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A Criticism of Hobbes’ Social Contract

Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan* is one of the earliest example of someone describing the idea of a social contract between a government and its people. The basis of Hobbes’ social contract is his description of the State of Nature, being the natural state of the world when no government is present; which he describes as being riddled with unavoidable violence, depiction, and individuals willing only to defend their own lives without regards for others. Hobbes’ core assumption is that men are naturally violent towards one another to protect themselves, this premise is false to the detriment of Hobbes’ conclusion; that men ought to submit to a sovereign power who holds absolute power over them. Hobbes explores the structure of such a sovereign and gives it the name *Leviathan.* In this paper, I will explicate Hobbes’ argument for the social contract, show that Hobbes’ core assumption is false, and examine that suggested structure, and flaws thereof, of Hobbes’ *Leviathan.*

To Understand Hobbes’ arguments it will help to define some of the terms and concepts that he uses. The first concept goes to explain the basis upon which Hobbes builds his arguments; The State of Nature as stated above, is what Hobbes claims is the natural state of an area that is outside the control of a sovereign power would be like. He describes this state as being such that all men are equal in that no one man can claim to have an advantage over any other, neither physically nor mentally (Leviathan, 82). Hobbes also introduces the “Right of Nature” which is described as men having an right to protect themselves and their property” (Leviathan, 86). Hobbes’ expands on the “Right of Nature” and shows that a rational person has an obligation to execute that right which I will refer to as the “fundamental obligation”. As a result of the fundamental obligation and the State of Nature Hobbes suggests that there are three principal causes of violence (scarcity, diffidence, and glory) in the State of Nature (Leviathan, 83). The last concept that Hobbes presents is referred to as the State of War, being a state where one has a legitimate fear of harm coming upon their person or property at any time. Hobbes takes these concepts and presents his arguments from them.

Looking at Hobbes presentation of the State of Nature it is clear that he believes that men are naturally violent when there is nothing to deter them. This natural violence has nothing deter individuals from acting against others and others against them in a State of Nature. This natural violence is core to Hobbes arguments, as without it would change the dynamic of the State of Nature.

Hobbes first argument is that in a State of Nature there are three principle causes of violence. The first reason, competition, is caused by the finite nature of materials and resources in any given area. Because there is a finite amount of a given resource individuals will fight over it to preserve their life or better their odds of survival. Since all men are equal in the State of Nature, and have the same fundamental obligation to themselves, this will lead to violence over any contested resources. The second reason stems from the inability to determine what another person’s true intentions are. There is no way to tell if someone is plotting against you or not which could lead to preemptive strikes to avoid ambushes, etc. Like the first rule suggests because everyone has the same fundamental obligation, people will use tricks, lies, and deceit to better their position. Hobbes’ third suggest reason for violence is that people may do things to obtain glory or status either to serve as a deterrent for others or to satisfy their own need for it (*Leviathan, 84).* Because of these reason Hobbes concludes that due to the natural violence of man and their pursuit of their fundamental obligation, violence in a State of Nature is unavoidable, and consequently a State of Nature is necessarily a State of War (*Leviathan, 84)*.

The second argument Hobbes’ presents is that all instances of a State of Nature have also been a State of War. Hobbes’ makes this claim and gives the example of the “… savage people in many places of America…” (Leviathan, 84). Claiming that the Native Americans had no government outside of the family. (Leviathan, 84). Hobbes yields that while a State of Nature may have at no point be the state of the entire world that mere possibility of it is justification enough. He continues stating that while it may not exist between men, the State of Nature can be seen by neighboring countries, and how they interact (Leviathan, 85).

The two arguments above allow Hobbes to derive a set of “laws” of nature that explain how a sovereign obtains its power and the extent of that power. The first law is presented by Hobbes with the two premises, all men are obligated to protect their own lives, and that in the State of Nature all men are equal in power and vulnerability. Hobbes concludes that the best way to ensure one’s safety is to seek peace and follow it (*Leviathan*, 87). The second law is a combination of the first law and the fundamental obligation, since the best way to ensure one’s safety is to seek peace and follow it, one ought to relinquish their rights to “all things” and submit to a sovereign who holds absolute power over them to maintain the peace (*Leviathan*, 87).

