Emergence of the Supra-Individual Realm in Hobbes, Rousseau and Spencer

Early social thinkers like Hobbes, Rousseau, and Spencer addressed social issues of concern to them by exploring the concept of the supra-individual realm. Whether they called it Commonwealth (Hobbes) or society (Rousseau and Spencer), they were concerned with the relationship between the individual and the supra-individual. In the examination of this relationship each author proposed an ontological model within which they defined the notions of individual and supra-individual as they conceived of them. We can query these models for answers to particular questions such as: how did each of these authors conceive of the emergence of the supra-individual realm? Having engaged thus with the models, we can also ask: are these explanations sound

In the following essay I will use excerpts from Hobbes's Leviathan, Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality, and Spencer's On Social Evolution to examine the ontological models that they propose. For each model I will identify the underlying assumptions; the definitions of individual and supra-individual; as well as, the interactions between the two realms. Having established this basis, I will utilize each model to answer the question: what is the process by which the supra-individual realm emerges? Finally, I will critically appraise the validity of the model and the explanations it provides.

Hobbes

Hobbes's model of the supra-individual, what he calls the Common-Wealth, is based on his conception of natural man, or the individual. In a two-part argument, Hobbes first elaborates on the condition of natural man, using his assumptions about the character of natural man as the starting point. In the second part of his argument, Hobbes contends that the Common-Wealth is the solution for the natural state of man derived in part one.

Hobbes begins Chapter XIII of Leviathan, titled "Of the NATURALL CONDITION of Mankind, as concerning their Felicity, and Misery" with the expansive statement: "Nature hath made men so equall, in the faculties of body, and mind…" (63). He continues to postulate that because men have equal abilities, they have equal desires for attaining things. And it is exactly this desire that leads men into a constant state of war. Hobbes describes this progression thus:

> IF ANY TWO MEN DESIRE THE SAME THING, WHICH NEVERTHELESS THEY CANNOT BOTH ENJOY, THEY BECOME ENEMIES; AND IN THE WAY TO THEIR END, (WHICH IS PRINCIPALLY THEIR OWNE CONSERVATION, AND SOMETIMES THEIR DELECTATION ONLY,) ENDEAVOUR TO DESTROY, OR SUBDUE ONE AN OTHER." (63)

In this statement there is the additional implication that one of the things men may be fighting for is their own preservation and security. Hobbes contests that "there is no way for any man to secure himself" (64) for in the constant state of war among equals he may find himself under attack by another at any time. In fact, Hobbes defines the "three principall causes of quarell" as competition (for resources), diffidence (or preemptive attack for own security), and glory (or pride) (64). There is a progression here. Initially man goes to war for material needs. Once a state of war is established, he goes to war to secure his position. And when war reigns unchecked he may go to war "for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion" (64). Hobbes concludes that in this constant state of war "the life of man [is] solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short." (65)

The natural condition of man is the social problem Hobbes is addressing when he develops his concept of the Common-Wealth. In Chapter XVII of Leviathan, titled "Of the Causes, Generation, and Definition of a COMMON-WEALTH", Hobbes proceeds from the premise that without an intervening power man would live in a constant state of war (87). The question is how does that power, or supra-individual, come into being? Hobbes offers the following mechanism. Given that the natural condition of man is violence and war, and that man is largely ruled by his passions, one of which is fear, Hobbes

contends that fear will ultimately convince man to submit to a restraining power, or a supra-individual, in the interest of safety.

> The finall Cause, End, or designe of men, (who naturally love Liberty, and Dominion over others,) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, (in which wee see them live in Commonwealths,) is the foresight of their own preservation (87)

Having established the need for a restraining power, Hobbes goes on to develop his particular conception of the supra-individual realm, the Common-Wealth. He argues that to be effective at preventing war, the supra-individual realm must be permanent and have absolute power. Moreover, this power must be granted to the supra-individual by agreement of each man with all other men. By this act the Multitude is made the Author of the acts of the Common-Wealth, suggesting that through the action of the ruler all are empowered, and are consequently less likely to challenge his authority.

> And in him consisteth the Essence of the Common-Wealth; which (to define it,) is One Person, of whose Acts a great Multitude, by mutuall Covenants one with another, have made themselves every one the Author, to the end he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their Peace and Common Defence. (90)

Thus we have arrived at a definition of the supra-individual realm as Hobbes conceived of it.

