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On the State of Nature: Locke vs. Hobbes

Locke and Hobbes derive their distinct philosophies from a comparable interpretation of the "state of nature," though ultimately their similar interpretation results in conclusions standing in diametric opposition. This state of nature, as conceived by both philosophers, posits a hypothetical existence in which men do not belong to any state, and where all men are equal—in Hobbes case, equality being an innate quality, whereas with Locke, equality arising from human nature. It is here, however, that interpretations split. Hobbes creates a chain of implications, noting that this equality gives rise to diffidence—or insecurity, per Hobbes' definition—and diffidence gives way to a state of war. Hobbes explains this transition with an example: "And therefore, 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 own conservation and sometimes their delectation only, endeavor to destroy or subdue one another." The equality of each man resulted in each desiring "the same thing," which in turn led to their hostility. Thus, Hobbes' interpretation of the state of nature is one of the state of war, with it also being the natural condition of mankind, a sentiment made famous by his quote that men's lives are "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Locke, on the other hand, notes that though the state of nature is "a state of liberty, it is not a state of license: though man in that state have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his person or possession, yet he has not liberty to destroy himself, or so much any creature in his possession, but where some nobler use than its bare preservation calls for it." Thus, in Locke's world, the state of nature's equality does not devolve into war like in Hobbes' world; rather, the law of nature is what prohibits going against another's life.

These divergent interpretations, of the natural state of mankind, the state of nature, and the laws of nature, unsurprisingly result in distinct conceptions of politics and community formation. Locke's understanding of the state of nature is derived from his belief of an inherent natural law. Particularly, he notes that within the state of nature, all men have executive power over natural law, but the creation of a community, and the politics driving it, implies the surrender of this natural law executive power "and to resign it to the public," noting that it is only then that there is "a political, or civil society." In entering into this commonwealth, the government is authorized to make laws "as the public good of the society shall require," and a judge is set up "with authority to determine all the controversies." In other words, Locke's conception of commonwealths depends on his understanding of the role of the state of nature and the natural law. Hobbes, meanwhile, notes that from the inherent conflict arising from the state of nature, it follows that groups will self-organize into smaller militias, where each will protect the other. However, this isn't particularly effective in the small-scale, leading to a larger organization, where everyone gives up their right of governing themselves—i.e., the freedom inherent to the state of nature—and places it in the hands of a greater power: "This is … a real unity of them all, in one and the same person, made by covenant of every man with every man." Crucially, this ultimately results in a notably distinct form of government than through Locke's interpretation. Here, Hobbes advocates for a monarchical rule, where the power is endowed in one man: "the essence of the commonwealth, which (to define it) is one person, … he may use the strength and means of them all, as he shall think expedient, for their peace and common defense." This absolute monarchy, where there is "one person" who "may use the strength and means of them all," stands in contradistinction to Locke, who specifically advocates against an absolute monarchy. Locke notes that an absolute monarchy is "inconsistent with civil society, and so can be no form of civil-government at all." Particularly,

Locke notes that this incompatibility arises from the fact that individual rulers may subvert natural law in favor of their own personal interests: monarchs may not always act in the best interest of the commonwealth!

Naturally, from these forms of government arises the concept of security. However, understanding the elements of the state of nature as derived by the two philosophers is not necessarily essential to understanding their assessment of security: while for Locke, the state of nature is intimately tied to his assessment of security in a civil society, in Hobbes it is ultimately separate. In Locke's civil society, there are judges and magistrates that serve with natural law as their guiding principle; thus, in these societies, a lack of the laws of nature or of a concept of state of nature would result in insecurity. This is exemplified by his rejection of an absolute monarchy; given that monarch derive their power from their selves, rather than from the laws of nature, there is ultimately no security: "for if it be asked, what security, what fence is there, in such a state, against the violence and oppression of this absolute ruler?" Hobbes, on the other hand, does not require the laws of nature or the state of nature for security. For him, there are three distinct stages: at the individual level (i.e., in a state of nature), the state of man is violent, leading to insecurity; seeking peace, the small groupings result in security in one another; finally, however, at the state level—where the state of nature no longer applies—there is security in a monarch, a singular person. This progression follows from Hobbes' assertion that "that a man be willing, when others are so too, as far-forth, as for peace, and defense of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself." Thus, it is the Hobbesian external power that ultimately provides the security, not the state of nature or the laws of nature.

Ultimately, as I read the works of both philosophers, I found both to have compelling arguments. The most attractive aspect of John Locke's theory, no doubt, is his form of government, which most aligns with the United States' form of government. However, I found his reliance on God to be troubling; I found his arguments throughout to be reasonable and well-developed, with the exception of his reliance on God. In those moments, I felt as though he was ceding reason and clarity to an ever-greater power, which ultimately undermined his argument. In that sense, I aligned myself closer to Hobbes, agreeing with the idea that a state of nature would likely be one of war, which would in turn lead to organization. That being said, however, I utterly reject his reliance on an absolute monarchy; I find that form of government to ultimately subvert security more than Locke's. As such, I would align myself more closely to Locke's conception of nature and commonwealths.