Locke versus Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes

(1588-1679)
The **Leviathan** (1651) is the most complete expression of Hobbes's philosophy. It begins with a clearly materialistic account of human nature and knowledge, a rigidly deterministic account of human volition, and a pessimistic vision of the consequently natural state of human beings in perpetual struggle against each other. It is to escape this grim fate, Hobbes argued, that we form the commonwealth, surrendering our individual powers to the authority of an absolute sovereign. For Hobbes, then, individual obedience to even an arbitrary government is necessary in order to forestall the greater evil of an endless state of war.

Man is not naturally good, Hobbes claimed, but naturally a selfish hedonist -- "of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself". As human motives were, in their natural state, guided by
unenlightened self-interest, these could, if left unchecked, have highly destructive consequences. Left unrestrained, humans, propelled by their internal dynamics, would crash against each other. Hobbes tried to envision what society would be like in a "state of nature" -- before any civil state or rule of law. His conclusion was dispiriting: life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short", a "war of every man against every man".

Nonetheless, as all people are equal (in a physical not a moral sense), possessing a passionate love of survival (right of nature) and some degree of rationality (law of nature); Hobbes concluded that a viable, working society would arise as equilibrium between these competing forces. The logic is simple. Any person's right of nature justifies violence against everybody else. Consequently, in the interests of personal survival, people will come around to agreeing that they should renounce their right to use violence. However, this yields up a tense and unstable equilibrium. The moment one party deviates from their promise, all will deviate and war restarts.

To keep society going with peace and confidence, then an artifice -- a Leviathan -- must be worked into the social contract. This Leviathan is the State -- whether in the form of an absolute monarch or a democratic
parliament, it does not matter. The important point is that the State will be given a monopoly on violence and absolute authority. In return, the State promises to exercise its absolute power to maintain a state of peace (by punishing deviants, etc.) Realizing that its power depends wholly on the willingness of the citizenry to surrender theirs, the State itself will have an incentive not to abuse it. Of course, there is no guarantee that it won't. But when it does, it must brace itself for the consequences.

One of the interesting elements of Hobbes's story is that concepts like morality, liberty, justice, property, etc. have no natural, intrinsic or eternal meaning. They are pure social constructions. They are generated and imposed by the Leviathan, through his laws and institutions, to keep war and social disorder at bay. As history has shown, no set of values will last forever but will evolve as circumstances change.

Hobbes is particularly keen to note that law itself is completely dependent on power. A law without a credible and powerful authority behind it is just simply not a law in any meaningful sense. Hobbes is thus one of the progenitors of "legal positivism", i.e. that justice is whatever the law says it is. An "unjust law" is simply an oxymoron.
In the context of the age, Hobbes's theory seemed to argue that Parliament's rebellion was illegitimate as long as Charles was king. But once the head of King Charles I fell, then all rebellion against the Parliament becomes illegitimate. For Hobbes, power legitimates, power is justice. The State -- whatever its form -- is always, by definition, right, as long as it is capable of maintaining civil peace.

**John Locke**

*(1632-1704)*
John Locke was a British philosopher, Oxford academic and medical researcher, and revolutionary whose cause ultimately triumphed in the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Much of Locke's work is characterized by opposition to authoritarianism. This opposition is both on the level of the individual person and on the level of institutions such as government and church.
For the individual, Locke wants each of us to use reason to search after truth rather than simply accept the opinion of authorities or be subject to superstition. He wants us to proportion assent to propositions to the evidence for them. On the level of institutions it becomes important to distinguish the legitimate from the illegitimate functions of institutions and to make the corresponding distinction for the uses of force by these institutions. The positive side of Locke's anti-authoritarianism is that he believes that using reason to try to grasp the truth and determining the legitimate functions of institutions will optimize human flourishing for the individual and society both in respect to its material and spiritual welfare.

This in turn, amounts to following natural law and the fulfillment of the divine purpose for humanity. Locke's monumental An Essay Concerning Human Understanding concerns itself with determining the limits of human understanding in respect to God, the self, natural kinds and artifacts, as well as a variety of different kinds of ideas. We can, he thinks, know with certainty that God exists. We can also know about morality with the same precision we know about mathematics, because we are the creators of moral
and political ideas.

In regard to natural substances we can know only the appearances and not the underlying realities which produce those appearances. It thus tells us in some detail what one can legitimately claim to know and what one cannot. Locke also wrote a variety of important political, religious and educational works including the *Two Treatises of Government*, the *Letters Concerning Toleration*, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* and *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*

Locke's *Two Treatises of Civil Government* was published after the Glorious Revolution of 1688 brought William of Orange and Mary to the throne, but they were written in the throes of the Whig revolutionary plots against Charles II in the early 1680s. In this work Locke gives us a *theory*
of natural law and natural rights which he uses to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate civil governments, and to argue for the legitimacy of revolt against tyrannical governments.

Locke wrote on a variety of other topics. Among the most important of these is toleration. Henry VIII had created a Church of England when he broke with Rome. This Church was the official religion of England. Catholics and dissenting Protestants, e.g. Quakers, Unitarians and so forth, were subject to legal prosecution. During much of the Restoration period there was debate, negotiation and maneuvering to include dissenting Protestants within the Church of England. In a "Letter Concerning Toleration" and several defenses of that letter Locke argues for a separation between church and state.
In *Two Treatises of Government* he has **two purposes in view**: to **refute the doctrine of the divine and absolute right of the Monarch**, as it had been put forward by Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha*, and to establish a theory which would **reconcile the liberty of the citizen with political order**. The criticism of Filmer in the first *Treatise* is complete. His theory of the absolute sovereignty of Adam, and so of kings as Adam's heirs, has lost all interest; and Locke's argument has been only too effective: his exhaustive reply to so absurd a thesis becomes itself wearisome.

Although there is little direct reference to Hobbes, Locke seems to have had Hobbes in mind when he
argued that the doctrine of absolute monarchy leaves sovereign and subjects in the state of nature towards one another. The constructive doctrines which are elaborated in the second treatise became the basis of social and political philosophy for generations.

Labor is the origin and justification of property; contract or consent is the ground of government and fixes its limits. Behind both doctrines lies the idea of the independence of the individual person. The state of nature knows no government; but in it, as in political society, men are subject to the moral law, which is the law of God. Men are born free and equal in rights. Whatever a man "mixes his labour with" is his to use. Or, at least, this was so in the primitive condition of human life in which there was enough for all and "the whole earth was America."

Locke sees that, when men have multiplied and land has become scarce, rules are needed beyond those which the moral law or law of nature supplies. But the origin of government is traced not to this economic necessity, but to another cause. The moral law is always valid, but it is not always kept. In the state of nature all men equally have the right to punish transgressors: civil society originates when, for the better administration of the law, men agree to delegate this function to certain officers. Thus government is
instituted by a "social contract"; its powers are limited, and they involve reciprocal obligations; moreover, they can be modified or rescinded by the authority which conferred them. Locke's theory is thus no more historical than Hobbes'. It is a rendering of the facts of constitutional government in terms of thought, and it served its purpose as a justification of the Revolution settlement in accordance with the ideas of the time.

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