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Human Nature: Hobbes and Locke

The definition of human nature has historically been an important topic of philosophical thought. Several thinkers have each proposed a different view of what they believe human nature is; with varying degrees of plausibility. One major contributor to this discussion is Thomas Hobbes, who presented his view in the *Leviathan*. Another is John Locke, who presented his view in his *Second Treatise of Government*. As is expounded below, each of these accounts of human nature can be taken as a premise, and thereby extended to offer a view of humans in the state of nature, and of a corresponding civil society.

It is my position that the accounts of human nature presented by Hobbes and Locke are equally plausible. Taking evidence of physical manifestation to be demonstrative of plausibility as a premise, I argue my position by presenting evidence of the present manifestation of three extensions of the thinkers' accounts of human nature.

Definitions

Before expounding on the views of Hobbes and Locke, it is prudent to first define 'human nature,' humans 'in the state of nature,' and humans 'in civil society.'

1. Human nature is defined as: "the shared psychological attributes of humankind that are assumed to be shared by all human beings" ("Princeton WordNet").
2. To be in the state of nature is to be a human with characteristics/attributes described by the view of human nature at hand, functioning alongside other humans also with those

characteristics, however outside of any overarching form of government/class system, or any socially determined legislation to govern one's behaviour either individually or in a group setting.

3. Humans in a civil society similarly possess the characteristics of human nature; however they are in addition members of a social collective. This social collective imposes certain rules on its members, and in turn confers certain benefits.

Importantly, these definitions assume that the behaviour of humans in the state of nature, and by extension the 'political atmosphere' (rules/benefits) of the civil society, are dependent on a given view of human nature and require it as a premise. In this way, a given view of human nature has corresponding implications for humans in the state of nature, the type of civil society those humans might form, and that society's political atmosphere (implications that would be different than those of another view of human nature).

Human Nature

In Hobbes' view, human nature is a "general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death" (Hobbes 289). This is to say that human nature is, first of all, an intrinsic desire for ever more resources, honours, powers, etc. Hobbes clarifies by saying that this unceasing desire is not necessarily rooted in the hope for more intensive delights or more wealth than one has already attained, but that "[one] cannot assure the power and means to live well, which he hath present, without the acquisition of more" (ibid.).

Locke's view of human nature is less clearly specified than that of Hobbes. Although Locke provides only what he thinks are the rules governing humans in the state of nature, these rules are both universal and innate – and as such in practice define Locke's view of human

nature. Locke's fundamental rule, the *law of nature*, dictates that "no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions . . . 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 another, as if we were made for one another's uses" (Locke 316). Further to simply not destroying or subordinating others, Locke's law of nature also dictates that one should, "when his own preservation comes not in competition ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind" (ibid.).

In summary, in Hobbes' view human nature is to unceasingly and aggressively strive for the acquisition of more resources, whereas in Locke's view, human nature is to acquire more resources only to the extent that one does not harm others, and to help others when doing so does not hinder oneself.

The State of Nature

Hobbes describes humans in the state of nature as being in "a condition of war of every man against every man" (Hobbes 296). To argue this point, he first clarifies that the unceasing quest for power and resources descriptive of human nature is not due to inherent greed, but because "there be some, that taking pleasure in contemplating their own power in the acts of conquest, which they pursue farther than their security requires; if others, that otherwise would be glad to be at ease within modest bounds, should not by invasion increase their power, they would not be able, long time, by standing only on their defence, to subsist" (id. 293). In essence, Hobbes suggests that even if one were to be content with his or her current wealth and power, there would almost certainly be another who would not be content with his or her own. As such, one must constantly remain on the offensive to ensure that one is not overrun by the attacks of others, who for the same reason also cannot sit contentedly idle. Therefore, acting for his or her

own preservation, everyone in the state of nature attacks one another, and thereby produce the “condition of war of every man against every man” (id. 296).

