

HOBBS, LOCKE AND THE STATE OF NATURE THEORIES: A REASSESSMENT

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Both Thomas Hobbes and John Locke utilize a "state of nature" construct to elucidate their more general views on human nature and politics. Yet their conceptions of man's original condition in the state of nature are usually contrasted: the political philosophy of Locke's *Second Treatise* paints man as a "pretty decent fellow," far removed from the quarrelsome, competitive, selfish creatures said to be found in Hobbes's *Leviathan*.¹ Lockean man seems to be more naturally inclined to civil society, supposedly more governed by reason. From this interpretation of human nature, Locke concluded that the state of nature was no condition of war, placing himself in opposition to the traditional interpretation of Hobbes.

It is my contention that although Locke painstakingly attempts to disassociate himself with the Hobbesian notion of the "self-interested man" in a perpetual "state of war," the execution of this attempt falls short, and can even be recognized to implicitly (if not explicitly) contain the very reasoning that Hobbes utilizes to advocate the movement of man from the state of nature to civil society. In order to demonstrate the truth of this contention, I will briefly outline the development of their philosophies and offer both a reinterpretation of the Hobbesian state of nature, and a critical analysis of Locke's view of the state of nature in the *Second Treatise*.

I. Hobbes: Method and Problem

Hobbes offered a materialistic metaphysics that utilized a simplified version of Galileo's resolutio-compositive method. According to this method, complex phenomena are broken down into their

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¹Examples of the many works in political philosophy that hold such views are Simmons, A. J. "Locke's State of Nature," and *Great Political Thinkers*, W. and A. Ebenstein, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanavich College Publishers, 1991.

simplest natural motions and components. Once these elements are understood, the workings of complex wholes are easily derived. Hobbes' intent was to develop a systematic study in three parts, starting with simple motions in matter (*De Corpore*), moving to the study of human nature (*De Homine*), and finally to politics (*De Cive*), each based, respectively, on a lower level of analysis (Lasco and Williams, p. 230). Hence, reality for Hobbes is reducible to mechanistic and material principles, or, simply stated, bodies in motion. If we are to understand politics, Hobbes suggests that we should look at such phenomena in terms of the relationships between "men in motion."

Furthermore, Hobbes adopted the Galilean proposition that that which is in motion continues in motion until altered by some other force. (Of course, this is a theoretical assumption which, independently, cannot be proven true or false, since all we *do* observe are bodies that are acted upon by such forces). Likewise, Hobbes assumed that human beings act voluntarily based upon their "passions," until they are resisted by another force or forces. This outward motion of the individual is the beginning of voluntary motion, which Hobbes calls "endeavor." Endeavor directed towards an object is called "appetite" or "desire." Endeavor directed away from an object is called "aversion" (Gauthier, p. 6).

The several passions of man are "species" of desires and aversion, which are directed toward those objects whose effects produce pleasure and away from those objects which produce pain. Thus, Hobbes conceives men to be self-maintaining engines whose "motion is such that it enables them to continue to 'move' as long as continued motion is possible" (Gauthier, p. 7).

From this account of utilitarian motion, it logically follows, according to Hobbes, that each man in the state of nature seeks only to preserve and strengthen himself. "A concern for continued well-being is both the necessary and sufficient ground of human action; hence, man is necessarily selfish" (Gauthier, p. 7).

It is this perpetual endeavor for self-preservation within the state of nature which gives rise to a condition of "war." Hobbes believes that men, being originally all equal in the "faculties of the body and mind," equally hope to fulfill their ends of vital motion (*Leviathan*, p. 100). Hence, if "two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies," for both, knowing

natural moral law would be privy to the unconditional, absolute and categorical right to preserve oneself at all cost (*Leviathan*, p. 98). This state of war encompasses all, "everyman, against everyman" (*Leviathan*, p. 100). Without a common power to police and settle disputes, man is in a perpetual condition of war; "war consisting not only in battle, or in the act of fighting, but in a *willingness* to contend by battle being sufficiently recognized" (*Leviathan*, p. 100). The state of nature is seen as a condition in which the *will* to fight others is known, fighting is not infrequent and each individual perceives that his life and well-being are in constant danger (*Leviathan*, p. 100). Accordingly, men in the state of nature live without security other than their own strength; this is argued to be the natural condition of mankind, and leads Hobbes to the conclusion that such existence is "natural" to man, but not rational (whereas society is seen as rational, but not natural, contra Aristotle) (Kavka, p. 292).