A model of Hobbes's natural man emerges from the depiction of the natural condition of man. Hobbes's natural man is above all self-serving; he acts only with regard for the betterment of his lot. He goes to war out of greed, fear and pride. It is arguable that going to war over a trivial matter such as someone's opinion is not reasonably in ones better interest. But, Hobbes's natural man is not ruled by reason; he is swayed primarily by his "naturall Passions, that carry [him] to Partiality, Pride, Revenge, and the like." (87) The dominant passion is fear, since this one passion overrides all others in convincing man to accept restraint on his freedom for the promise of security. Perhaps Hobbes would argue that it is in fact man's use of reason that results in his participation in a Common-Wealth, for he writes that it "is the foresight of their own preservation" (87) that causes men to accept restraints upon themselves. But, if that were the case, why wouldn't men use reason to better their situation at other times, such as making the decision not to go to war?

Having summarized Hobbes's arguments about the nature of man and the necessity for a Common-Wealth, and having derived his models of the individual and supra-individual realms, it is possible to assess the validity of his models in general and the validity of his explanation of the process by which the supra-individual realm emerges in particular. I will begin with a consideration of the process by which the supra-individual realm emerges.

Despite titling Chapter XVII "Of the Causes, Generation, and Definition of a Common-Wealth", Hobbes does not provide us with many causes of a Common-Wealth, nor does he address how it might come into being. The one cause that Hobbes does provide is men's fear of death, as a result of which men turn to the Common-Wealth for protection from war. This cause certainly seems plausible given Hobbes's portrayal of a miserable, war-ridden world. However, it is logically problematic. Hobbes first argues that natural man's fear and desire for security would drive him to war. Then, he argues that the same fear and desire for security will drive man to relinquish his power to the Common-Wealth. Clearly in this model there are opposing effects being attributed to the same factor.

Perhaps Hobbes could have worked around this logical problem if he had developed a process for the emergence of the Common-Wealth. He could have argued that as man first engaged in covenants among a small number of men he enjoyed temporary peace, and thus learned that there was a beneficial trade off between liberty and security. This knowledge could have eventually led to his willingness to surrender all power to the Common-Wealth. However, as is, this model does not provide a satisfactory explanation of the transition from the state of nature to the Common-Wealth. Without this crucial transition the model presents a system in which violence progressively increases as men's passions rage,

and the only plausible mechanism for the establishment of a Common Power is brute force. Thus, while Hobbes provides us with a well laid out, impassioned, and even poetic argument in favor of the Common-Wealth, the model that he provides to back up this argument is not logically sound.

Rousseau

In his Discourse on Inequality Rousseau concerns himself with the question of the origin of the inequality among men, specifically he wants to establish if inequality is "authorized by natural law" (8) or a product of society. In order to answer this question, Rousseau embarks upon a lengthy deliberation of what natural man must have been like. Rousseau does not directly describe the supra-individual realm, which he calls society; he merely alludes to it as the force acting upon civil man, and that which is not present in natural man. Rousseau does set out "to indicate in the progression of events the moment at which right replaced violence and nature was subject to law" (9), that is the moment at which the supra-individual realm emerged.

Rousseau begins his deliberation of natural man with the assumption that characteristics such as need, greed, etc. are socially constructed. "All of them, in short, constantly speaking of need, greed, oppression, desires, and pride, have transferred to the state of nature ideas they have acquired in society; they speak of savage man and they depict civil man." (9) In this statement he is engaging in a direct debate with other social thinkers, particularly Hobbes, to whom he refers by name elsewhere.

A significant portion of Rousseau's argument is dedicated to refuting Hobbes's model of natural man. He disputes "Hobbes' claim that man is naturally intrepid and only interested in attacking and fighting" (12). Instead he asserts that "nothing is as timid as man in the state of nature" (12) for like an animal he is frightened of those he does not know; "no animal naturally makes war upon man except in the case of its own self-defense or extreme hunger" (12). Rousseau argues that passions are "the handiwork of society" (27), and not a constitutive part of natural man, as Hobbes contended. In addition, Rousseau grants natural man the quality of compassion "which, by moderating the activity of self-esteem in each individual, contributes to the mutual preservation of the whole species." (29) Thus, Rousseau is rejecting Hobbes's premise that because of man's contentious nature, the natural condition of man is war.