Locke describes the state of nature for humans as “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” (Locke 316). To ensure that the law of nature is observed, and that “all men may be restrained from invading others rights, and from doing hurt to one another” (ibid.), Locke provides that in the state of nature, the execution of the law of nature is everyone’s responsibility. He explains, “everyone has a right to punish the transgressors of [the law of nature] to such a degree as may hinder its violation . . . each transgression may be punished to that degree, and with so much severity, as will suffice to make it an ill bargain to the offender, give him cause to repent, and terrify others from doing the like” (id. 316-317). It is important to note, however, although everyone has a right to punish the transgressions of those who violate the law of nature, this right extends only “so far as calm reason and conscience dictate, what is proportionate to his transgression” (id. 316). Furthermore, as stated in the law of nature, when it does not hinder oneself to do so, one is obliged to help others for the preservation of mankind.

In summary, in Hobbes’ view, the state of nature is one of constant war and continual fear, in which life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes 293) due to the war of all against all, as caused by the constant struggle for resources (necessitated by the general inclination for power after power, characteristic of human nature). In Locke’s view the state of nature is also one where each person strives for their own resources, however one is bound not to invade others’ rights, and also to help others (provided doing so does not hinder oneself).

In The Civil Society

In the state of nature derived from Hobbes' view of human nature (the condition of war of every man against every man), there are several of what he calls *natural laws*. The first of these laws is the *first law of nature* "by which a man is forbidden to do that, which is destructive of his life, or taketh away the means of preserving the same" (Hobbes 295). This law, which states that a person will use any means in his or her power to preserve her or his life, is derived from the *right of nature*, which allows one "to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life" (id. 294). From this first law of nature, and given that each person is in a condition of war of everyone against everyone, Hobbes suggests that "every man, ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it" (id. 295).

This suggestion gives the *second law of nature*, "that a man be willing, when others are so too, as farforth, as for peace, and defence of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself" (Hobbes 295). This law of nature allows for the possibility of a peaceful status, where people in exchange give up their unceasing quest for 'power after power.'

Because this peaceful status is contrary to human nature, the Hobbes' civil society consists of the introduction of an artificial force, or sovereign, to ensure compliance to this status, and thereby provide "a more contented life" (Hobbes 299). Hobbes believes an outside force is necessary to bring men out of the state of nature and into the civil society because "the laws of nature (as justice, modesty, mercy, and (in sum) doing to others, as we would be done to,) of themselves, without the terror of some power, to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions, that carry us to partiality, pride, revenge, and the like" (id. 300).

In Locke's view, people primarily form commonwealths (thereby leaving the state of nature and enter into civil society) to protect their property (Locke 328). Further to this end,

Locke lists three shortcomings of the state of nature that are solved by forming a commonwealth. Firstly, the commonwealth provides “an established, settled, known law, received and allowed by common consent to be the standard of right and wrong, and the common measure to decide all controversies” (Locke 328) to ensure that the law of nature can be applied to particular cases in an unbiased fashion. Secondly, the commonwealth provides a “known and indifferent judge, with authority to determine all differences according to the established law” (ibid.) to ensure that partiality to oneself does not influence one’s execution of the law of nature. Thirdly, the commonwealth allows those who would be unable to properly punish transgressors in the state of nature to do so, by offering to “support the sentence when right, and to give it due execution” (ibid.).

In summary, for Hobbes people are driven by irresistible passions; however, the war of all against all that results from these passions is undesirable and unpleasant. People realize this, and wish to escape from the undesirable state of nature; however, the constant attention and offensive required to preserve one’s life in the presence of unjust others prevents this from being realized. Therefore, the only way to be free from the constant state of war is to create a civil society by collectivizing everyone’s power into one sovereign that can terrorize everyone into complying with what is actually a mutually beneficial arrangement. In the view of Locke, the state of nature is rife with inconveniences and misapplications of the law of nature, and as such in order to better preserve their property and eliminate the ‘inconveniencies,’ people unite into commonwealths that allow for powerful and just observation of the law of nature.

Political Atmosphere

The formula for the creation of the civil society stemming from Hobbes’ view of human nature has several political implications. This civil society is founded on a collected power, or

sovereign, which ensures a peaceful status by its ability to punish those who would disturb the peace and to control the lives its citizens in whatever way necessary to ensure that peace. As Hobbes states, everyone “shall authorize all the actions and judgments, of that man, or assembly of men, [the sovereign] in the same manner, as if they were his own, to the end, to live peaceably amongst themselves, and be protected against other men” (Hobbes 302).

