

Thomas Hobbes and John Locke's State of Nature and Social Contract: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT -Thomas Hobbes and John Locke were considered as great philosophers who have solidly contributed to political theory. Their ideas of state of nature and social contract were elaborately brought out in their celebrated works, *Leviathan* and *Two Treatises of Government*. This paper attempt to briefly study Hobbes and Locke's state of nature and social contract and make a comparative analysis of the same.

OBJECTIVE: The objective of the paper is to comparatively analyse Hobbes and Locke's State of Nature and Social Contract.

KEY WORDS: State of Nature, Social Contract, Laws of Nature

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I. INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hobbes was one of the greatest English political thinkers. He was born on 5th April, 1588 in Malmesbury and died in 1679. In his young days he was a bright student and mastered a number of languages such as Latin, Greek, French, Italian and English. He learnt scholastic logic and physics at Oxford University and after completing his education he was recruited into an aristocratic family of Lord Cavendish. He accompanied Lord Cavendish's son on many grand tours to Europe. These tours gave Hobbes a golden opportunity to meet politicians and intellectuals which enables him to gain new insights. He met eminent people like Galileo, Pierre Gassendi, Marin Marseenne and other prominent intellectuals.¹ Hobbes's ideas of state of nature and social contract were addressed in one of his most famous work *Leviathan*. Other prominent works include *De Cive*, *De Homine*, *Elements of Law* etc.

John Locke was born in Somerset village in England in 1632 and died in 1704. He was regarded as one of the most influential English thinkers. He was a physician by profession and his competence attracted the attention of Lord Ashley later known as the Earl of Shaftesbury, who appointed him as his personal medical adviser. This association gave Locke direct experience in political affairs as Lord Ashley was the founder of the Whig party. His famous works included his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, *The Letter of Toleration*, *The Two Treatises of Government*, etc.

Hobbes and Locke wrote about the condition where men lived prior to the formation of societies, state and government. They also reflected the idea of how mankind was able to leave the state of nature and form civil societies. They also pointed out on a social contract where the state of nature was transformed to an organised state under a common authority or a sovereign as Hobbes called.

II. DISCUSSION

Before attempting to analyse Hobbes's state of nature a brief highlight on his concept of human nature is made. Hobbes view human beings as matter in motion. There are two kinds of motion. The first he calls vital, or involuntary motion, by which he means those basic and unthinking life functions of inhalation, digestion, circulation, and so on.² The second Hobbes calls voluntary motion, by which he means those forms of human activity that are willed such as walking and speaking.³

Hobbes saw individuals constantly in motion to satisfy their desires and continual success in the attainment and fulfilment of their desires was called felicity (a condition of movement and not rest).⁴ For Hobbes " continual success in obtaining those things which a man from time to time desires, that is to say, continual prosperity, is that men call Felicity; I mean the Felicity of this life. For there is no such thing as perpetual Tranquility of mind, while we live here; because life itself is but motion, and can never be without Desire."⁵ This desire for success makes men to be egoistic, selfish and quarrelsome.

Hobbes's State of Nature

Hobbes's idea of the State of Nature is a hypothetical condition where men lived prior to the formation of society, state and government. Hobbes depicted the state of nature as a state of war. In Part I, Chapter 13 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes wrote this following passage which is worth quoting at length.

“Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of warre, where every man is Enemy to every man; the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without security, than what their own strength, and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, 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, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.”⁶

From this passage it is understood that Hobbes illustrates that since a man does not know whom to trust, he fears all men in general. Man believes in force and fraud. In this horrible state of nature man's rights are limited only by his physical power where there is no distinction between right and wrong, justice and injustice. The only motivating force is self interest. It is understood that the state of nature is a state of conflict. Competition, Diffidence and Glory were the three reasons that were responsible for quarrel and rivalry among individuals.

Competition, make men invade for gain, Diffidence for safety and Glory for reputation. Hence it is manifest that during the time where men live without a common power, they are in a condition of war. Clearly what is needed for people to escape the dreadful state of nature is towards a collective rationality and covenant with one another called the social contract.

Hobbes's Social Contract

Before attempting to explain Hobbes's Social Contract, the paper also tries to highlight on Hobbes's laws of nature which form the basis of the social contract. According to Hobbes “A law of nature is a precept, or generall rule, found out by Reason, by which a man is forbidden to do ,that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same; and to omit, that, by which he thinketh it may be best preserved.”⁷ Hobbes listed as many as nineteen laws of nature, but the first three are considered as fundamental. They are (a) to seek peace, and follow it (b) abandon the natural rights to things and (c) that individuals must honour their contracts.

Hence in order to guarantee peace and under the precepts of the laws of nature, individuals were compelled to give up their natural rights and a covenant is made that binds all men to a common authority. In Chapter 17 of *Leviathan*, Hobbes stated that every man would say to every man, “I Authorise and give up my Right of Governing my selfe, to this Man, or to this Assembly of men, on this condition, that thou give up thy Right to him, and Authorise all his Actions in like manner”⁸ The person or body who received this power was not, however, a party to the contract but he was rather, the result of the covenant and was consequently above it.⁹ As a result this left him free to exercise an unlimited power. Hence we can call Hobbes's sovereign as absolute. Hobbes is regarded the chief exponent of absolutism.