Rousseau further characterizes natural man as being physically robust, generally free of illness, and largely satisfied by his natural environment. In the realm of the physical, Rousseau considers natural man to be a perfectly designed animal. However, in the realm of the meta-physical he attributes to man characteristics that differentiate him from animals and have the potential to lead to his downfall. One of these characteristics is free agency, as a result of which man "often deviates from his own rule to his detriment." (15) Another characteristic of man is "the faculty of self-improvement", which Rousseau asserts "is the source of all the misfortunes of man". (16)

In man's desire for self-improvement, Rousseau hints at a mechanism by which the supra-individual realm may have emerged. He considers how man may have in practice bridged the gap from the natural state to one including cultivation of land and language. Rousseau declares "it is impossible to conceive how a man, through his own strength alone, without the help of communication, and without the goad of necessity, could have bridged so great a gap." (20-21) He goes on to consider the possible ways in which man may have come to learn how to cultivate the land. But, he concludes "these are all the things that they must have been taught by the gods, since it is impossible to conceive how they could have learned them on their own." (21) However, he does propose that communication would have been required for such an undertaking. He then considers "the obstacles to the origin of languages" (22) and concludes that in order to establish language, "a kind of society already established among the inventors of language" (22) would be required. After further deliberation on the nature of language, Rousseau throws up his hands and declares

> I LEAVE TO ANYONE WHO WILL UNDERTAKE IT THE DISCUSSION OF THIS DIFFICULT PROBLEM: WHICH WAS MORE NECESSARY, A PREVIOUSLY ESTABLISHED SOCIETY FOR

THE INVENTION OF LANGUAGES, OR A PREVIOUSLY INVENTED LANGUAGE FOR THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SOCIETY? (25)

From Rousseau's argument about the nature of man, outlined above, we can proceed to delineate his model of the individual and supra-individual realms. His contention is that natural man is happy, healthy and largely contented. It is within his capacity for self-improvement and being a free agent that the potential for drawing away from his Eden like existence lays. Thus, we see that in Rousseau's conception of the individual there exist the competing qualities of both being perfectly happy in nature and having the capacity to leave nature.

It is a bit more difficult to conclude what Rousseau conceived of as the supra-individual realm. We know that he called it society and saw it as the cause of all of man's woes. In Rousseau's ontological model passions "are the handiwork of society" (27). But, what makes them the providence of society? Nor does Rousseau provide us with any specifics of what he means by society; is it the social realm only with which he concerns himself? Is it the state? Or perhaps both? In this essay society is merely a foil for the discussion of the nature of man.

Now we can ask: does Rousseau's model adequately account for the process by which the supra-individual realm arises, and man leaves the state of nature? He certainly deals with this question in greater depth than did Hobbes. Like Hobbes, Rousseau provides within his model of the individual for elements that contribute to the transition from the natural state to the social. But, unlike the desire for self-preservation in Hobbes's model, here the desire for self-improvement ultimately leads to the decline, not improvement, in man's quality of life as he transitions from being natural man to civil man. This of course highlights the question of: why would man choose this path? This question Rousseau raises, but dose not answer. Nor does he provide us with actual mechanisms for how such a transition may occur. He picks up the ideas of agricultural and linguistic development and then puts them down with no resolution. The one mechanism that he does provide is time. He concludes his investigation of processes by which a supra-individual realm might arise with the statement: "man in the state of nature…could have had the desire and the opportunity to leave that state only after many centuries." (26) The implication being that over time man's capacity for self-improvement may pull him ever so gradually out of the state of nature. So, that each incremental step is not obviously in conflict with his greater well-being, but collectively these steps take man further and further out of the state of nature.

Overall, Rousseau's model is problematic in that most of the assertions he makes cannot be proved or disproved. To a large extent the model consists of Rousseau's conjectures about what a mythical man in nature may have been like. He fails to construct a plausible argument for why his particular representation of natural man is more accurate than another. He certainly does not refrain from attacking Hobbes's model of natural man. However, his arguments against it are based on assumptions that he had just put forth. For example, Rousseau argues that man is not indeed as vicious as Hobbes makes him out to be. However, the reason he offers in support of this argument is that man's passions (the cause of his viciousness) are the result of society, which is something he takes to be a basic assumption in his model. Rousseau's model is further weakened by his lack of a clear mechanistic explanation for the emergence of the supra-individual. Given some sort of mechanism, we could at least assess if that particular causal relationship was sound. But, Rousseau doggedly avoids proposing a clear causal relationship. As a result, this essay is primarily a set of ruminations on the nature of man. It is certainly thought provoking, but it does not provide us with a set of causal relationship we can analyze.

Spencer

In his essay on "The Social Organism", Spencer takes an entirely different approach toward conceiving of the supra-individual realm, than do Hobbes and Rousseau. The supra-individual realm, or society – not natural man – is his primary focus in this work. He begins with the premise that "societies are not artificially put together…but are consequent on general natural causes", which is to say that they are not "determined by the wills of individual men", nor by divine ordinance, but rather by an organic

process of social development (54). In this essay, Spencer sets out to describe this process of social development. To explicate his ideas, Spencer draws an analogy between society and living organisms. In the following paragraphs I will focus on three aspects of Spencer's model of social development: the pattern of that development, its underlying causes and mechanisms, and the relationship of the supra-individual and individual realms within it.