The specific mechanism by which the sovereign ensures peace is the addition of disincentives (with the exception of killing/wounding/maiming) to sour the appeal of seeking more property or harming others. This power of the sovereign to disincentivize war, in Hobbes’ view, can include any number of controls over citizens or punishments for crimes. No one, however, is obliged to compromise the protections that are the goal of the entering into the civil society – in essence, the role of the sovereign is to protect its subjects for as long as it is able, and through whatever means, while not sacrificing the protection from harm that it is designed to offer.

The political atmosphere of the civil society (commonwealth) described by Locke is given by assuming the absolute freedom present in the state of nature is to be compromised only as much as is necessary to alleviate the “inconveniencies [people] are therein exposed to, by the irregular and uncertain exercise of the power every man has of punishing the transgressions others” (Locke 328), because a person in the state of nature is (desirably) the “absolute lord of his own person and possessions, equal to the greatest, and subject to nobody” (id. 327). As such, the civil society of Locke’s commonwealth will be necessarily liberal, as its citizenry would want to sacrifice only as much of their previous freedom as is necessary.

In summary, Hobbes’ sovereign is limited in its power to punish transgressions and ensure peace only by its obligation not to harm its citizens. That is, there are no aspects of life

outside of the ‘scope of the law’ for the sovereign, except for killing/maiming its citizens.

Locke’s commonwealth, however, is bound to interfere with the freedom of its citizens only as much as is necessary to eliminate the ‘inconveniencies’ of living in the state of nature.

Defining Plausibility

Having presented the views of human nature proposed by Hobbes and Locke, and their implications for people in the state of nature and in a civil society, I posit that neither view offers a more plausible account of human nature, insofar as both may be deemed equally plausible. To argue this position, it is prudent to first elucidate the criteria by which I will judge the plausibility of the views. To deem something plausible is to say that it has apparent reasonableness and validity (“Princeton WordNet”); an apt indication of whether something is plausible, therefore, is that it is demonstrably manifested in reality. To argue my position that the views of human nature proposed by Hobbes and Locke are equally plausible, I will analyze three implications of their views, and demonstrate their manifestation in the present day.

Inherent Morality

The views of Locke and Hobbes on human nature each have different implications for the presence of an inherent moral standard for human life. The Hobbesian account of human nature suggests that human behaviour is driven by “a perpetual and restless desire of power after power” (Hobbes 289). Humans in his view are motivated to function in their lives by an intrinsic desire for more power, resources, status, etc. and do not have moral checks or balances restricting their pursuit of this aim. This view is manifested by many humans, who even if unnecessary for their own survival, will still attempt to acquire the wealth and property of others. For example, (past and present) North Americans are driven to acquire wealth to such a degree that those whose survival is already guaranteed will exploit others to the point that theirs is in

question, for the sake of living better (e.g. slavery, sweat shops, child labour).

In Locke's account of human nature, he provides the law of nature, which states that humans are bound not to harm others, and furthermore to aid in the preservation of others (provided that assistance does not come into competition with one's own preservation). This proposition of an inherent morality is supported by research in the psychology of altruism. For example, Warneken and Tomasello (455-471) found that human infants will aid others in reaching their goals by, for instance, handing them out-of-reach objects, or opening cabinet doors for them without concern for reciprocation or reputation. The researchers found similar behaviour in primates (chimpanzees). Their research, they concluded, demonstrated a natural altruistic tendency to help others in their goals present in infants as young as 14-18 months.

Given both the apparent absence of inherent morality (as would be suggested by Hobbes) and its apparent presence (as would be suggested by Locke), both views are demonstrably manifested in the present day, and can therefore be said to be plausible.

Necessity of Civil Society

The views of Hobbes and Locke each have specific implications for the necessity of their corresponding civil society. Because the state of nature proposed by Hobbes is a state of war where life is short and brutal, his position implies that the maintenance of a civil society is very important. The sovereign is required to use whatever measures necessary (aside from harming the members of the civil society) to prevent the state of nature (and its consequent brutality) from resuming. The need for the influence of a civil society can be seen in the cases of riots/lawlessness that follow natural disasters, when existing law-enforcement agencies are incapacitated. For example, following Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, looting and violence became serious problems for an overwhelmed police force ("Fox News").

