

On human nature and state of nature:

A comparison between Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau

To better live, people need to be aware of themselves and the conditions in which they inhabit. In order to do so, they must first define human nature and the natural state of life, which is known as the state of nature. Throughout the history of social and political philosophy, many notable philosophers attempted to define and categorize these issues, and among them stood Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. I plan to iterate and compare how these philosophers exemplify human nature and state of nature through analyzing and dissecting Hobbes's *Leviathan*, Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, and Rousseau's *The Social Contract* while explaining how their lives and the social context they were in impacted their works and how they shaped the contemporary society,

One first must define the social contract theory, the basis in which human nature and the state of nature are explained. Social contract theory focuses on the origination of laws and states, and how states and/or civilized communities impact the individual. All social contract theories underlie the following assumption that the individual, through a collective agreement, seeks and desires security, safety, and demands fulfillment. The agreement transforms humankind from the primordial and savage state into an organized society. While Greek philosophers made some progress fabricating aspects of a social contract theory, it was Rousseau who first coined the term "social contract", but it was Thomas Hobbes who is regarded as the founder of social contract theory in western philosophy. Using Hobbes writings, both Locke and Rousseau formed their respective social contract theories. But they transformed Hobbes' concept to fit their perspective on what the human nature and state of nature must be.

Thomas Hobbes, born in the 16th century, an English philosopher, is one of the founders of modern political philosophy. His most well-known book, the *Leviathan*, which was written in 1651, exuded an influential formulation of social contract theory. The book also served as the backbone for the analysis of human nature and state of nature in this essay. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes set the foundation of states and legitimate governments using his assumed definitions of human and state of nature, and he used them to establish the need for a strong central authority to end the benevolence of strife and civil war.

Regarding human nature, Hobbes noted that human is inherently not a social animal, bad, and needs to be protected from themselves with a government. His argument was inspired through none other than Machiavelli's *The Prince*. "Appealing to Machiavelli's famous account of human nature, according to which man is like the centaur, capable of greatness, but also a monster to his fellows – a topos introduced by Hobbes no doubt with reference to Machiavelli – Tralau argues the likelihood of Hobbes drawing on this tradition."¹

First, Hobbes stated the three causes for quarrel in men, then explained why and how men would resolve these issues. He stated that there were three principal causes of quarrel, which were competition, diffidence, and glory. One competed for gain, one contented with diffidence for safety, and one fought with glory for reputation. The first one, competition "use violence, to make themselves masters of other men's persons. wives, children. and cattle".² The second one, diffidence, was to defend them. As for the third, glory, is "for trifles, as a word. a

¹ Springborg, Patricia. *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's Leviathan*, (New York, 2007), 8.

² Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 312.

smile a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue' either direct in their persons, or by reflection in their kindred. their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name.”³

He then famously summarized his notion of human nature to be: “and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”⁴ Another quote of him: “Homo homini lupus est” - “A man is a wolf to another man” elucidates his view of human nature.

Hobbes simultaneously exemplified human nature and detailed the state of nature. In this state, every person was free to do what he or she needed to do to survive. So people will only act in their personal best interests. Thus, this leads to the state of nature being a state of anarchy and war. The reason for the state of war is because there are no laws or anybody to enforce it. He equated the state of nature to be a state of anarchy, a state “where every man is enemy to every man: the same is consequent to the time, wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal.”⁵ Because of such state, there was no societal and technological progress and Locke stated that “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;”⁶ In this state, morality is nonexistent, and everybody lives in a perpetual and constant fear and dread.

³ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Common-Wealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*, (England, 1651), 312.

⁴ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 312.

⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 312.

⁶ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 312.

The amplest cause of fear would be the fear of death caused by the omnipresence of violence. He concluded this with “which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death”⁷

Because of this fear, human is not free, but human is naturally equal. Hobbes expounded this with: “For as to the strength of body. the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest either by secret machination. or by confederacy with others. that are in the same danger as himself.”⁸

With an understanding of Hobbes through the Leviathan, one shifts the focus to Locke for a perspective which is clearly influenced by Hobbes, yet contained novel and bold ideas that inspired a modern superpower.

