Hobbes, Locke, & Mill:

Climbing the Ladder of Human Potential

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The works of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and John Stuart Mill play a pivotal role in defining societal evolution since antiquity. More importantly, the future trajectory of the modern project is based in no small part on these authors' conceptions of human nature and the construct of the state. I argue modern societies are climbing the three-tiered ladder of structural evolution composed of the core objectives envisioned by each author. On the ladder, the sovereign state progresses from basic concern with collective security to considered, directional productivity aimed at individual development. At each rung, I will describe the fundamental characteristics and purpose of the state, culminating in Mill's utilitarian, progressive society. I also argue (albeit circumstantially) that current politics and culture lie somewhere between the unrestrained growth of a Lockean state and the individual progressivism found in a Millsian society. Though the benefits of property manifest themselves in extraordinary rates of production, unresolved issues with mental freedom indicate that many of the benefits of Mill's necessarily rational society remain outside the grasp of modern civilization.

The lowest rung of societal structure, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, is the least ambitious of the three, but Hobbes' derivation of human rights is an essential precept for many liberal constitutions. Hobbes differs most from Locke and Mill in his derivation of human behavior, which he states is "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short… what opinion [Man] has of his fellow subjects, when he rides armed; of his fellow Citizens, when he locks his dores; and of his children, when he locks his chests."[1] Hobbes supposes that all these behaviors are a natural result of man's passionate nature. The solution to anarchy must also arise from the passions, specifically "Feare of Death; Desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a

[1] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Books, 2017), 103.

Hope by their Industry to obtain them."[2] Consequently, Hobbes' society is fearful and tenuous; the state's only priority is *Salus populi*, the people's safety.[3] Hobbes requires a strong central authority to compel the people to abandon their natural proclivity for liberty and dominion in exchange for coordinated protection against conquest, but he does not guarantee comfort or fulfillment for the individual.[4]

Hobbes' centralized state is not prominent in a heavily democratic contemporary landscape. Hobbes clearly states that democracy, and distributed rule in general, is insufficiently unified to protect a society or even uphold the citizen's endogenous right to security:

> For being distracted in opinions concerning the best use and application of their strength, [citizens of a democracy] do not help, but hinder one another; and reduce their strength by mutuall opposition to nothing: whereby they are easily, not onely subdued by a very few that agree together; but also when there is no common enemy, they make warre upon each other, for their particular interests.[5]

Although the factional politics Hobbes predicts certainly plague modern societies, a continuous trend towards representative democracy and an emphasis on popular opinion in contemporary governments indicate that Hobbes' authoritarian preferences have not been sustained. Nonetheless, the assumption of individual rights from which Hobbes constructs the Leviathan is indispensable to the formation of secure states and Lockean society, the next rung of the ladder.

In *The Second Treatise of Government*, Locke adds a twist to Hobbes conception of individual rights and the social contract, that of positive consent and of property, and imagines a

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[2] Ibid., 105.
[3] Ibid., 7.
[4] Ibid., 136.
[5] Ibid., 139.

more adaptable and productive society. For Locke, the business of the state is not the people's security; rather, it is "comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure Enjoyment of their Properties…"[6] Locke improves on Hobbes' Leviathan in two ways: first, he decreases the need for a strong central authority by defining a more flexible social contract; second, he provides further incentive to industrious individuals by offering them the opportunity to benefit in proportion to their labor.

To loosen the bonds of civil society, Locke stipulates that submission to civil law does not make an individual a member of a commonwealth; "nothing can make any Man so, but his actually entering into it by positive Engagement, and express Promise and Compact."[7] By granting the individual greater agency in her own social contract, Locke massages the Leviathan's rigid anatomy, promoting an iterative process of government in which the dissolution of any particular legislature requires the affirmation of every individual's social consent.[8] In this manner, Locke's society is far more focused on the private citizen than either Hobbes' or Mill's. The cumulative effect of government politics on individuals leads to adaptive structural alterations and the formation of states that protect not only their constituents' security, but the enjoyment of individual property.

Locke promises that the fruits of society belong to individuals. Security remains a collective possession, but from each individual's unique right to her own labor arises a right to property, and from her right to property arises the incentive to trade in lasting currency:

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[6] John Locke, "The Second Treatise of Government," in *Political Theory: Classic Writings, Contemporary Views*, ed. Joseph Losco and Leonard Williams (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 291.

[7] Ibid., 293.

[8] Ibid., 295.

> For I ask, what would a Man value Ten Thousand, or an Hundred Thousand Acres of excellent *Land*, ready cultivated… where he had no hopes of the Commerce with other Parts of the World, to draw *Money* to him by the Sale of the Product?[9]

Without the right to property, the frontiersman in America grows only enough to feed himself and the whole of Europe suffers for the potential goods abandoned by his restraint; with property, a society may produce far more than individuals in autarky or even the command of a central authority. Simply put, Locke provides the incentive for individual industry.

