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GOVT-405-001, Modern Political Thought

Professor Merrill

The purpose of this paper was to make an argument regarding an issue in political thought by bringing in multiple texts from the course and putting them into conversation with each other. Secondary sources were not allowed, but texts that were not covered in class by the authors, who were read, were allowed.

Self-interest and Body Politic

Thomas Hobbes in the political treatise *Leviathan* views humans as inherently, primarily, and unalterably self-interested, and consequentially, considers absolute authority the lynchpin of contractual agreements. Hobbes argues without authority mankind descends into a state of de facto war with itself. Hobbes also introduces the concept of natural freedom, which is in turn freely given away to an authority in exchange for safety from a powerful sovereign, the covenant. This safety is upheld by a central authority in exchange for absolute power over the submitting parties involved. I want to challenge this idea that association and contractual agreement necessitate absolute authority. That is, are humans so divisive and individualistic that we require authority to avoid anarchy? Does political association need to be constructed under the notion that people will only work towards their individual selfinterest? I argue that, in addition to critiquing using absolute authority to keep private interest in check, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in *On the Social Contract* gives, at least conceptually, an alternative in which private interest plays no role in governance, and while problematic in some respects, allows for collective interest to be the driving force of political association. To answer my question, I will look at Hobbes' state of nature and Rousseau's criticisms of it, as determining if humans are inherently self-interest is necessary to answer my question. Then, I will give my concerns as well as Rousseau's regarding Hobbes' commonwealth. Finally, I will consider if Rousseau's arguments in *On the Social Contract* are a viable alternative to

Hobbes' commonwealth.

Hobbes' belief that man is inherently self-interested makes his claim that the state of nature was a state of war problematic. The whole idea of unanimously associating to form a commonwealth is impossible under the premise that interaction beforehand was solely conflict-ridden. Hobbes even notes that this state of nature was may not have even happened in some cases.

It may peradventure be thought there was never such a time nor condition of war as this: I believe it was never generally so, over all the world.... Howsoever, it may be perceived what manner of life there would be where there no common power to fear, by the manner of life which men have formerly lived under a peaceful government use to degenerate into civil war. (77)

If Hobbes' state of nature was never universal it can not be the state of nature. The justification of existent states losing their respective central authorities is simply describing the functioning of a societal construct. After the establishment of the commonwealth of course no central authority leads to anarchy, but what does that tell us about before the commonwealth? Instead of using his beliefs about the actual state of nature, Hobbes uses examples of societies that lose their central authority going into the state of war as well as current examples of human behavior:

Let him therefore consider himself – when taking a journey he arms himself, and seeks to go well accompanied; when going to sleep, he locks his doors; when even in house he locks his chests; and this when he knows there be laws, and public officers, armed, to revenge all injuries shall be done to him - what option does he have of his fellow citizens, when he locks his doors; and of his children and servants, when he lock his

chests. Does he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions, as I do by my words?

(77)

Again, Hobbes makes a very accurate observation to argue that mankind is so self-interested that we have a fear of others in a stable and orderly situation as if we were still in the original state of war. However, as before, it is an observation of the present, rather than the origin of humanity. This is an important distinction that supports Rousseau's claim in *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality* that previous philosophers had not gone back far enough to ascertain the state of nature. However, that does not mean Hobbes is wrong about the state of humanity, he is just wrong in claiming that the state of war was the original state of humanity. I feel Hobbes' claim that without central authority society collapses into conflict and chaos describes the present, for example what has happened in Somalia. Therefore, we can assume, as Rousseau claims, that something happened between the true state of nature and Hobbes' observations. Rousseau believes that as humans began to associate, the development of amour propre and eventually private property made humanity self-interested and mutually antagonistic, necessitating the social contract. Ultimately, I do not think the anthropological question of when and how did humans originally associate is that relevant to the argument. Neither of these writers had enough knowledge to accurately answer their question regarding the state of nature, and to an extent they both recognize this. However, Rousseau's critique and the irrational aspects of Hobbes' argument give doubt to concept of humans being inherently self-interested. This is why the state of nature is so key to my question. I believe Hobbes is currently right about human behavior in the absence of central authority, as most people I know do lock their doors when they go out and are often critical of strangers that they meet on the street. But it begs the question can this development be reversed or undone? Both Hobbes and Rousseau claim that knowing the original state of

nature, not necessarily exactly, but close to it, is imperative to the construction of society.