It is within this irrational condition of "war," or Hobbesian "fear" or "despair," in which human beings find little hope of attaining their ends without conflict, that mortal men are compelled to elect a sovereign and move out of the state of nature; only then can the imperative of self-preservation be truly fulfilled through peace (Lemos, p. 24). It is important to note that the state of nature, for Hobbes, is a philosophic device employed as a means of hypothesizing about human behavior in a pre-political and pre-social state, i.e., a state without any external constraint on behavior. As Hobbes indicates, it is not necessary to presume such a state actually existed, only that it captures essential features human beings would exhibit in such a condition.

Hobbes' political philosophy was received in his own time with nearly universal rejection, being more often renounced than actually read. Hobbes was labelled an atheist, the "monster of Malmesbury," a schemer, a heretic and a blasphemer (*De Cive*, p. xx). His advocacy of an absolute monarch as the solution to man's inherent condition further distanced him from the "enlightened" mainstream of 17th century political thought, including Locke's philosophy. It is a commonly held view that although Locke makes no specific mention of Hobbes in the *Second Treatise*, it may nonetheless be interpreted as an attempt to systematically refute both the notion of absolute monarchy and Hobbes's description of the state of nature (Lemos, p. 74).

II. John Locke: Method and Problem

Philosophy, Locke tells the reader in the introduction of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, is “nothing but true knowledge of things.” Properly, philosophy contains the whole of knowledge, which Locke himself divides into three parts: a *physica* or natural philosophy, *practica* or moral philosophy, and logic, the “doctrine of signs.” The goal of the philosopher is to build as complete a system as he possibly can within these three categories (Aaron, p. 74).

Yet Locke persuasively argues in the *Essay* that mankind’s ability to gain true knowledge is significantly limited, and sets himself the task of determining the demarcations of human knowledge. To help mankind rid itself of this “unfortunate” failing, he argues that man has been endowed with talents capable of allowing him to live a useful and profitable life. The *Essay* is extremely practical: we should concentrate on what we can know, and not waste our energy or effort searching for knowledge of things which lie beyond us (Aaron, p. 77).

It is exactly these practical and utilitarian ends that motivated the construction of his moral and political philosophy. Although political and moral philosophy are not reducible to metaphysical principles that apply outside of their respective fields of inquiry (thus explaining the difficulties between advocating, on one hand, the strict empiricism of the *Essay*, and, on the other hand, the rationalist natural law theory of the *Two Treatises*), in all of his writings Locke assumes, fundamentally, that man knows enough to live a good and righteous life if he so chooses.

Locke argued that the state of nature is not identical to the state of war, and, although it is “inconvenient,” nature is governed by a natural law known by reason, the “common rule and measure God has given mankind.” The natural 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 property” (Locke, p. 4). If the law of nature is observed, the state of nature remains peaceful; conventional wisdom defines this condition as one of mutual love (via the “judicious” Richard Hooker), from whence are “derived the great maxims of justice and charity” (Locke, p. 4).

Yet, according to Locke, God has instilled in natural man a “strong obligation of necessity, convenience and inclination to drive him into society”; hence, men quit their “natural power, resigned it

up into the hands of the community” for the assurance that their property will be preserved (Locke, pp. 44, 48, 53).

Men being, as has been said, by nature free, equal and independent, no one can be put out of this estate and subjected to the political power of another without his own consent. The only way whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty and put on the bonds of civil society is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties and a greater security against any that are not of it. (Locke, p. 53).²

An equally important factor motivating men to forfeit the perfect freedom of the state of nature is that within this environment, each man has a right to interpret natural law and to punish what he judges to be violations of it (Lemos, p. 85). Anyone who violates another’s right to life, liberty or property has placed himself in a state of war, and the innocent party has the right to destroy those who act against him because those that are waging war do not live under the rule of reason, and, as a result, have no other rule but that of force and violence. Furthermore, this state of war would be perpetual if justice could not be fairly administered (Locke, pp. 11, 13).