John Locke, born in the 17th century, an English philosopher and physician, is generally considered as the “Father of Liberalism” and one of the most influential of Enlightenment thinkers. Locke is equally important to social contract theory since his work greatly influenced another great thinker who happens to be the next subject of comparison, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, classical republicanism, and liberal theory, both of which are reflected in the United States Declaration of Independence. The basis of his definition of human and state of nature was based on his most notable political philosophical work, the *Two Treatises of Government* (or *Two Treatises of Government: In the Former, The False Principles, and Foundation of Sir Robert Filmer, and His Followers, Are Detected and Overthrown. The Latter Is an Essay Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government*). *The First Treatise* denounces

⁷ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 312.

⁸ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 319.

patriarchalism in direct refutation of Filmer's *Patriarcha*, while the second one emphasizes on Locke's depiction of a civilized society based on natural rights and contract theory.

Human nature, according to Locke, states that people are inherently and naturally good-natured but corrupted by society. He also said that human can make intelligent decisions for themselves.

*"It is often asked as a mighty objection, where are, or ever were, there any men in such a state of Nature? To which it may suffice as an answer at present, that since all princes and rulers of "independent" governments all through the world are in a state of Nature, it is plain the world never was, nor never will be, without numbers of men in that state. I have named all governors of "independent" communities, whether they are, or are not, in league with others; for it is not every compact that puts an end to the state of Nature between men, but only this one of agreeing together mutually to enter into one community, and make one body politic; other promises and compacts men may make one with another, and yet still be in the state of Nature. The promises and bargains for truck, etc., between the two men in Soldania, in or between a Swiss and an Indian, in the woods of America, are binding to them, though they are perfectly in a state of Nature in reference to one another for truth, and keeping of faith belongs to men as men, and not as members of society."*⁹

Regarding his theory on the state of nature, John Locke envisions a much less frightening one although he still generally agreed with Hobbes about the brutality of the state of nature, which required a social contract to assure peace.

First, the state of nature is different from the state of license in that one cannot harm oneself. He explained that although human lives in a state of liberty, it is not a state of license, a state of uninhibited, unlimited, uncontrollable liberty. So human does not possess the liberty to destroy himself.¹⁰ Even "so much as any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use,

⁹ Locke, John. *Two Treatises of Government: In the Former, The False Principles, and Foundation of Sir Robert Filmer, and His Followers, Are Detected and Overthrown. The Latter Is an Essay Concerning The True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government*, (England, 1689), 331.

¹⁰ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 332.

than its bare preservation calls for it.”¹¹ The reason why is because the state of nature has a law of nature to govern it, and this law obliges everybody. Since everyone is equal and independent, no one has the right to harm another person in his life, health, liberty, or possessions.¹² The ultimate reason for the law of nature is because men are the product of God, or precisely “of one Omnipotent, and infinitely wiser Maker; all the servants of one Sovereign Master, sent into the world by his order and about his business;”¹³ Because of this reasoning, they are not of their own but are the Omnipotent property, so they cannot seek harm to another property of the Maker.

Locke stated this relationship to God and how one cannot harm another person in

*“whose workmanship they are, made to last during his, not one another's pleasure. And being furnished with like faculties, sharing all in one community of Nature, there cannot be supposed any such subordination among us, that may authorize us to destroy one another, as if we were made for one another's uses, as the inferior ranks of creatures are for ours. Everyone as he is bound to preserve himself. and not to quit his station willfully; so by the like reason when his own preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind, and may not unless it be to do justice on an offender, take away, or impair the life, or what tends to the preservation of the life, liberty, health, limb or goods of another”*¹⁴

Locke said that men exist in the state of nature in perfect freedom to do what they want.

The state is not morally good or bad, but it is chaotic. So, men do give it up to secure the advantages of civilized society. He extrapolated his point below:

“To understand political power aright, and derive it from its original, we must consider what estate all men are naturally in, and that is, a state of perfect freedom to order their actions, and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of Nature, without asking leave or depending upon the will of any other man. A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another, there being nothing more evident than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another, without subordination or subjection, unless the lord and master of them all should, by any manifest declaration of his will, set one above another,

¹¹ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 332.

¹² Locke, *Second Treatise*, 332.

¹³ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 332.

