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Kant and Hobbes on Internal and International Affairs

One of the key premises behind Kant's and Hobbes' different ideas about political affairs is the role of reason. For Kant, reason is much more powerful. It differentiates humanity from the animals and causes it to fall from peaceful coexistence with nature into conflict. By giving people the capacity for evil, nature outlined two paths toward peace – one of cultural and scientific progress toward a desirable world, and one of warfare leading to the graveyard. To follow the better path individuals must think for themselves, curb their passions, and escape their egoism via reason. On the other hand, Hobbes follows the Cartesian scientific method in saying that we interact with the world chiefly by sensations. This method renders reason subordinate to desire. Our passions and fears of one another are the roots of Hobbes' Leviathan.

The difference lies in the question of whether people can or cannot think for themselves. For Hobbes, passion instead of reason defines what is right or wrong. Our desires and vanity cause us to seek unjustifiable power over others. People can and will take advantage of one another if given the chance, so they need a covenant. Kant disregards this notion, saying that the individual is not an irreconcilable wretch but a creature with the capacity for moral maturity.

Kant says that unsociable sociability can be productive when freedom under external laws is guaranteed by irresistible force. Hobbes says that it must be completely suppressed by an absolute sovereign who rules by fear. These different conclusions – the need for a constitutional republic versus an absolute monarchy – stem from different evaluations of the power of reason. By principle, Kant advocates for the separation of legislative and executive powers. Hobbes

advocates for the unity of all powers in an indivisible sovereign. Where Kant supports freedom of the pen, Hobbes dismisses the lawful use of reason as troublesome.

Kant and Hobbes certainly share some ideas. Pure egoism is an evil which warps mankind and makes coercion needed to secure private rights. Citizens need a master because they abuse their natural freedom. The will of the people must decide universal law, justice, and speech. However, Kant draws different conclusions on the right to rebel due to the individual's egoism and the fact that there is no outside knowledge of moral righteousness. Like Icarus, we cannot successfully see through the eyes of Providence. Our conclusions are but speculation, as human ability to deduce reality is limited.

I agree with Kant's argument for reason over passion in the human soul because passion originates in the individual's premises about reality that are gained through reason. I like the notion that citizens can think for themselves and engage in public criticism for the sake of improvement. While I disagree that there is no way of knowing who is justified in a moral dispute between the ruler and the citizens, any conclusions that can be deduced are irrelevant since society dissolves into savagery without obedience. The ruler may not be correct, but peaceful society is paramount. I take Kant's position that humankind, realizing that long-term peace is needed to cultivate the mind and enlighten the species, can create freedom among commonwealths, justice, and perpetual peace between states with international cosmopolitan law. However, Kant's theology might not be effective in philosophy because God is not agreed upon. I agree that the individual's happiness is not the end goal of politics due to the individual's ephemeral nature, but I say that the individual has the right to pursuit of happiness and self-preservation based on the Kantian idea that human nature is compatible with a free society.

Generally, I disagree with Hobbes that the international relations between states must reflect a state of nature. Based on the social contract theory, a cosmopolitan state of international relations in which power is granted to an arbitrator based on the will of the states is possible.