Therefore, in order to avoid a state of war, Locke suggests that one must forfeit the state of nature, creating an environment where disputes can be decided upon by an impartial authority (Locke, p. 14).

It would seem, at least upon *prima facie* analysis, that although both thinkers utilize a state of nature device to demonstrate political necessity, their similarities would end there. Hobbes’ state of nature would seem to be populated by self-interested egoists whose personal gain is ultimately important. Locke, on the other hand, appears to suggest that a “civil” nature permeates pre-civil society to such an extent that man is voluntarily obliged to respect his fellow human beings, and the formation of civil society soon follows.

The common conception regarding the state of nature theories of Hobbes and Locke is thus presented. I shall now turn to the argu-

² A classic statement of libertarianism!

ments as to why this conception is invalid, beginning with a reassessment of Hobbes' position, followed by specific arguments regarding Locke's notion of pre-political man's motivation to pursue civil ends.

III. Reassessing Hobbes

To understand morality and politics, Hobbes argues that one must understand man *qua* man; hence, psychology becomes the necessary foundation of moral and political science. And the only way to view mankind in its most natural condition is to assume a hypothetical state of nature in which men act purely out of passion, void of reason at least initially. Hobbes' account of the state of nature, as shown in Chapter 17 of *Leviathan*, was expressly "designed to provide a glimpse of man without the garb of convention, tradition or society, so as to uncover the underlying principles of the mundane equity of natural man, without assuming an transcendent purpose or will" (Lasco and Williams, p. 252). Therefore, Hobbes' prescription for stability was a deduction from the necessary behavior of man in a theoretical society, not emphasizing how men *ought* to act, but rather how they would act void of any relationships, whatsoever. It is in this condition that our endeavors dispose us towards pleasure or pain; man, being concerned with only those endeavors which serve to preserve himself, chooses those objects which meet this condition. Hence, man would find himself often in competition with others for the same objects, and a state of war would ensue, with each having the "right to everything" he wishes.³

Historically, the negative interpretation of this condition of nature, being a "war of all against all," has been dominant in political and philosophical circles. Sterling Lamprecht defines the common conception of Hobbes' psychology as follows:

God made man such a beast and a rascal that he

³Keep in mind that the aim of Hobbes is not to suggest that we can actually observe such a condition, or that it is even remotely possible; this is merely a fundamental axiom in Hobbes' thought experiment. In fact, R.E. Ewin has argued that this more radical form of the natural condition is used by Hobbes as part of a *reductio*, as to point out the logical inconsistencies between simultaneously assuming the existence of both such a natural condition and the pursuit of self-preservation: they ultimately prove contradictory (Ewin, p. 108).

inclines universally to malice and fraud. Man's typical acts, unless he is restrained by force, are violent and ruthless, savagely disregarding the persons and property of his fellows. His greatest longing is to preserve himself by gaining power over others and exploiting others for his own egoistic ends (*De Cive*, p. xx).

Lamprecht labels this view "Hobbesism," and argues that in this view of human nature, Hobbes is far from being a Hobbesist. Hobbes gives, to be sure, a picture of man in the state of nature which is far from becoming. But, Lamprecht argues, Hobbes did *not* intend to say that his picture of man in the state of nature is an exhaustive account of human nature. Rather, the concept of man in the state of nature enables us to measure the extent to which reason and social pressures i.e., other "forces" determine and direct the expression of human passions.

The idea of man in the state of nature is for social science like that of a natural body in physical science. Physical science holds that a body continues in a state of rest or uniform motion in a straight line unless influenced by outside forces. Actually, there is no body which is not influenced by outside bodies; but the *idea* of such a body enables us to measure the outside forces (*De Cive*, p. xxi).

