

Essay 1

Hobbes and Malthus are both extraordinary utilitarian thinkers who started their exploration into political philosophy from the same micro-ontological assumptions, that is, people are self-interested and self-centered. In their eyes, people are born and living with a bad or even evil human nature. If Hobbes referred to human beings as “like beasts”, Malthus admitted directly that human beings “are beasts”. They are driven by the intentionality of survival to compete with each other for the limited resources- no matter for the limited resources or the basic right to be alive - people are “in war”, some natural conflicts between the interests of men and the scarcity of things in the world.

However, these shared assumptions turned out to lead those two great thinkers into radically opposing views of how societies should best be organized. If we say Hobbes is a zealous proponent of an artificial super government which is absolutely authoritative, Malthus is entirely supportive of a “natural law” to play the key role in the organization of the society.

Just as Hobbes has said, “our sociability is through an artificial covenant, not natural agreement...This covenant is that we submit to a “common-wealth” or “Leviathan” – a “Mortall God””. For Hobbes, this “Leviathan” is an absolute authority, an undivided and unlimited sovereign power, and society should exactly be beneath which through entering into the social contract; law, in this sense, should be the enforcement of

contracts. According to Hobbes, people are truly trying to pursue their self-interests all the time; they were even in “a state of nature”. It is not only notes the “the right of nature” here for everyone “to all things”, it is also a condition with no government or any other recognized authority to interfere with private judgments, at the same time without a transcending power to arbitrate conflicts and to enforce public decisions. People seemed to be in a perfectly free world in the common sense, however, from Hobbes perspective, in this “state of nature”, even the strongest and the most intelligent men are being manipulated beyond a “fear” of violent death; in the face of this threat against survival, self-defenses become the most urgent human necessity; with this “right of nature”, people are endowed with the rights to everything, thus unavoidably along with which are the serious struggles for resources and scarce goods. As a result, “the state of nature” would become a “state of war”, or even “war of all against all”. This is a desperate situation for Hobbes, where he could only see fear, threat and uncertainty, which was totally against people’s interests. There would be “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; and which is worst of all, continual feare, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.” Driven by the self-interests pursuit, man desire to end the existing and avoid the future war, and they saw hope in the government, since reality has already been clear enough that

“dissolute condition of masterless men, without subjection to Lawes, and a coercive Power to tye their hands from rapine, and revenge” would not secure anything. Man should hand over rights to government and enter into a social contract to ensure internal peace and a common defense.

However, for Malthus, he could see if human beings were left alone, they would fall into starvation and war, still, it is the most important thing for him to follow the natural law since the survival competition, natural and social checks would lead the society to some equilibrium eventually. For Malthus, it should be the law of nature to govern the human society, instead of some artificial “social contract” or supreme sovereignty – we should just follow the automatically self-regulating social nature and let it be. In this sense, Malthus is a social naturalist, since he believed that “...society, like nature, is fundamentally constrained by the scarcity postulate...Society is not like, but is a biological entity, and it is thus subject to biological laws of nature rather than to institutional rules and social rationality...” (Somers&Block, 2005) As far as Malthus concerned, exactly like animal, “food” and “sex” are “fixed laws of our nature, and ...they will ever cease to be what they now are, without an immediate act of power in that Being who first arranged the system of the universe, and for the advantage of his creatures, still executes, according to fixed laws, all its various operations.” So, even though in this “natural” society would also exist relentless struggle for survival exactly like what Hobbes considered, Malthus, though pessimistic with the human nature – again the same with Hobbes, was quite optimistic

of the “nature’s fierce wisdom” (Somers&Block, 2005) which would bring about a harmonious equilibrium in the end. “The weakest of both species were among the first to pay the debt of nature; the most active and vigorous preserved their lives.” (Townsen[1786], 1971) Due to Malthus’s firm belief and confidence in the social naturalism, to obey to nature was the mightiest security for stability and order, especially, in Malthus’s eyes, compared to the “failures of human artifice, political will, social institutions, and positive law”, (Somers&Block, 2005) not to mention Hobbes’s absolutely authoritative sovereignty. This confidence even bought Malthus to the direct hostility to politics and government, “...of all sciences, there is none where first appearance are more deceitful than in politics.”

From the above understanding, it is now not that difficult for us to figure out why the paradoxical situation of a common point of origin leading to divergent conclusions in the work of Hobbes and Malthus occurred, that is, though they assumed the same kind of human nature, their perspectives upon the law of nature are already departing from each other, or, to be more precise, the parts of their interpretation relating to the intersection of human nature and law of nature are different.

As aforementioned, if Hobbes thought the human beings are like beasts, Malthus considered human beings to be beasts straightforwardly, “the line between humans and animals is blurred since people are conceived as biologically driven by the self-interested need for food and reproduction.” Thus, with the beliefs of the

remaining distinction between man and animal, Hobbes, in the face of the threat of violent death and severe competition for survival, still pinned his hope on some “non-animal” but social solutions as “social contract”, instead of following the animals’ law of nature. “Bees and ants are social, but we are different because we are motivated by honor & dignity; we distinguish between common good and private good; we exercise reason; we use words and other symbolic representations; we distinguish between injury & damage; and our sociability is through an artificial covenant, not natural agreement.” As can be seen, Hobbes and Malthus’s definitions of law of nature are not in the same level: Hobbes’s law of nature is a rational human nature which provides resources to “shun death”, and human just recognize the pursuit for peace as “imperatives” which Hobbes calls “Lawes of Nature”; while Malthus’s law of nature is the biological law without human interference, driven by the two immutable instincts for food and sex against the scarce resources.

Their divergent conclusions rooted more deeply in the historical circumstances they were situated in. *Leviathan* was written during the English Revolution, which was a live show of the “war of all against all”; what Hobbes experienced at the time made him feel that even an absolute authority would even be better than any civil war, which may bring people back into “brutishness and misery”. For Malthus, the poverty and social vices after the enforcement of poor laws made him to believe that “the real causal mechanisms behind poverty were the perverse incentives set up by the poor law’s violation of nature’s law of permanent scarcity. This is the perversity thesis at its

best: instead of ending poverty, child allowance perversely exacerbated it by encouraging childbirth among the poor and thus inducing overpopulation.”

To seek foundation and source for our thinking from the social and historical background is one of the best things we are endowed as a learner of social science and social philosophy.