¹⁴ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 332.

and confer on him, by an evident and clear appointment, an undoubted right to dominion and sovereignty."¹⁵

From the quote above, one sees that within society, a state of freedom and equality, men can dispose of their possessions and persons as suitable, while they voluntarily choose to be bounded within the law of Nature, under the general consensus of being a property of the Omnipotent, while respecting the will of any other man. They also gave up their absolute, licensed freedom to receive a reciprocal power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, with equality embedded within the very fabric of said community, and that everyone is of the same species and rank.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, born in the 18th century, a Genevan philosopher, writer and composer, philosophically and politically forwarded the progress of the Enlightenment throughout Europe, along with the French Revolution. His two most impressive work, *Discourse on Inequality* and *The Social Contract*, laid the foundation and growth of modern political and social thought. Traces of human and state of nature definition can be found within *The Social Contract*, written in 1762. Rousseau first showed in *The Social Contract* his conception of human nature and state of nature, which were generally believed to be a thought exercise of human perfectibility.

As Rousseau illustriously wrote in the first line: "Man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains."¹⁶ This means that life is naturally pure and through civilization, man is now unequal and corrupted. It is only when people began to claim ownership of property, inequality, murder, and war resulted. One interesting point is that Rousseau's method of delivery is different from Greek's writers: "So it is not surprising that in answering this Rousseau most aggressively

¹⁵ Locke, *Second Treatise*, 331-332.

¹⁶ Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, *The Social Contract* (England, 1762), 1.

modifies Plato's text. One of Rousseau's first acts of revision was to abandon the classic Platonic tripartite soul. Instead of the Socratic discussion of the parts of the soul we find a focus on "the nature of man."¹⁷

Rousseau viewed men in the state of nature are free and equal. In the state of nature, men are "noble savages". He described savages in a state of nature as free, equal, peaceful, and happy. "Humans in the state of nature are similar to other animals insofar as they express love of themselves by seeking to avoid pain and to safeguard their well-being. They are not selfish, however; they do not compare themselves with other persons, and they do not suffer from envy or petty pride. On the contrary, they instinctually empathize with others who suffer, pity being one of the few innate traits of human nature"¹⁸

As for the state of nature, people will be inclined to cooperate rather than conflict. Originally, primitive humans lived in a pre-political, pre-social state of nature in which "the produce of the earth furnished him with all he needed, and instinct told him how to use it."¹⁹ Next, as it is shown in the *Companion Guide to Rousseau*, when humans started to enter society, they formed an opinion on themselves and on other people:

*"However, as these primitives began to encounter difficulties - whether they took the form of other animals, variable "soils climates and seasons" - and opportunities - such as the chance discovery of fire, for example – then the way these different beings and phenomena impinged on him and on each other must naturally have engendered in man's mind the awareness of certain relationships... which we denote by the terms great, small, strong, weak, swift, slow, fearful, bold, and the like..."*²⁰

¹⁷ Riley, Patrick. *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, (New York, 2001), 346.

¹⁸ Riley, *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, 68.

¹⁹ Riley, *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, 111.

²⁰ Riley, *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, 111.

Society, he argues, has corrupted man. Pride entered humans when they could do things they could not previously do before when they were savages; and especially when they regarded themselves to be superior to animals.²¹ People acquired preferences and lost their innocence “As early societies form and humans interact one with another and do things together, they learn how to make comparisons, to form judgements about what is better and worse”²² This leads to humans caring more about public esteem than self-worth. And evidently, it lead to inequality as

*“They came to think more highly of themselves if they thought themselves to be highly thought of by others, and this, says Rousseau, was “the first step towards inequality, and at the same time towards vice.” Comparative judgements, a sense of superiority, the desire for the approval of others: All are aspects of amour-propre, the self-love that comes to poison the simplicity of the primitive life and that leads to hierarchy, poverty, slavery, misery, property, and to the social division of labour.”*²³

In a nutshell, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau have different views regarding what is human nature and the state of nature. Hobbes is pessimistic in viewing human as naturally evil and the state of nature to be a state of anarchy. Locke concludes human to be naturally good and that the state of nature, while is still brutal, is much less than of Hobbes’s. As for Rousseau, human is naturally good like Locke, but the state of nature is good, and he shares the consensus with Locke in that civilization corrupts man. These statements, quotes, and analysis are achieved using arguments from the books and secondary sources.

²¹ Riley, *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, 112.

²² Riley, *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, 112.

²³ Riley, Patrick. *The Cambridge Companion to Rousseau*, (New York, 2001), 111-112.