Such a natural man in "full motion" would be observable whenever one operates wholly under the dominion of passion, without the restraint, or to use Hobbes' language, "the opposing force," of reason. Man, acting on his own, with no concern for others' self-preservation, guided by short-term considerations only, is doomed to failure in a state of nature. But if long-term moral and political arrangements (i.e., a voluntary social contract) enable them to maintain themselves without facing a war of all against all, then the basic cause for hostility is removed (Gauthier, pp. 18-19). In fact, many scholars suggest that the whole concern of Hobbes' moral and political philosophy is to show men the way out of this short-term condition of war and into a long-term condition of peace, for human life can continue only if mankind can remove itself from such a

condition. David Gauthier, in his treatise titled *The Logic Of Leviathan*, states this argument most eloquently:

In the beginning, everyman has an unlimited right to do what he will, conceiving it to be for his preservation. But the exercise of this unlimited right is one of the causes of the war of all against all, which is inimical to preservation. Thus the unlimited right of nature proves contradictory in its use; the man who exercises his right in order to preserve himself contributes thereby to the war of all against all, which tends to his own destruction. And so it is necessary to give up some part of the unlimited natural right. ... The fundamental law of nature is "that every man ought to endeavor peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it." The law is the most general conclusion man derives from his experience of the war of all against all. Clearly it depends on that experience, whether real or imagined. Although hypothetically a man might conclude that it was necessarily inimical to human life, only an analysis of the human condition with all social bonds removed shows that peace is the primary requisite for preservation (Gauthier, pp. 51-53).

The salvation of mankind, for Hobbes, depends on the fact that although nature has placed him in an unpleasant condition, it has also endowed him with the possibility of removing himself from it, as revealed through the use of *reason* i.e., the rational desire to pursue those avenues in which the hope of attaining peaceful existence is real! To argue that the state of nature, for Hobbes, is purely brutish and warlike, devoid of rationality or reason, is to miss the point: it is a necessary ingredient to lead man out of the state of nature and into a civil society. Hobbes' vision of nature might be but a limited guide; yet, to borrow the words of Gauthier, "it is a truth which we must endeavor to overcome—but we shall not overcome it if we misunderstand it, deny it, or ignore it (Gauthier, p. 180).

IV. Locke and Political Motivation

What follows are several arguments which independently suggest that the Lockean state of nature implicitly admits of a Hobbesian condition of war, for Locke himself views conflict as the primary motivating factor that necessarily compels man to leave the state of nature and enter civil society.

Initially, it is important to establish a fundamental point of difference between these two theories: Locke's state of nature is *pre-political* (i.e., prior to common authority), whereas, for Hobbes, it is *pre-social*. Locke refers to a situation in which a collection of human beings are not subject to political authority, not a situation in which there exists no form of rudimentary organization, much less an organized society (Lemos, p. 89). Hobbes uses the expression "state of nature" to denote a situation in which men do not live in any form of society at all, regardless of how fundamental. Furthermore, his definition tells us what people would be like if they could be divested of "all their learned responses or culturally induced behavior patterns, especially those such as loyalty patriotism, religious fervor or class honor" that frequently could override the "fear" that Hobbes speaks of so dramatically in pre-civil society (Hinchman, p. 10).

If we were to assume man as existing pre-socially as Hobbes does (a condition without trade, without the arts, without knowledge, without any account of time, without society itself), it seems a rather intuitive implication that he might be motivated by only self-centered drives, for that would be the extent of his learned behavior within this condition. Locke, on the other hand, takes social and cultural bonds for granted and argues purely from a pre-political position. Even a hypothetical Lockean might act a bit more selfishly in a Hobbesian state of nature; once semantic discrepancies are taken into account, these definitions already begin to appear closer to agreement.

Secondly, Locke's position seems to be a normative prescription, as opposed to a theoretical description. For example: in chapter II, section 6 of the *Second Treatise*, Locke argues that through reason, those who consult the law of nature will learn that no one "ought" to harm another's life, liberty or possessions. This phrasing seems to suggest a normative position, prescribing how man *should* live in a state of nature, versus the account that Hobbes constructs upon his

theoretical premises. These positions are not mutually exclusive: one can observe pre-civil man in a Hobbesian state of nature and morally prescribe a Lockean state of nature as a more “civil” alternative.