Despite the issues with

Hobbes' claims about the stage of nature, I believe mankind has generally constructed society under the premise that one's fellow man can not be trusted. Therefore, there must be laws that are not solely obeyed because they are just or good, rather because there is a force to uphold them.

The covenant necessitates very questionable behavior on the side of the subjects that does not seem rational given the state of nature argued by Rousseau or Hobbes. I believe the covenant as Hobbes describes it would have never happened. First let me introduce the Hobbes argument for the sovereign.

Which is the natural consequence to the natural passions of men, when there is no visible power to keep them in awe, and tie them by fear of punishment to the performance of their covenant of their covenants and observation of those laws of nature... (106)

The sovereign is the authority that allows contractual agreements to have weight behind them, and if humans, as Hobbes claims are solely driven by private interest, a powerful sovereign is necessary for a state. Hobbes commonwealth depends on the premise that we value safety over freedom, to the extent that one would willingly give complete power over themselves for guaranteed safety. This is problematic for several reasons as Rousseau notes in *On the Social Contract*:

Renouncing one's liberty is renouncing one's dignity as a man, the rights of humanity and even its duties. There is no possible compensation for anyone who renounces everything. Such a renunciation is incompatible with the nature of man... Finally, it is a

vain and contradictory agreement that stipulates absolute authority on one side and a limitless obedience on another. (160)

The covenant requires complete submission and would go against any instinct to preserve natural liberty. If one wholeheartedly believes in the state of war this might seem to be a rational albeit steep price to pay, but when one considers previous arguments against Hobbes' state of nature the covenant falls apart. As Rousseau argues, it is an incredibly one-sided and in a sense dehumanizing act to completely submit oneself to another. It is effectively selling oneself into slavery, as the sovereign has all the power in the covenant.

And even if the state of war was entirely true, I think the covenant would be problematic.

Hobbes observes that humans often lack the ability to make long-term, rational decisions that are contrary to their short-term private interest. Hobbes views the covenant as the original political association, yet his depiction, which I feel is in many ways accurate, does not support it.

Additionally, when one considers Hobbes' commonwealth, especially in his preferred form of an absolute monarchy, the office of sovereign can easily and, more importantly, without checks by the body politic – the subjects – degenerate into tyranny. Hobbes in listing the powers and rights of the sovereign creates an absolute entity, unaccountable to his subjects or the laws he created. Hobbes argues that this gives the sovereign the most flexibility and agency to perform their primary purpose: to protect their subjects and maintain order. Rousseau offers a strong criticism of this:

It will be said that the despot assures his subjects of civil tranquility. Very well. But what do they gain if the wars his ambition drags them into, if his insatiable greed, if the oppressive demands caused by his ministers occasions more grief for his subjects than their own dissensions would have done? What do they gain, if this very tranquility is

one of their miseries? A tranquil life is also had in dungeons; is that enough to make them desirable. (160)

And that is where I also take issue, if safety and order justify all actions of the sovereign, shouldn't police states be ideal? They keep order, are highly militarized, etc. The covenant gives the sovereign a carte blanche to do anything he wishes. That is a sovereign would never have to justify their actions as necessary to achieve safety and order. Hobbes counters with tyranny is always preferred over civil war, but I do not think the argument can be left solely in the terms of either effectively bondage or anarchy. The sovereign should be accountable, under the same premise that they rule: private interest cannot be trusted. Hobbes' explanation of how the sovereign is a physical, singular manifestation of the commonwealth, and that, therefore, his individualistic wants coincide with the utility and needs of the commonwealth does not support this argument. The sovereign is a private individual with power, how is he actually a manifestation of his subjects? Hobbes defends this by arguing that the private interest of the sovereign, while sometimes against the interest of certain individuals, is the generally in the interest of their subjects in his argument for monarchy:

From whence it follows that where the public and private interests are most closely united there is the public more advanced. Now in the monarchy the private interest is the same with the public. The riches, power, and honor of a monarch arise only from the riches, strength, and reputation of his subjects. For no king can be rich nor glorious nor secure, whose subjects are either poor, or completable, or too weak... (120) Whereas Rousseau directly responds to this in *On the Social Contract*:

A political sermonizer might well say to them that since the people's force is their force, their greatest interest is that the people should be flourishing, numerous and

formidable. They know perfectly well that this is not true. Their personal interest is first of all that people should be weak and miserable and incapable of resisting them (202)

This is in one respect a very difficult question to answer, if power acquisition is the genuine interest of the sovereign do they not have an interest in building the most prosperous commonwealth to further their interests? When does the increasing utility of the commonwealth to the sovereign, which is already a problematic concept, ultimately threaten their ability to dominate and enforce their will? But I do not think that is very important in understanding the inherent contradiction of using authority to keep self-interest in check by creating an entity only subject to its own private interest. A cruel Machiavellian ruler can dramatically increase his power and state while still being cruel and impoverishing his or her subjects. Hobbes and Rousseau are both critical of direct democracy, but in the end, Hobbes feels a monarchy, the most individualistic form of governance, and therefore most selfinterested is ideal for a commonwealth. Where is the authority to hold the sovereign from acting in its own self-interest? Rousseau notes that to maintain power through keeping a power discrepancy between the sovereign in subjects is also in the interest of the sovereign, contrary to Hobbes. And I feel this is a good point, I do not associate absolute power with prosperity, and while the two are not mutually exclusive, keeping the subjects weak and poor is not necessarily against the interest of the sovereign.

Fundamentally Rousseau's argument is when the sovereign is the people, the government is made subject to the people and therefore no entity can act in private interest, because the body politic is a collective association that can only operate in the collective interest, as no specific entity(ies) would have the power or number to make their private interest the general will. From that, the government is held always accountable to people, through public assembly, and therefore members of the government cannot act in their selfinterest. The body politic is the sovereign and the government is in a way the subject. In

my opinion this is objectively better for the citizens of a political association than in Hobbes' commonwealth because private interest is subdued, but not at the price of liberty. While I feel Rousseau gives a poor defense of tyranny of the majority, it nearly goes without saying, that any civil liberty supersedes none. Additionally, the threat of tyranny is less eminent than in Hobbes' commonwealth, because the government serves the sovereign. There is no possibility for the illegitimate and or self-interested exercise of power if the citizenry are upholding their duties as an executive. And I think that is where Rousseau's social compact really shows itself as superior to the commonwealth. Liberty is not totally sacrificed for the benefits of association because the state is controlled by the people, as opposed to the people consenting to be ruled. Therefore, the citizenry, at least theoretically, are always and only subject to their own interest, which is liberty in a sense. For example, when we consider both writers justification for laws Hobbes claims:

And law was brought into the world for nothing else but to limit the natural liberty of particular men, in such a manner that they might not hurt, but assist one another, and join together against a common enemy (175) Whereas Rousseau argues:

In a perfect act of legislation, the private or individual will should be nonexistent; the corporate will proper to the government should be very subordinate; and consequently, the general will should always be dominant and the unique rule of all the others. (196)

To Hobbes laws are the rules of the covenant, made and upheld by the sovereign in order to hold private interest contrary to the commonwealth in check. Laws are chains and restrictions, albeit necessary, upon the body politic. This is extremely pessimistic. It is like we are all children and cannot be trusted to do what is right. Laws in Rousseau's social compact are a means to an end, a manifestation of the common will. The ratification of such

laws is an act of civil liberty. That is the ratification of law is a positive, and free act. And since legislation is effectively the main purpose of government, Rousseau's social contract is so much better constructed to deal with the dilemma of regulating society.

What makes Hobbes' argument for the commonwealth so compelling even after reading *On the Social Contract* is that he challenges the notion of collective/public interest being capable of overcoming private interest. To Hobbes even when there is a public interest readily available to work towards, conflicting private interest will always sway men away from it.

