



A Review of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, Their Effect on Today's World

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1. Introduction

Though they differ in many ways, John Locke and Thomas Hobbes are both philosophers that in multiple ways, have contributed to modern philosophy. Today, their contribution to many well-known political issues such as the state of human nature, natural law, social contract, conflict, and civil society just to list a few, are common knowledge. This essay discourses their views, its impact on either or both themselves and the masses, and the criticisms it evoked.

On the issue of the state of human nature: Locke, unlike Hobbes seemed to have faith in man and was more of an optimist. He believed that of his own constitution, man tends to keep their promises, be peaceful, good, and pleasant. Hobbes, who was clearly a pessimist, believed that man's innate characteristic is naturally selfish and wicked. Although, their ideas varied and although Locke began writing a few years after Hobbes, he must have accepted the terms of debate Hobbes had brought up and they must have raised similar questions in their minds such as; how could man live together, when there was no society or when society was no longer effective or persuasive? What was the proper limit of political authority? What justifies such authority and was it limited? If it was indeed limited, what law or system ensured that they did not exceed their limits?

2. The Early Years of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes

"Every man has a property in his own person. This nobody has a right to, but himself." This quote was made by John Locke, a highly influential English philosopher and physician whose works are today, situated at the founding of the philosophical belief of empiricism and political liberalism.

John Locke was born in Wrington, a village in the English county of Somerset, England on August 29, 1632. He went to Westminster school and the University of Oxford, where he studied medicine. Both his parents raised him as a puritan to follow very strict moral and religious rules about the proper way to behave and live. His father, a military man, had served the English government during the civil war that took place from 1642–1651 as a captain. Therefore, due to his connections he was able to provide an exceptional education for Locke. At the age of fifteen, he entered the Westminster School in London, where he earned the title "King's Scholar" that enabled him to attend Christ Church—

of Oxford's most esteemed schools— later in 1652. There he immersed himself in logic, metaphysics, and the classical languages. Four years later, he graduated but still returned to Christ Church in 1658 for a master's degree and afterwards, tutored at the college¹.

Thomas Hobbes, on the other hand, was born on April 5, 1588, which was historically the year that the Spanish Armada attempted to invade England. With his uncle's sponsorship, he was able to study in the university at Oxford; as he was born to only a disgraced village vicar. There his intellectual talents were recognized and developed. These— in addition to his uncle's support and self maturity— gained him a place in tutoring the son of the Cavendishes family who were important and noble. His association with this family brought him closer to his philosophical career. He was then able to enter circles where the activities of the King, the Members of Parliament, and other influential and wealthy landowners were discussed.

Locke was also politically influenced. Early in his medical studies, he met Lord Ashley whose association deeply affected his professional career and political thoughts. Afterwards, Lord Ashley became the Earl of Shaftsbury and persuaded Locke to move to London to be his personal physician. As Shaftsbury elevated, Locke's responsibilities corresponded. Locke also supported in his business and political matters. So later, after Shaftsbury became chancellor, Locke was made his secretary of presentations.

Shaftsbury himself, presented a political image as one of the founders of the Whig party, a major British political group in the late 17th through the early 19th century that aimed at constitutional monarchism and opposed the Tory system which was then in place. So, he was well equipped to influence Locke.

3. The State of Human Nature

Both philosophers expansively explained the state of nature; that is, what man tends to do of its own accord. In summary, Hobbes believed it to be wicked and selfish, whereas Locke had a more positive light.

3.1 Hobbes's view

Man, in Hobbes's defense is not a social animal. According to his greatest work the *Leviathan*, life of man in the state of nature is, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short". He was deeply convinced about this and concluded that because men do not know good or bad, they should hand their life and rights to a supreme ruler, where they would be contained under a strong government. Thus, his firm belief in the monarchy system of government where the monarch had absolute power. Hobbes was also certain of many things regarding his belief. He was sure of war of "every man against every man" as he put it, and that the traits of selfishness and wickedness in man were natural. The human race could not change these things about themselves and will always have these traits².

In his view of the "natural" condition, human beings lack government, which according to him, is an authority created by men. Hobbes belief in the equal capacity for men to threaten themselves strongly opposes the natural or God-given source of authority supposedly given to monarchs to order man's life. His most basic argument is threefold. First, he thinks we will violently compete, to have the necessary things of life and probably other material gains. The next argument he put forth was that we would challenge others and fight out of fear for our personal safety. Last, he believes that man would seek glory, mainly to protect itself.³

3.2 Locke's view

On Locke's view regarding the state of nature, it is first, a state of perfect freedom; second, a state of equality; and third, bound by a law of nature. This view, put in a clear and concise manner, Locke's believe in the three natural rights of life, liberty, and property. He thought that man could improve himself through time, and learn from what they have done in the past. He concluded that the life of humans honored each other's objectives and knew what was right and wrong. Therefore, humans are intelligent enough to solve the problems in front of them and realize what is lawful and unlawful. Life was simply pleasant and peaceful.