Thirdly, Locke seems to provide evidence for the Hobbesian assumption that man often acts out of selfishness and criminal intent.

Initially Locke seems somewhat ambiguous about precisely what motivates the man of nature to move to civil society: he states that God has instilled a “strong obligation of necessity, convenience and inclination to drive him into society.” But why would man leave a state of nature that, at least according to Locke, provides him the ultimate liberty and power over his destiny, a condition that he likens to “a state of peace, good-will, mutual assistance and preservation”?

If the man in the state of nature be so free, as has been said, if he be absolute lord of his own person and possessions, equal to the greatest, and subject to nobody, why will he part with his freedom, why will he give up his empire and subject himself to the dominion and control of any other power? To which it is obvious to answer that though in the state of nature he has such a right, yet the enjoyment of it is *very uncertain and constantly exposed to the invasion of others ...* This makes him willing to quit a condition which, however free, is *full of fear and continual dangers* (Locke, p. 71).

He continues:

were it not for the *corruption and viciousness* of degenerate men, there would be no need of any other law, no necessity that men should separate from this great and natural community” (Locke, p. 72).

If Locke’s state of nature is truly as “rational” and “concerned” as he suggests, why is the only motivating factor powerful enough to move men out of this condition that which he so vehemently denies exists: a Hobbesian condition of “war”?

Locke clearly states in the *Second Treatise* that one of the natural rights that must be granted to all men in the state of nature, equally, is that man should interpret natural law for himself and decide upon

appropriate punishment for offenders since there exists no common judge to settle controversies between men. It is precisely this intuitive and pre-political knowledge of the natural law that is said to enlighten man to the burdens of civil society.

Yet Locke argues persuasively that any knowledge of a natural law is more often than not hindered due to mankind's inherent epistemic limitations. Man's own unquenchable and boundless curiosity itself becomes a hindrance. Richard Aaron uses the words of Locke's *Essay* to demonstrate this point:

Thus men, extending their inquiries beyond their capacities and letting their thoughts wander into these depths where they can find no sure footing, 'tis no wonder they raise questions and multiply disputes, which never coming to any clear resolution, are proper only to continue and increase their doubts and to confirm them at last in perfect skepticism (Aaron, p. 77).

Even if one accepted that a natural law existed, Locke's clear rejection of man's ability to know this law with any degree of certainty, combined with his suggestion that foreknowledge of such a law does not guarantee moral action, would seem to suggest a condition of skepticism and disagreement. This position is strikingly similar to Hobbes' argument that although human reason is capable of discerning the laws of nature, mankind is unable to consistently follow the dictates of such reason (Lamprecht, *De Cive*, p. xxix). In fact, one of the strongest arguments that Locke proposes to reject in the *First Treatise* is the divine right theory of Sir Robert Filmer, which is based upon the notion that even if a right of succession had been determined by a law of nature, our knowledge of natural law is limited to such a degree that there remains no compelling reason to accept one explanation over another.

Furthermore, such subjective interpretations of the natural law would logically imply an unfairly administered and inconsistent justice. Locke continues:

for everyone in the state of nature being both judge and executioner, of the laws of nature, men being

partial to themselves, *passion* and *revenge* is very apt to carry them too far with too much heat in their own cases, as well as *negligence* and *unconcernedness* to make them remiss in other men's (Locke, p. 71).

This seems contradictory to an environment of peace and fellowship, and Locke strongly suggests that a state of *war* would exist if justice could not be fairly administered.

Consider this: For Locke, in the absence of a neutral judge, no one can accurately know truthfully whether his cause is right or wrong. Thus, everyone is at liberty to believe himself right. Patrick Colby provides case-in-point:

If one person fears his neighbor, whether with cause or without (for only an individual can judge), by this partial and subjective determination the neighbor becomes a wild beast and is lawfully destroyed. But when the neighbor, now the target of attack, might understandably conclude that his assailant is the wild beast and so endeavor to execute the law of nature against him (Colby, p. 3).

