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Q3(c)

**Individualism is inherent in Hobbes' absolutist ideology.****Comment**

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2022 · PSIR GS 1 · 15 marks · Political Theory

Political Theory: meaning and approaches.

**Core demand of the question**

- Individualism is inherent in **Hobbes'** absolutist ideology. Comment. (15 marks)

**Revision summary**

**Hobbes** starts from separate, equal, self-preserving individuals, not from a natural polis.

Their war of fear makes an undivided sovereign seem necessary.

**Macpherson** named this possessive individualism.

**Locke** keeps individuals and drops absolutism; **Hobbes** joins the two.

The residual individual right is only against immediate self-destruction, not against the civil law as such.

**Introduction**

**Thomas Hobbes** builds an absolute sovereign out of individuals who fear death. The absolutism is not a medieval corporate chain. It is a machine assembled from equal, separate persons. Individualism is therefore not an accident of Leviathan. It is the starting point of the ideology.

**Body****Individuals before the city**

- **Natural equality is equality of vulnerability:** anyone may kill anyone. That is an individualist anthropology, not an Aristotelian zoon politikon.
- Each has a natural right to everything that seems to preserve himself. There is no shared summum bonum.
- Competition, diffidence, and glory are passions of separate agents. The state of war is a relation among individuals without a common judge.
- **C. B. Macpherson** called this possessive individualism: the person as owner of his own capacities, entering the market of security.

**How individualism yields the absolute sword**

- Covenants are acts of individuals who authorise one will. The sovereign is a representative person made by those acts.
- Because individuals will otherwise defect, the sword must be undivided. Absolutism is the security technology of atomised fear.

- The subject retains the inalienable individual right not to kill himself or to walk quietly to death, which is a residual individualism inside obedience.
- Religion, guild, and family are not allowed to become rival common powers. That flattening is individualist in method even when the result is a giant state.

### Comment: inherent, not identical with liberalism

- **Locke** keeps individualism and refuses absolutism by adding natural law, property, and trust.
- **Hobbes** shows that individualism plus extreme insecurity can justify concentration, not only limitation.
- **Rousseau** attacked this path: the Hobbesian individual is already a product of a fallen comparison, not a natural given.
- **Sandel's** later critique of the unencumbered self has a Hobbesian ancestor: persons without constitutive community need an artificial common power.
- **Contemporary security states still use Hobbesian individualism:** the isolated frightened subject who trades liberty for order.

### Limit of the comment

- **Hobbes** also needs unity, honour of the sovereign, and civil religion. Those are not market individualism.
- Absolutist ideology here means undivided sovereignty, not a cult of the private consumer.
- **The accurate comment is:** methodological individualism is the premise; political absolutism is the inferred remedy.

### Flow diagram

Equal individuals -> State of war  
 State of war -> Covenant  
 Covenant -> Absolute sovereign  
 Absolute sovereign -> Residual right of life

### Conclusion

**Hobbes's** absolutism is built from equal, fearful individuals who authorise one sword. Individualism is inherent as method and as residual right of self-preservation. It is not Lockean limited government. It is the paradox of modern sovereignty: atoms produce Leviathan.

### Facts & figures

#### Leviathan, 1651

**Hobbes's** main statement of natural condition, covenant, and undivided sovereignty.

#### Macpherson

The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism read **Hobbes** and **Locke** through market man.

#### Three causes of quarrel

Competition, diffidence, and glory among individuals, Leviathan chapter 13.

**Inalienable right**

**Hobbes** allows resistance when the sovereign directly threatens the subject's life.

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