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Philosophy 335

Hobbes and Locke

The concept that a social contract is the basis of a sovereign’s power is not a new concept. This idea can be traced back to primarily Thomas Hobbes, 17th century English philosopher. Thomas Hobbes presents this concept in his book *Leviathan;* this book inspired much talk and thinking through the ages. One person who took to understanding and building their own ideas from Hobbes’ work is John Locke, a contemporary of Hobbes. While Hobbes and Locke both are well known for their works on the topic of the social contract, they have very distinct ideas of how it may come to be. Their ideas of equality in nature, and how this affects what people are willing to do for each other, as well as to what lengths a sovereign’s power reaches are some of the ways they would not agree with each other on. In this paper I will set out to explicate Hobbes and Locke’s ideas on the matter, giving example to highlight the differences between the two’s ideas.

To begin let us first examine Hobbes’ view of what he refers to as “The State of Nature”. Hobbes claims that in this state all men are equal in the sense that no man’s strengths, whether physical or mental, when weigh against another’s could claim to have a substantial advantage over the other. Hobbes’ states “As for ‘strength of body’: the weakest man is strong enough to kill the strongest, either by a secret plot or by an alliance with others who are in the same danger that he is in (Hobbes, *Leviathan 1, 56*)”. Because of the equality of men Hobbes that there is three unavoidable causes of violence, Competition, Distrust, and Glory. These are unavoidable because there is no power large enough to prevent people from doing what Hobbes would call their fundamental obligation. The fundamental obligation is that every person ought to protect their own life and property at all costs.

The list of unavoidable causes of violence Hobbes provides combined with the fundamental obligation cause people in a state of nature to have a constant fear of harm to their person or property. Hobbes defines a state of war as a period in which someone has a legitimate fear of harm at any time. Combining all this information Hobbes deduces his two “laws of nature”. The first law of nature states that individuals in a state of nature should seek peace; and the second law of nature is that a state of nature” is necessarily a state of war.

With his two laws of nature deduced it is easy to see that Hobbes believes that a sovereign’s power comes from the peoples need to seek peace to fulfil their fundamental obligation. Hobbes’ view on the extent of a sovereign’s power is that it is unlimited in every aspect bar one; they cannot order someone to lose their life. Hobbes contends that all citizens should submit to a sovereign’s absolute power no matter the cost (excluding the loss of one’s life) to prevent a state of nature from emerging in the absence of a sovereign.

While John Locke’s view of a state of nature is similar, he defines it as a “…state of perfect freedom of acting and disposing of their own possessions and persons as they think fit within the bounds of the law of nature (Locke, Second Treatise)”. Locke also presents a very Hobbesian concept, that all men are equal in this state, meaning that no individual is naturally given any benefit that puts them above any other man. In this state there is no relationship of subordination or subjection with the exception that God can set people above others and confer them with an undoubtable right to dominion and sovereignty. While they hold similar view points, Locke disagrees with Hobbes when it comes to how men would behave in such a state by claiming that men are naturally social animals and will keep their promises.

Locke also delves into the concept of property and how government is created specifically to protect it. This is in contrast to Hobbes view that it is made specifically for protection. First it helps to define property in Locke’s context; property to Locke is all that a person owns, including their own life. So, to Locke property is one’s life, liberty, and estate. Locke states that property must exist outside the context of government. In the state of nature, the work that an individual puts into obtaining or improving something is what makes it his. By making the claim that government was made specifically to protect its citizens property, Locke is claiming that government serves a private interest, as opposed to a political one. Locke considers that for a government to be legitimate it must be built in a way to ensure that individual’s property must be protected from the government as well. Because of this he objects that an absolute monarchy is not a valid for of government due to its unlimited power over its citizens.

Hobbes’ view is that a sovereign’s power is absolute. He also contends that because the sovereign’s power is so grand that they have the power to seize any property regardless of who obtained or improved it. Locke holds the view that for a sovereign to be legitimate they must protect their citizens private property rights. This dichotomy between the two contemporaries is the largest difference between the twos views of the social contract. As a consequence of this difference in the twos view’s their ideas of what laws a sovereign has the authority to enforce are very different.

Locke clearly would claim that any laws that support a person’s right to protect their own property is among the most important laws that a government could have. Continuing, Locke stats that if a government fails to protect property rights or abuses its power in other aspects, the people have a right to revolt and replace the government with a new, better government. Hobbes, in contrast, believes that the only thing that a government must do is protect the lives and maintain order within its borders. He also claims that there is never a reason to overthrow a government as long as they are not taking the lives of their subjects.