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A Comparison of Hobbes and Locke’s Argument

on the State of Nature from *Leviathan* and *The Second Treatise of Government*

Whose is More Convincing?

The debate over how to establish a government and its purpose has been a fundamental one in political philosophy that has lasted for centuries. A large number of political philosophers have risen to fame on this subject. For example, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, two of the most influential thinkers in this field of political philosophy, had contrary views on the matter. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes believes that the purpose of establishing a government is to eliminate the state of nature. Oppositely, in *The Second Treatise of Government*, Locke believes that the purpose of establishing a government is to protect the natural right belonging to the state of nature. In this essay, I will evaluate the two views on the state of nature and argue that Locke’s perspective on the purpose of establishing a government is more convincing than Hobbes’.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes believes that the origin of government is a social contract from the consent of the ruled that inspires terror if citizens disobey. Hobbes advocates for the necessity of repressing and replacing the state of nature in humans. He sees the state of nature as bad and intolerable to society. He believes that there is no natural law or natural morality (Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, Page 85). Hobbles believes that it is essential and just for people to sacrifice their freedom, or properties, for their security, which the government warrants by Hobbes’ comprehension of the social contract. Hobbes thinks that one’s right by nature is equivalent to the liberty to follow his own judgment concerning the means of his self-preservation. And by nature, our fundamental aim is to preserve ourselves, so our judgment will be partial and misleading. Therefore, Hobbes believes that government taking away one’s liberty or the state of nature, in other words forbidding him to do something, is the best way for the sake of self-preservation. As a result, people seek peace only by removing themselves from the state of nature (Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, Page 89). Hobbes considers the government as an agency of natural law that works against people's natural rights by forcibly limiting their natural rights and enforcing the giving up of freedom from them. And such transferring of rights is part of the social contract. Furthermore, the government’s job is to prevent people from doing what they personally judge as right or wrong. Hobbes believes the way that government works is that it produces unity as everyone follows the same judgment, and it creates something so powerful in its subjects that it inspires terror (Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, Page 114). The government has exclusive authority so that no one is higher than the sovereign. Hobbes believes that such an authoritarian government is always better than nothing, where people would have been in a state of nature of constant war. In short, Hobbes views the government as an agency established by means of eliminating the state of nature to enforce the social contract of natural law, something that preserves our lives that we ought to obey.

In *The Second Treatise of Government*, opposite to Hobbes, Locke believes the power of government is limited and balanced to prevent the government from abusing its power. He argues that originally every individual is born common and free with a natural right to preserve everything by the state of nature, which includes liberty, labor, and natural resources claimed through labor (Locke’s *The Second Treatise of Government*, Pages 44 to 45). Locke asserts that individuals have their own rights to judge others but must give up some in order to prevent extreme cases where they abuse their power and commit offenses against others. Establishing a government that ensures the punishment of those who commit offenses is necessary to help maintain order and stability in society. It is also necessary for the full protection of the natural rights of individuals. Furthermore, Locke believes that individuals have rights naturally inherent to them that the government must protect, and its power must be limited by the common good and established with laws (Locke’s *The Second Treatise of Government*, Page 65). He emphasizes that the power of government must not be absolute. It should be limited by the common good since its purpose is to protect the state of nature for its subjects by ensuring impartial judgment, law, and the execution of the law. The power of government should be limited to be only practiced within the established laws and impartial judges. In short, Locke’s view on the purpose of establishing government is to protect natural rights that belong to its subjects. The government ought to secure every individual’s property and enforce impartial judgment and laws, while its power ought to be limited to only doing the said above.

While Hobbes' perspective on the purpose of government has its merits, Locke's view is ultimately more convincing. By emphasizing the protection of natural rights and the importance of limited government, Locke's approach offers more protection for individuals and greater accountability and stability in government. Hobbes' absolutist approach may provide security, but it comes at the expense of individual freedom and liberty. In addition, Locke acknowledges that individuals have natural rights that are not granted by the government but rather exist independently. This view provides a strong foundation for individual freedom and autonomy, which is crucial for the development of a just society.