Contrary to Hobbes, Locke's view of human nature does not imply to a great need for people to be organized into civil societies. In his view, the civil society simply removes the 'inconveniencies' present in the state of nature (mostly concerning the administration of punishment for transgressions against the law of nature), however is seemingly unnecessary for the flourishing of humans that do not have such administrative difficulties. This view is manifested in the present day by those who choose to live in isolated communities outside of the influence of a formal governing body. For example, in Venezuela, there are socialist communes that exist autonomously and independently from the government, where "ways of relating to each other and of producing as brothers, without exploiting each other, are unlocked" (Pearson).

Similar to the implications for inherent morality, the implications for the necessity of the civil society derived from the views of both Hobbes and Locke are demonstrably manifested in the present day, and can therefore both be said to be plausible.

Political Atmosphere

The political atmospheres of the civil societies proposed by Hobbes and Locke are similarly contrasted according to their views of human nature. In the civil society proposed by Hobbes, the sovereign has an unlimited power to control the lives of its citizens (provided it does them no harm) in order to maintain peace and avoid re-entering the war of all against all as in the state of nature. This view is exemplified presently in dictatorial governments that have very close control over the lives of their citizens. For example, although the government of China does officially recognize free speech, free press, free religion, etc. in practice these protections do not significantly limit the state's power during criminal prosecutions ("Human Rights Watch").

In the civil society proposed by Locke, the commonwealth seems bound to interfere with the state of natural freedom of its citizens only as much as is required to pre-empt the

‘inconveniencies’ of the state of nature. This view is manifested in present day liberal societies, where (except for taxation) one’s involvement with the state is generally limited to punishment for transgressions of the law of nature (i.e. for hindering/harming others). For example, the present Canadian government values the freedom of its citizens very highly (i.a. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms), and unless necessitated by the criminal activities of its citizens, largely avoids interference that might impinge on said freedom.

Again, the implications for the political atmosphere of the civil society derived from the views of Hobbes and Locke are demonstrably manifested in the present day, and can therefore both be said to be plausible.

Equal Plausibility

The views of human nature of both Hobbes and Locke, and the several of the implications thereof, have all been shown to be manifested in reality and therefore are (based on the definition of plausibility provided above) equally plausible. This conclusion, however, is unsatisfying. As defined previously, human nature is understood to be the inherent psychological attributes shared by *all* human beings; for two conflicting views of human nature to be shown to be equally plausible and equally manifested in reality seems to be a contradiction – and as such intimates that the views of Hobbes and Locke do not actually address human nature at its most basic level.

The Instinctual View of Human Nature

My critic might argue that the definitions of human nature and of plausibility I have provided are invalid. To justify her or his position, my critic might argue that based on my definitions there can never be a view that will address human nature at its most basic level (because of the seemingly endless and varied manifestations of different forms of human behaviour and social practice). In essence, my critic might argue that if I require a view of human

nature to be generalizable to all normal humans, then I thereby pre-empt any view of human nature from ever being accepted as valid because there will always be a subset of individuals that does not manifest the characteristics of human nature in that view.

In response to this criticism, I propose a view of human nature that (unlike those of Hobbes and Locke) does not address the behavioural tendencies or presumed interactions of humans in the state of nature, but is instead founded solely on the characteristics of a single human. Namely, I propose the *instinctual view of human nature*, which takes human instincts (e.g. pain/death aversion, reproduction, food consumption) as the sole constituents of human nature. These characteristics, which are the most fundamental and pervasive predictors of human behaviour, are manifested in all humans with normal brain function and bodily capacity. This universal manifestation is evidenced by the regard of an absence of these basic instincts as pathological (that is, a neurochemical explanation such as drug addiction or mental illness is sought, and treatment is administered in response to their absence).

Conclusion

Following an exposition of the logical extensions of their views of human nature, I have argued that the views of Hobbes and Locke are equally plausible, based on the physical manifestation of several of their implications. Addressing the criticism that my definitions of plausibility and human nature are overly prohibitive (in that they require a view of human nature to be generalizable to all human beings), I have proffered a view of human nature based on human instinct that is both generalizable and has intuitive validity.

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