Thomas and Thomas: Malthus and Hobbes in Contrast

Thomas Hobbes' 1651 work *Leviathan* is a/the foundational text for the field of political economy. The first to argue against medieval religious ideologies that had no concept of the individual or society, Hobbes introduced into discourse the self-maximizing, self-interested, isolated individual. While later theorists, such as Adam Smith and John Locke, would tweak and refine his notion of the individual, the introduction of the atomistic self produced a philosophical precedent that has proven unshakeable even today. Importantly, however, the fondness of later theorists for Hobbes' ontology did not mean that those same thinkers accepted the whole of his arguments around the state or the social contract. In fact, some, such as Thomas Malthus, rejected Hobbes' belief in the efficacy of government to make humans' lives better and looked instead to civil society as the key sphere of social action.

Written and revised several times in the late-Eighteenth and early-Nineteenth centuries, Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* is grounded in micro-ontological assumptions very similar to those Hobbes sets forth in *Leviathan*. Hobbes makes the individual the focus of his attentions and then goes on to stress the powers of reason possessed by said individuals. For Hobbes, reason is what divides man* from beast and what gives him the power to move out of the state of nature and war and into peaceful and stable society (88). Similarly, Malthus attributes to man "that distinctive superiority in his reasoning faculties, which enable him to calculate distant consequences" (21). All preventative checks on population growth, such as chastity, are the result of reason (22). Like his hero Adam Smith, Malthus adhered to a utilitarian understanding descended from Hobbes of the subject that acts individually to

* In the interest of authenticity, I choose to use "man" instead of the more inclusive "human" in a nod to feminist critiques of Enlightenment theories of reason that excluded women and all other subordinate peoples from those endowed with the faculties of reason.

maximize the benefits he can reap from his own actions. Even the lower classes whom Malthus detests for their fecundity are seen as exhibiting some facility for reasoning when they learn "there is no occasion whatever for them to put any sort of restraint on their inclinations … because the parish is bound to provide for all that are born" (120). For Malthus and Hobbes, then, reason is the defining characteristic of man.

Where Malthus and Hobbes first part ways, however, is in the degree of faith they put in man's reason. Hobbes sees government (whether representative or monarchical) as the fruit of man's "foresight of their own preservation" and the sole way in which man's passions can be quelled (87). Through the social contract and reason man has the "possibility to come out of" the state of nature and thus no longer experience constant strife and war (66). In contrast, Malthus doesn't see reason as able to trump the passions; in his cosmology, humanity is always in thrall to the animalistic drives for food and sex. Humans share with animals* "the constant tendency in all animated life to increase beyond the nourishment prepared for it" and "the race of man cannot by any efforts of reason escape from it" (14). Human institutions cannot overturn these natural laws and instead must learn to maneuver within them, accepting them as immutable.

The result of these two distinct understandings of the relation between human reason and the passions leads to two very different opinions of how society should be organized and thus two different solutions to the problem of order that has haunted social scientists for centuries now. Hobbes' extreme faith in reason and the "Common Power" that men (via the social contract) erect to protect them both from outsiders and themselves is ultimately an overriding faith in the power of government to keep the passions and the state of nature at bay (89). In valorizing this sovereign power, which he variously calls "Leviathan," the "Mortall God," and

* Unlike Hobbes who sees humanity and the animal kingdom and distinct and thus humans only *like* beasts, Malthus does not make distinction and thus views humanity *as* beasts.

the "COMMON-WEALTH" (89), Hobbes condones the sovereign's ability to "form the wills of them all" (90). He does not question the absolute power given to the state, and instead stands firm that the fear engendered by this Leviathan is the only way to insure the stability and peace of society. The state is thus the embodiment and epitome of reason.

In contrast, Malthus puts his faith not in government but in the power of civil society. Following John Locke, who rejects Hobbes's argument about the state of nature as a state of war and says instead that people are naturally peaceful and that government is only necessary to protect private property (15), Malthus sees freedom *from* government as the most pressing issue. In this respect, he again follows Smith, who saw state intervention in the market as blasphemous and dangerous. As a whole, *An Essay on Population* is an attack on government and its inability to produce a social policy that adequately conforms to the laws of nature; the social policy it has developed, specifically the Poor Laws of England which form Malthus's focus, are actually detrimental to those they are designed to help. For hundreds of pages, Malthus rails against the English Poor Laws and the taxes collected by the government that fund the program. Central to his disgust is how the provision of sustenance and aid to the poor allows them to escape just retribution for violating the laws of nature. Like contemporary arguments against welfare, Malthus asserts that the poor laws "create the poor which they maintain" (100). Similarly, he asserts that the poor laws "may … be said to diminish both the power and the will to save among the common people, and thus weaken one of the strongest incentives to sobriety and industry, and consequently to happiness" (101). His solution is thus the "very gradual abolition of the poor-laws" (118). By allowing natural law again to function unimpeded, the imbalance of supply and demand in the labor market can be rectified, which in turn will improve the lot of the poor because the population will be in equilibrium to the food supply (119). The only charity

Malthus sees as acceptable is that provided by private sources, especially since private charities can more effectively determine whether a certain citizen is deserving of aid. The echoes of Locke and Smith in this solution's recourse to civil society are clear.

Having outlined the ways in which Malthus and Hobbes are similar in terms of their micro-ontological assumptions yet different in their belief in how society should best be organized, one wonders how such similar starting places could produce such different prescriptions. A careful consideration of the historical location of both theorists as well as the implications of their respective attitudes toward natural law and the passions may serve to explain these discrepancies to some degree.

When Hobbes was writing *Leviathan*, England was mired in the English Civil War (1642-1651), which was so divisive and bloody that it is often known as the War of All against All. Thinking and writing in this social and historical context, Hobbes was appalled at the omnipresence of conflict and hostility and thus set his mind to the problem of order. His conception of the state of nature as well as his prescription for an absolute sovereign to bring order out of chaos reflect the historical events through which he lived. While his focus on the individual may have been revolutionary, his solutions were largely reactive. Living in a time where the supreme governing bodies had broke down, he wished for their restoration as the solution to the horrors of war. In desperation, he could only conceive of the state or monarch's power over the people as a good; the possible ills of the state were no match for its benefits.

In contrast, Malthus thought and wrote a century and a half later than Hobbes, and thus had to grapple with a very different historical and social context as well as a very different intellectual environment. Between Hobbes and Malthus's respective publications, Adam Smith, John Locke, and others had not only refined Hobbes' notion of the individual but had also

introduced the concept of civil society and begun to discredit the power of government as a force for social order. Where Hobbes posited a simple bifurcation of existence into the state of nature and the commonwealth that lead to a valorization of the latter and the reason it embodied, Malthus's more complex cosmology not only blurred the lines between nature and society but also incorporated insights about the ability of civil society to foster the proper functioning of natural laws where the state meddled to detrimental effects. Like Smith's market law, which could only function properly if the government left it alone, Malthus's law of population is only allowed its fullest expression (and thus proper functioning) when it is not subject to intervention by the state. The state was no longer the seat of reason in the midst of chaos, but in Malthus's view acts irrationally when it attempts to contradict the laws of nature. This dethronement of the state as the embodiment of reason is the crux of his difference from Hobbes.

Ultimately, Malthus and Hobbes come to different opinions on the importance of government and how society should be organized because they have different ideas about how man's reason plays out in institutional contexts. These differences result not only from the two theorists' different historical positions but also the different intellectual lineages within which they worked. While government is reason made manifest for war-weary Hobbes, it is for the liberal Malthus often reason's enemy. No shared micro-ontological assumptions can erase these deep differences.