¹ Substantive revision Sat Aug 23, 2008. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hobbes-moral/> Lloyd, Sharon A. "John Locke." Sun Sep 2, 2001; substantive revision Sat May 5, 2007. <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/locke/>

² "Philosophy." *The Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia*, 6th ed. Copyright © 2007, Columbia University Press. 7 Feb. 2010

³ <http://www.blupete.com/Literature/Biographies/Philosophy/Hobbes.htm> Williams, Garrath. "Hobbes's Moral and Political Philosophy." Tue Feb 12, 2002;

John Locke's idea was that from experience, people could govern their personal lives and take care of their own problems. He believed in an equalized system of government where people somewhat carved their paths through the choices they make in life. Therefore, to him the natural human behavior came from thought, that was learned, and subject to the influence of reason and observation⁴.

4. The Natural Rights of Man

Hobbes, Locke and other philosophers have used the pre-societal condition to imagine how humans might have been without a society and to define natural rights.

In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes pointed out that humans had the natural rights to survive. He also argued that in the natural state, man has a right of nature to use its abilities to survive. According to the book *Natural Right and History*, by Leo Strauss, this implies that the root of justice is not just "a duty but a right ... the fundamental and inalienable right of self preservation".

Hobbes does not mean to reason that others have a corresponding duty to respect someone else's right of survival. It is actually just the opposite. Therefore, Hobbes' right of nature is more of a statement of justification for an individual to act, not a statement of 'right'.

John Locke was one philosopher who believed that people have equal rights to life, freedom, and property is the right man has by nature. He argued in *An Essay Concerning the True Extent and End of Civil Government* that humans were born with such natural rights.

Taking a closer look at natural rights from a religious standpoint, it could be viewed as the obligations that God passes down or hands over to man. That thought supported Locke's belief. In the case of the right to life, it seems to be established by God's commandment 'Thou shall not kill.'

5. The Social Contract

According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, a social contract is "an actual or hypothetical agreement among the members of an organized society or between a community and its ruler that defines and limits the rights and duties of each".

Hobbes again throws a negative light on the social contract. He believes that when a society is put in place, man has virtually 'no right' at all. In this scenario, humans have no choice but to do as they are told to spare their lives. Then again, Hobbes insists that because the sovereign tells and wills what is good or bad, he can do no wrong. In such a state, man has no right to rebel. In Hobbes's myth of the social contract, everyone except the sovereign ruler lays down his or her right to everything. They agree to limit their natural rights, retaining only the right to defend their lives. The sovereign, however, retains his right of nature.

In the case where man does wrong, it gives up its right to itself, as a punishment for its crimes. Locke believed this, and that we could retain our three natural rights. If the ruler tries to violate this agreement by probably seeking sovereignty, he puts himself in a state of war with the people who can choose to rebel against him.

Locke also believed that an absolute ruler could be over-thrown by the people if the choices they are making neglect many things that the people enjoy.

The government is meant to protect the rights and improve the state of nature for each individual. An illegitimate government would neither protect these rights, nor listen to what the people have to say. For a government to work, ideas need to be taken from everyone and applied to the rights of each person.

6. Their Effect on Today's World

In Locke's landmark, the *Two Treatises of Government* he wrote put forth his revolutionary ideas concerning the natural rights of man and the social contract. Both concepts not only stirred waves in England, but also influenced the intellectual basis that brought about the American and French revolutions.

In England with the mid-seventeenth-century era of repression, rebellion, and civil war, there was a tremendous

⁴ <http://www.infoplease.com/ce6/people/A0859328.html> Dawson, Dawn P. "John Locke." *Dictionary of World Biography Volume IV The 17th and 18th Centuries*. 2005.

outpouring of political pamphlets and tracts. Among all of them, the most influential emerged from Locke.

Hobbes is viewed today as the founding father of modern political philosophy. Directly or indirectly, he has set the terms of debate about the fundamentals of political life right into our times. Though his theory is unacceptable to many, we still live in the world that Hobbes addressed head on: a world where human authority is something that requires justification, and is automatically accepted by few; a world where social and political inequality also appears questionable; and a world where religious authority faces significant dispute. We can put the matter in terms of the concern with equality and rights that Hobbes's thought heralded: we live in a world where all human beings are supposed to have rights, that is, moral claims that protect their basic interests⁵.

7. Conclusion

Could it be so that both philosophers and their beliefs were wrong? Could they have been right? Hobbes held beliefs that showed a poor outlook on society and he had believed that humans were naturally evil. His interpretation of the human race was quite different from that of Locke who believed that humans were naturally good and had ideas that were positive to the human race.

As for Thomas Hobbes, few have liked his thesis that the problems of political life mean that a society should accept an unaccountable sovereign as its sole political authority. Some blame it on his background saying that the social and political turmoil he grew up with affected his life and shaped his thoughts. Hobbes's greatest fear was social and political chaos and he had many opportunities both to observe it and to suffer its devastating effects.

Locke was openly against the monarch system of government that existed in his time. His works were based on examining the nature of human knowledge from which we would also see clearly that like Hobbes; his environment also influenced his reasoning in the sense that at times they had a religious background.

Though different in opinions, there is no doubt that both philosophers were after peaceful coexistence and the best government for man. Truly examining their work, their beliefs are not wrong. They are both different paths that could probably work in different conditions.

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