The benefits of property accrue not only to the individual, but to humanity at large. Locke's theory of property increases a society's economic growth and its extension into intellectual property rights spurs technological development. Capitalism is a testament to Locke's influence on modern society; nearly all contemporary constitutions protect individual property to some extent. Yet the greatest flaw of economic individualism is that the value of any given good, idea, or human being is determined by the aggregated preferences and behaviors of individuals. Today, governments regularly intervene in markets for the express purpose of enacting policies to counteract the negative externalities that arise from narrow-minded, self-interested behavior. How does a policymaker interfere with regular market behaviors to preserve the security and property of her people? Hobbes conceives a single-minded sovereign to assess the value of particular policies to her society, but a free market provides no protection against the whims of market demand.

In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill exposes the dangers of popular opinion and proposes a methodology for determining the value of goods and ideas in any society. Because no individual is entirely infallible, there must not be any definite standard of intellectual value. Instead, Mill

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[9] Ibid., 288.

proposes, let the value judgments of individuals determine the economic production and policies of a given society and encourage them to exercise their rational natures to make the best value judgments possible based on their own circumstances and perspective. Still, individual rationality succumbs to society's tendency to homogenize ideas:

> Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough: there needs protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling; against the tendency of society to impose… its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them …[10]

Mill insists that individuals must have "mental freedom," a state in which the mind is at liberty to weigh the arguments at hand against the facts of its experience and make a rational decision in accordance with its judgment. To achieve mental freedom, Mill suggests that individual liberties similar to those proposed by Locke and Hobbes must be protected.[11] Vitally, the individual must have freedom to express any opinion, hold any preference, and unite under any cause, so long as she does not interfere with the right of another to do the same; Mill calls this freedom that of "pursuing our own good in our own way."[12] Why not allow a sovereign or philosopher king to dictate those opinions which are best for society? Because no opinion can be definitively true except by unanimous acceptance, no individual can be forced into any action on the grounds of protection and no minority opinion can be eliminated by any force other than rational debate. As Mill puts it, "all silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility."[13] Instead, opinions should be disseminated and debated so that every individual can apply it towards their own,

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[10] John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 11.

[11] Ibid., 18.

[12] Ibid., 19.

[13] Ibid., 24.

individual good. A society of individuals with diverse opinions performs "different experiments of living; that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others; and that the worth of different modes of life should be proved practically, when any one thinks fit to try them."[14] Even better, Mill argues that individuality of thought is not only beneficial to society, but also to the individual herself. Mill recasts Hobbes' "brutish" passions as the energy that supports human development, "a tree which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing."[15]

Though Mill addresses issues with the suppression of opinion in the popular market of a Lockean society, Mill's theory differs most strikingly in its ultimate objective. Enabled by his emphasis on individualism and his rejection of any definite standard of good, Mill envisions a progressive society built on diversity of preference, intended to maximize utility:

> It is proper to state that I forgo any advantage which could be derived to my argument from the idea of abstract right, as a thing independent of utility. I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being.

Thus, Mill establishes a more abstract, flexible direction for individuals and society. He has no need to presume the existence of human rights; they are a logical consequence of utilitarian ethics. His methodology for determining truth and value is the means by which he achieves universal utility, more than a simple revision of Locke's theory of property; Locke seeks only the enjoyment of property, while Mill digs down to a more general definition of human utility.

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[14] Ibid., 65.
[15] Ibid., 68.

However, the path to creating such an environment of mental freedom is long and arduous. Mill blames the oppression of individuality on his culture's lack of belief that "the free development of individuality is one of the leading essentials of well-being; that it is not only a co-ordinate element with all that is designated by the terms civilization, instruction, education, culture, but is itself a necessary part and condition of all those things…"[16] To fully integrate any principle into society takes overwhelming advocacy and time, but if Mill's argument is correct, modern institutions of free speech and expression may facilitate the rise of mental freedom as more and more individuals adopt and cherish the principles of individualism itself. Modern society seems to teeter at the brink of radical individualism and collective monotony; perhaps it is the equilibrium of these two that gradually focuses the raw power of capitalism on true human progress.

Problems with Mill's argument remain: that the absence or presence of mental freedom is not an absolutely binary condition, but exists in degrees; that even in an age of communication, the time from the spark that starts a debate to its dissipation into a generally accepted viewpoint is only reduced at the risk of sacrificing cautious consideration; and most worryingly, that there is a part of human nature which consistently inhibits the rational, self-interested decision-making that is crucial to Locke's private self and Mill's intellectual individual. Globally, states have taken full advantage of Lockean property rights to grow industry in every direction, but human civilization still struggles with the ethical issue of wisely evaluating not only the goods and ideas it produces, but also the human beings who produce them.

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[16] Ibid., 65.

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