In contrast, Hobbes' view of the state of nature is certainly flawed from today’s perspective though it might have seemed reasonable at his time - in the context of the 17th century. Hobbes’ belief in the need for an absolutist government to eliminate the state of nature has been criticized for being overly pessimistic and authoritarian. His idea of an authoritarian, centralized government that forces its subjects to surrender their natural rights in order to eliminate the state of nature and thus maintain order and security has been seen as a potential threat to individual liberty and freedom. This absolute power in the government can cause terrifying consequences if the sovereign abuses the power and violates individual rights. Furthermore, Hobbes’ government is based on a fundamental assumption that humans are inherently selfish, aggressive, and violent and are in a constant state of warfare. Such an assumption is not true being against humanity and moral virtues. Historical evidence also helps contradict Hobbes. Various examples of peaceful societies have existed without an authoritarian government, such as the Nuer of Sudan or the Iroquois Confederacy among North American indigenous tribes. These societies are strong proofs of the possibility and capability of living in harmony without the condescending power of control from a centralized government.

Another historical example that demonstrates the pros and cons of Hobbes and Locke is from ancient China. During the Spring and Autumn and the Warring States period, China was in a state of constant warfare, with hundreds of states of varying sizes declaring wars against each other for power and territory. Hundreds of schools of thought emerged during this time. Confucianism and Legalism were two different ones among the few that stood out. Confucianism emphasized the importance of morality and social harmony. It opposed unnecessary state intervention and was also opposed to governing against nature. Additionally, one of his greatest followers, Mencius, expanded upon Confucius’ ideal of limited government intervention by discussing the rationality of individuals. In contrast, Legalism emphasized the importance of strict laws and harsh punishments to maintain order. While both schools of thought had their merits, it was Confucianism that ultimately survived and became the dominant philosophy in China that lasted for centuries. States that practiced Legalism were defeated and merged by other states. Clearly, there exists an analogy of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke to Legalism and Confucianism.

Admittedly, the weaknesses of Hobbes’ view on the state of nature and the counterexamples that attack it do not necessarily make Locke’s view more agreeable. Similarly, the wider acceptance and practices as well as the longer existence and survival of Locke’s belief, implied by the lasting impact of Confucianism throughout history, does not necessarily argue for Locke’s idea but barely argues against Hobbes’ view implied by the fading away of Legalism. These arguments denounce Hobbes' view more than appreciate Locke’s, but at least when logically comparing the two, Locke’s view is in favor of the odds. Regardless, Locke’s view is more favorable due to its emphasis on individual liberty and equality. Locke's view of government encourages individuals to the center of the stage, whereas the government’s purpose is to act like the spotlight, revealing their natural rights and constantly protecting them. In contrast, Hobbes’ view puts the government at the center, weighing the authority of the government over the rights of the individuals.

Nevertheless, there may be potential counterarguments against Locke's view as well. One such argument is that individuals may abuse their natural rights, and a weak government may be too vulnerable to protect its citizens from offenses. However, Locke suggests a system of checks and balances to prevent abuses of power and to protect individual rights. Additionally, a strong system of laws and regulations is encouraged for implementation to ensure that natural rights are protected while maintaining proper social order.

In conclusion, the purpose of establishing government is a fundamental question in political philosophy. Similar to Hobbes, Locke’s view is also based on the idea of the social contract, where subjects give up some degree of their rights, or the state of nature, for their security and protection provided by the government. However, Locke advocates for a more democratic and liberal government than Hobbes’ authoritarian government. In fact, such an idea of protecting natural rights and limiting the power of government has been widely used in the development of modern democratic societies. The influence of Locke’s idea can even be seen in societies before Locke’s time, such as the Spring and Autumn period and the Warring States period of ancient China.