, and guidance.

	Category	Tabataba'i	Thomas Hobbes	Common Ground
1	Anthropology	Humans endowed with divine nature (fitra) and justice-seeking reason	Self-interested humans in a state of nature and perpetual war	Both recognize humans possess fundamental drives
2	Origin of Sovereignty	Human nature, reason, and divine guardianship	Social contract to escape the state of nature	Necessity of order and governance
3	Philosophy of Law	Based on divine law and justice	Based on social contract and sovereign power	Importance of order and law
4	Political Legitimacy	Dependent on justice, morality, and respect for human nature	Dependent on absolute power and security maintenance	Need for legitimacy to ensure social stability

Comparative Framework of Hobbes' and Tabataba'i's Perspectives

4. Conclusion

Hobbes represents a perspective that locates legitimacy in power derived from social agreement to curb chaos (Pettit, 2008). In contrast, Tabataba'i, from the standpoint of Islamic philosophy, regards justice as the foundation of legitimacy, viewing it as emerging from humanity's innate nature (fitra) and reason.

Thomas Hobbes perceives humans as beings driven by instinctual motives—fear of death, desire for self-preservation, and will to power. In his view, these innate tendencies render the human state of nature a condition of perpetual conflict and "war of all against all" (Hobbes, 1651). Within this framework, reason serves an instrumental role in calculating gains and losses, compelling humans to accept a social contract and surrender power to an absolute sovereign; for only absolute and unchallengeable power can guarantee security and order (Skinner, 2008; Pettit, 1997).

Conversely, Tabataba'i—grounded in Islamic philosophy—understands humans as beings endowed not only with material dimensions but also with a soul, divine innate nature (*fitra*), and reason. Consequently, humans intrinsically desire goodness, justice, and perfection, possessing the capacity for moral, intellectual, and spiritual growth (Nasr, 2006). Unlike Hobbes' view of humans as self-centered and dangerous, sees them as transcendence-seeking beings whose reason and *fitra* enable them to distinguish truth from falsehood and advance toward a just order.

Hobbes primarily interprets humans as subject to biological and power-seeking drives, framing government as the necessary institution to control these instincts (Tuck, 1989). This analysis stems from a realist yet pessimistic anthropology. In opposition, Tabataba'i—relying on a theological approach—considers humans free and rational beings who, through their reason and divinely endowed nature (*fitra*), can participate in establishing moral and social order.

Thus, while Hobbes derives governmental legitimacy from the social contract and the necessity of controlling human instincts, roots legitimacy in divine justice, moral rationality, and the imperative to establish social justice. Ultimately, two distinct anthropologies yield two divergent theories of political power's origin and legitimacy."

Hobbes posits that to achieve lasting peace and security, humans must—through a social contract—surrender all their natural rights to an absolute sovereign. This sovereign, endowed with inviolable and absolute authority, is obligated to guarantee security and order, preventing society's relapse into natural chaos (Hobbes, 1651; Pettit, 1997; Skinner, 2008). Consequently, governmental legitimacy in Hobbes' thought derives from its capacity to establish order and maintain security. Any limitation on sovereign power threatens the foundations of social order; thus, political authority must be absolute, unbound by prior legal or moral constraints.

In stark contrast, Tabataba'i—drawing on the foundations of Transcendent Theosophy (*Hikmat-e Mota'aliya*), Shi'a theology, and Islamic philosophy—locates the origin of governance not in social contract, but in humanity's divine innate nature (*fitra*), rationality, and the principle of divine guardianship (*wilāya*). He conceptualizes governance as an innate and rational institution whose mission extends beyond mere preservation of order to encompass the realization of divine justice, preservation of human dignity, and the moral-spiritual guidance of society (Tabataba'i, 2009: 160–163; Tabataba'i, 2018: 127, 135).

From 's perspective, humans possess God-given reason and *fitra* that orient them toward goodness and justice. Legitimate governance, in this view, is an instrument for manifesting justice and expanding the common good. Hence, Islam—being consonant with human nature—regards *wilāya* (divinely sanctioned authority) as natural and necessary. For early Muslims, accepting the authority of the Prophet of Islam was self-evident, requiring no formal justification (Bouzari-Nejad & Marandi, 2015: 117–118).

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