The contract however is perpetual or permanent because once the contract is made it could not be broken and those who refused to obey the terms of the contract returned to the original state of war. In Chapter 18 of the *Leviathan*, Hobbes asserted the rights of the sovereign where people have no right to resist or protest or else they may return back to the condition of war as before.

Locke's State of Nature

Locke's political speculation of his state of nature begins with his concept of human nature. He believed that human beings are naturally endowed with social instinct where they are depicted as basically decent and good. Based on this background, Locke's description of the state of nature was one in which peace and reason prevailed. It was not as gloomy and pessimistic as that of Hobbes. Locke held that the state of nature is a state of “peace, goodwill, mutual assistance and preservation.” One thing to be noted is that Locke's state of nature was not lawless, since men lived under the dictates of natural law. According to Locke, Natural Law is defined as a body of rules determined by reason, for the guidance of men in their natural condition.¹⁰ From this natural law he derives certain natural rights, rights to life, liberty and property.¹¹

“The state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one: and reason, which is that law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possessions...”¹²

The state of nature is a state of perfect freedom in which men are equal and free to act “as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature.”¹³ It is also a state of equality and liberty, “wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another.”¹⁴ Even though it is a state of freedom and equality,

it was not one of license. The individuals though they are free from any superior power, they are subjected to the laws of nature. Locke clarified that it is reason that dictates the laws of nature.

Locke's state of nature as understood is not a state of war. It was one of liberty and equality but at the same time peace was not secure as it was corrupted by vicious and degenerate men. However, there are inconveniences that prevail which makes man unsatisfied. The inconveniences pointed out by Locke are the lack of an established, settled, known law, the lack of an impartial judge and the lack of an executive power to enforce just decisions. It is because of the lack of these three important wants, man wanted to escape the state of nature and enter into a contract. Here it is important to note that Locke was trying to show us the importance of authority to increase the chances of peace.

Locke's Social Contract

By entering into a contract, individuals consented and agreed to submit themselves before a majority rule and willing to organise themselves as a community or civil society. This contract is consented by all and once made, it is irrevocable. Each generation must give its consent. As Locke said, "Every man's children being by nature as free as himself, or any of his ancestors ever were, may, whilst they are in that freedom, choose what society they will join themselves to, what commonwealth they will put themselves under."¹⁵

The social contract of Locke has a two step progression- first the setting up of a civil society and the second is the setting up of government. The government is only a fiduciary power for promoting certain ends. On the whole Locke regarded the setting up of a government as a much less important event than the original compact that makes a civil society.¹⁶ Locke described the progression of the two steps in this passage quoted from chapter VIII of the Second Treatise of Government.

"Whosoever therefore out of a state of nature unite into a community, must be understood to give up all the power, necessary to the ends for which they unite into society, to the majority of the community, unless they expressly agreed in any number greater than the majority. And this is done by barely agreeing to unite into one political society, which is all the compact that is, or needs be, between the individuals, that enter into, or make up a commonwealth. And thus that, which begins and actually constitutes any political society, is nothing but the consent of any number of freemen capable of a majority to unite and incorporate into such a society. And this is that, and that only, which did, or could give beginning to any lawful government in the world."¹⁷

Once the government is formed, its power is derived from the people. The three wings of the government is composed of the legislature, the executive and the federative power. The legislature is the supreme power but if the performance is not satisfactory, the people can change or alter it. Hence Locke advocated a limited government.

Conclusion: Similarities and Differences

To conclude, the paper tries to bring out the points of similarities and differences between the two thinkers on the concept of state of nature and social contract.

Hobbes and Locke are both famous political philosophers whose writings have greatly influenced liberal political theory. Both refer to a hypothetical condition before the existence of society, state and government i.e, the state of nature. They speak about the insecurity of peace in the state of nature. They conceived the idea of contract as the source of the state and common authority. To them, the contract is irrevocable as violation of the same will lead to the return of the state of insecurity and war. Both of them speak about the laws of nature as based on reason and responsible for the contract in the creation of a responsible authority to preserve peace.

The points of contrast between the two thinkers are upheld in their concept of human nature. Hobbes depicted that human beings are egoistic, selfish and quarrelsome. While on the contrary Locke believed that human beings are altruistic, selfless, peace loving and good. Their view of the state of nature also differs. For Hobbes the state of nature is essentially a state of war while Locke depicted the state of nature as essentially a state of peace, goodwill and mutual assistance. Another point of difference is that by Hobbes contract, the individuals surrender all their natural rights to the sovereign, while according to Locke's contract, the people surrendered only the right of interpreting and enforcing the laws of nature while the remaining rights is possessed by the individuals. Finally, another point of difference is based on their idea of the sovereign. Hobbes was in favour of an absolute sovereign where people cannot resist its authority, or else they return back to the original state of nature which is a state of war. Locke tries to put limitations on the absolute government as he is in favour of a limited government as its powers were derived from the people.

To sum up we can say that both the thinkers have acknowledged the essential of the social contract or the existence of a common authority as instrumental in a state's political stability. Their ideas reflected in their works have deeply influenced other thinkers as well in political thought. The 21st Century has brought us closer to an appreciation of Hobbes and Locke on account of preservation of peace and stability in the political system.

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