But this means that Locke's state of nature will not divide neatly into groups of "upright law-abiders and selfish malefactors." And if a distinction cannot be made between such individuals, it would seem impossible for justice to be administered effectively. Locke himself deduces such a conclusion:

The inconveniences that they are therein exposed by the irregular and uncertain exercise of the power every man has of punishing the transgressions of others make them take sanctuary under the law of government (Locke, p. 71).

Locke makes it clear from the beginning of his argument and increasingly so as he progresses, that because judgment and punishment are in the hands of everyman, the state of nature works very poorly (Godwin, pp. 126-127). And in the state of nature, conflict (or a willingness to contend by conflict), once begun, and once unable to achieve a satisfactory resolution, would tend to continue to a harsh

ending, because there exists no authority to subject both parties to the fair determination of the law (Godwin, p. 127).

This potential inconsistency in the application of natural law seems, for Locke, to create significant enough hardships to motivate man to civil society:

I easily grant that civil government is the proper remedy for the inconveniences of the state of nature, which must certainly be great where men may be judges in their own case; since it is easy to be imagined that he who was to be unjust as to do his brother an injury will scarce be so just as to condemn himself for it (Locke, p. 9).

Clearly, Locke's original state of nature, if not absolutely equivalent to Hobbes' state of nature, is at the very least a place of extreme anxieties, inconveniences, inequality and fear of the potential outbreak of war. Locke provides convincing evidence that the state of nature would be so dangerous and unhappy, and the preservation of one's right to life so precarious, that the law of nature demands that the state of nature be abandoned for civil society (Locke, p. 18). Though Locke suggests that his state of nature is not a Hobbesian condition of "war," a closer examination of this argument would tend to suggest that without the failure of the state of nature to guarantee a secure peace, mankind would never voluntarily choose to forfeit his absolute freedom. Jean Fautot provides support:

But (Locke's) state of nature also includes a condition scarcely distinguishable from that which Hobbes describes as a state of war—all that is needed is for some man to act contrary to reason, because in the state of nature every man is obligated to punish evildoers. In this way, war begins, with the right on the side of the innocent to destroy the evildoer, or, if he prefers, to enslave him. Nor is there any end to this condition in the state of nature, where every man is both judge and executioner. The slightest disagreement is enough to set men fighting, and the victory of the righteous is never secure. Therefore, men have the strongest reasons for leaving the state of nature and

entering civil society (Faurot, p. 75).

Hence, not only do I argue that Locke's state of nature corresponds to Hobbes' notion of a condition of perpetual fear, or the "state of war," but it actually becomes the identical catalyst by which Lockean man justifies movement to civil society.

V. Conclusion

The point of this presentation is clear: the common conception of Locke as the political propounder of the polite school of positive, optimistic descriptive psychology is an inaccurate characterization. Furthermore, the also-common contrasting of Locke's view of man in the state of nature with Hobbes' theoretical consideration of natural man has been misunderstood. Hobbes did not concern himself with a "plain, historical method": his concerns were with devising a system of government (albeit monarchical) that would best serve mankind's inherent drive for both self-preservation and peace.

Men enter civil society because the state of nature tends to deteriorate into a condition of unrest and insecurity. If all men were rational and virtuous, apprehending and obeying a natural law, there would be no problem. The presence of a few men acting in opposition to reason, combined with an environment lacking a common authority to arbitrate disputes, creates a condition of instability and provides the necessary impetus for, in Locke's words, "reasonable part of positive agreement": a social contract (Faurot, p. 75).

Whether one accepts a reinterpretation of Hobbes' state of nature construct, or a closer examination of Locke's arguments, it is clear that, although not identical, their analyses offer many striking similarities. And, more importantly, without the instability and fear within the state of nature, neither philosopher could logically infer movement from nature to civil society: it becomes the necessary, perhaps sufficient cause for any social contract.

Therefore, the classical juxtaposition of Hobbes' and Locke's state of nature theories is at best questionable and far from convincing.

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