First that men are continually in competition for honor and dignity, which the creatures are not; and consequentially among men there arises on that ground, envy and hatred, and finally war, but amongst these not so. Secondly, that amongst these creatures the common good differs not from the private; and being by nature inclined to their private, they procure thereby the common benefit, but man, whose joy consisteth in comparing himself with other men, can relish in nothing but what is eminent. (108)

Rousseau somewhat responds to this by giving specific criterion in which his social compact can function, but I think that gives Hobbes' argument more support for applied to today. We aren't in ancient Greece, living in temperate*¹ small, somewhat egalitarian, austere, homogenous societies. To clarify, when there is a very mild inequality between people, the comparison, amour propre that comes with association will not be strong enough to foster the destructive private interests that occur in other political associations. Hobbes' commonwealth doesn't have any specificities, because the awe and fear felt towards great authority is universal. Can Rousseau really say that private interest will not worm its way into the public.

¹ Temperate climates make public association easier in winter months according to Rousseau

I do not believe so, as this is the often the cause of the degeneration of his social compact.

Rousseau views this as normal that states are temporary, but Hobbes gives a much more stabile alternative in terms of longevity of the state.

The second issue is what exactly does Rousseau mean by the common good?

Rousseau feels that the collective interest works towards the common good, although notes that people will often not know what it is or how to work towards it. And to me this is the lofty, vague concept that Rousseau's argument hinges on: why associating through common

interest is good. I think Hobbes would argue that the only achievable common good is the peace, stability, and order that the covenant provides. Hobbes challenges the notion that there is anything more than that. “For there is no such *finis ultimus* (upmost aim) nor *Summum Bonum* (greatest good) as is spoken by the books of the old moral philosophers.” (57) The conditions available to pursue one’s private interests, essentially freedom of opportunity, is the end of public utility. How do we know if there is common good? That is a huge philosophical question that is inherently difficult to answer in itself, and I do not think Rousseau gets any closer to answering it. What if Hobbes is right and there is no common good? I think the criticisms of Hobbes covenant and commonwealth still stand, but the whole purpose of Rousseau’s social compact is made a lot less utopian, reduced to the point where the subjects are the sovereign, that is civil liberty is preserved, but that’s it. However, as argued before a system that preserves civil liberty in my opinion is better than one that doesn’t, which is why I feel Rousseau’s social compact is a preferred alternative to the commonwealth.

I think many people feel we as Americans are closer to Rousseau’s social compact than to Hobbes’ commonwealth. But Hobbes, despite being somewhat apathetic to them, feels that republics can be commonwealths and Rousseau is very critical of representative democracy as well. I think when one looks at how much authority we give the executive, and how far the peoples interests are from the actual process of governance and legislation which are in turn dominated by divisive, private interests, one can see how far we are from the Rousseau’s social compact. It is not that I think local democracy and citizens’ agency do not play a role in American politics, just a lot less than one would think. Regardless of the checks and balances and the rhetoric of freedom and liberty that have become synonymous with the term “American”, we are in my opinion much closer to Hobbes’ commonwealth. I feel we

reject the idea of a lofty common good, praise private interest and the ability to pursue it as falsely as liberty. We willingly let the state continually encroach upon our lives and, in some respect, our liberty. We then justify this by claiming that without state influence the destructive private interests of society would make us worse off. *Leviathan* is essentially a justification for authority; that political association must be constructed with force to back it. I have just argued how socially destructive self-interest is likely unoriginal to humanity, and, from this, the massive price one has to give up and endure for peace and stability – one's liberty –; is unjustified. I believe self-interest does not have to be accepted as the foundation of political association, and therefore political association does not necessitate absolute authority and the problems associated with it. Additionally, to address the concern that I am simply rehashing Rousseau's argument I feel that while Rousseau gives an alternative to Hobbes' commonwealth, it is problematic in certain aspects. Specifically, I do not think in most cases Rousseau's ideal social compact can be constructed. However, what I think one can take from Rousseau's alternative is that the body politic can act as the sovereign, and act in its own collective interest. Ultimately, that is what I find so frustrating: despite Rousseau's alternative to Hobbes' commonwealth, we don't trust ourselves enough to construct a state in which collective-interest is the driving force of society. And instead we put ourselves into bondage below a central authority under the misconception that everyone but ourselves are in a way our own enemy.

Sources

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