Spencer draws heavily on his analogy between society and living organisms to elaborate the pattern of social development. He declares that as in living organisms there are different stages of development in societies. As societies develop they increase in size, complexity, and mutual dependence of their parts. Spencer traces this development from "the first stages of human societies" (61) found in Bushmen societies. He characterizes these societies as small aggregates of individuals, made up of "two or three families wandering about together" (61), where there is little differentiation among individuals, "and the only kind of mutual aid is that of joint attack or defence" (61). In aboriginal tribes, the next rung in Spencer's ladder of social evolution, he finds "traces of social structure" (61) in the division of labor among the sexes and the presence of a governing body.

Spencer further develops the living organism analogy by comparing the "consumable and circulating commodities in the body politic" (65-66) to blood and "the active human agents who propel the currents of commodities, and regulate their distribution" (66) to the circulatory system. Thus, as societies develop, so do their commercial mechanisms, including roads and modes of communication.

The executive function within societies becomes analogous to the nervous system in Spencer's model. This too develops in conjunction with social evolution. Lower level societies have an undifferentiated governing class, and no intermediate class "between the governing and the governed" (63). [This description fits the model of society presented by Hobbes.] As societies evolve, their governing structures become more and more specialized and complex. The apex of this development, according to Spencer, is in the existence of a regulatory body, such as Parliament, that acts as society's brain by coordinating "the countless heterogeneous considerations which affect the immediate and remote welfare of the whole community." (69) Interestingly enough this apex of social development looks somewhat like English society.

Given this pattern of social development, what are the causes and mechanisms that underlie it? Spencer argues avidly that social change is driven from the lowest level of the organism, the will of individuals. Social organisms arise "under the pressure of human wants and activities. While each citizen has been pursuing his individual welfare" (54) Legislative acts are "ultimately dependent on the national will…the average of individual desires" (55). According to Spencer, even despotic governments and those where one class holds all the advantage are "due to certain sentiments in the commonality" (55); "the character of the people is…the original source of this political form" (56). Another mechanism of social development, or more specifically economic development, that Spencer mentions is growth through economic need; that is, when demand for particular commodities increases, the class, group or organization that produces them grows and develops. (65)

Spencer further elaborates the relationship of the social organism, or the supra-individual realm, with its constituents, the individual realm, thus:

> ITS LIVING UNITS DO NOT AND CANNOT LOSE INDIVIDUAL CONSCIOUSNESS...THIS IS AN EVERLASTING REASON WHY THE WELFARE OF CITIZENS CANNOT RIGHTLY BE SACRIFICED TO SOME SUPPOSED BENEFIT OF THE STATE; BUT WHY, ON THE OTHER HAND, THE STATE IS TO BE MAINTAINED SOLELY FOR THE BENEFIT OF CITIZENS. (60)

This unequivocal statement of Spencer's dedication to individual rights is a departure from Hobbes's conception of a highly subordinate relationship of the multitudes to the Common-Wealth. Even though, one could argue that both Spencer and Hobbes construct their models of the supra-individual as being determined by the individual.

In Spencer's model we see society, or the supra-individual realm, as developing organically. This development is driven from below by the average will of the individuals within the social organism, as

well as, by economic development through the demand for commodities. Aside from these general principles of social development, the supra-individual realm does not have other defining characteristics in Spencer's model. The social organism can be anything from a group of families hunting together to a society organized under a Parliamentary system of government. Likewise, the individual in this model does not have any defining characteristics, such as those accorded by Hobbes and Rousseau to natural man. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that in Spencer's conception of the individual and supra-individual realms the two are inseparable. Consequently, Spencer's model does not allow for an emergence of the supra-individual realm, as it exists at all levels of social association. Instead Spencer deals with the evolution of the supra-individual realm.

What then are the mechanisms described in Spencer's model for social evolution? The only factors associated with development that Spencer offers are determination of structures by an average individual will and economic growth in response to demand. However he does not explain how these factors interact with the supra-individual realm to cause it to evolve. In fact, like Rousseau, Spencer is purposefully vague about the mechanisms that cause social evolution. He writes that social evolution occurs "by changes as insensible as those through which a seed passes into a tree" (54).

Thus, in Spencer's work, as in the work of Rousseau and to a lesser extent Hobbes, we see a model of society that does not tell us how it comes into being and develops. The model presents an interesting framework through which to examine society. However, it cannot make any claims to describing how society actually behaves. This is also true of Rousseau and Hobbes (though Hobbes does attempt to describe a causal mechanism within his model). Without plausible causes and mechanisms to account for the ontological model that they present, these three authors can most accurately be seen as reflecting the state of society at their particular place and time. This too is highly valuable input, though it is arguably not science as we conceive of it today.