With the first two laws of nature Hobbes concludes that a rational individual ought to submit to a sovereign power that holds absolute power over all peoples in their dominion. Hobbes claims that the fundamental obligation requires obedience to the sovereign to avoid the society decaying back to a State of Nature. This conclusion is the result of what Hobbes refers to as a contract (a social contract) (*Leviathan*, 88).

As mention previously, one assumption that Hobbes makes is that men are naturally violent when there is nothing to prevent it. This is assumption is simply false. On May 16, 1986 the Spanish National Commission for UNESCO released the “Seville Statement on Violence” that had 5 main points. “That is would be scientifically incorrect to say that; humans inherited a tendency to make war from our animal ancestors, war or any other violent behavior is genetically programmed into our human nature, in the course of human evolution there has been a selection for aggressive behavior more than for other kinds of behavior, humans have a 'violent brain, or that war is caused by 'instinct' or any single motivation” (Jones). Furthermore, Erich Fromm wrote “the more division of labor [advanced] a society the more warlike it is” (Fromm, 174). The quote from Fromm is backed with evidence from Quincy Wrights study of warfare in primitive people. If people are naturally violent it would follow that the less developed societies would be more warlike, yet this is not shown to be true. The opposite is show, the more time that a society has to do things other than survival the more violent they become. If this is true and Hobbes believes that avoiding violence is the best plan to fulfil one’s fundamental obligation, then remaining in a State of Nature with out a sovereign’s power may be a better option.

The question arises, how well does Hobbes’ argument stand when the assumption of natural violence is removed? If the evidence from Wright’s study is considered and societies do in fact become more warlike as they develop, this has a two-fold effect on Hobbes’ arguments. First the State of Nature would not necessarily be violent, while violence increases it is not zero in the State of Nature and if resources necessary for survival is scarce then some violence would still be expected. The Hobbesian State of Nature riddled brutal violence over scarcity, diffidence, and glory is replaced by one with less violence than a society structured as a *Leviathan.* The second effect would be that living in a more developed society would increase the odds of violence and warlike behavior, increasing the odds that one may find themselves in conflicts with fellow citizens or waging war in the name of their absolute ruler. With these effects on Hobbes’ arguments it is hard to say that they stand under this analysis.

Hobbes’ *Leviathan* is described as a government structure that has a singular ruler, whether a single person or counsel. This single ruler has absolute power over all things with in its domain, ranging from property laws to moral law. Because this ruler has absolute power they cannot be removed for any reason. Since they make the laws and their power cannot be questioned by anyone they can appoint their heir without guidance from the citizens, and the citizens would be required to follow that heir the same way that would the previous ruler. “The conditions under the Hobbesian sovereign can become so miserable that citizens will choose to rebel without even caring about the alternative—even if the alternative turns out to be disastrous too” (Khzmalyan). In addition to this problem, the ability of the sovereign to promote what is best for them is high as well. With the exception of their own self-preservation there is nothing that the citizens can resist, meaning that the ruler could exchange things that do not directly take the lives of the subject, minerals for example, and trade them to other nations simply to enrich themselves. Erik Khzmalyan, states that if the Hobbesian idea that men are natural violent and ought to primarily be focused on protecting their own lives, then the ruler would be primarily interested in just that. This would lead to a ruler who would suppress any and all opposition that may arise against them (Khzmalyan). The Hobbesian *Leviathan* as a structure for the power of a sovereign would create an atmosphere that is likely to be no better that what Hobbes claims the State of Nature would be like.

In closing this paper explicated Hobbes’ view of the social contract and how people should act when governed by a sovereign, total submission. Then the Hobbesian State of Nature was shown to be based on a false notion that men are naturally violent. This rebuttal challenges whether the rest of Hobbes’ argument stands without its core assumption. And Lastly it was show that regardless if men are violent by nature or not, he society formed under the *Leviathan* model fails to produce a society any better than that found in the Hobbesian State of Nature.

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