

HOBBS AND LOCKE REVISITED: ON UNDERSTANDING, NATURE AND THE SOVEREIGN IN THE 21st CENTURY

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Abstract: This paper would revisit Hobbes and Locke's work, namely *Leviathan* and *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding* so as to reconnect the work of the two philosophers to the present reading of politics and philosophy. The paper discusses Hobbes and Locke's importance in laying the foundations for the field of political science and acknowledges their role for incorporating human reason and understanding in their seminal works. And in the age of 21st century of modern politics where strife and dissent are commonplace in the era of technology and interconnectivity, perhaps it is timely that Hobbes and Locke's fundamental philosophies are re-emphasized for their core focus on humanity and reasoning in the perspective of the sovereign state and the individual.

Keywords: Hobbes, Locke, state, nature, law, philosophy, political science

John Locke and Thomas Hobbes, both great thinkers of 17th and 18th century England, wrote extensively on various fields of knowledge. At such a time in England, where knowledge knows no bounds, there was no one area of specialization where one could actually draw a line and reside without overlapping various fields of study. Hence Hobbes and especially Locke wrote furiously on the fields of religion, medicine, education, history, law, politics, political theory, philosophy and unknowingly, psychology. Both were radicals of their age who wrote upon and survived the first civil war of England, between Charles I and the Parliament; a tormenting time especially for John Locke when he became an exile during the reign of King James. The work of Hobbes and Locke were unparalleled and far exceeding the mind frame of their peers. Hobbes wrote the *Leviathan* in 1651 while Locke wrote on numerous topics; his principal philosophical work is *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, published in 1690.

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John Locke (1632-1704) was from a puritan background. Born in Bristol, he was educated in Westminster school in 1646 and proceeded to do his BA and MA in Christ Church, Oxford in 1652. His father, a modest landowner and lawyer in Somerset, saw action in the Royalist army where he was a soldier. Locke remained in Oxford for somewhat of a while as a tutor and a lecturer and eventually proceeded to do a Bachelor of Medicine in 1674. It was during his 15 years at Oxford that Locke met several important figures in the developing new sciences, among them Newton, Robert Boyle, Robert Hooke, John Wallis, John Wilkins, and Dr. Thomas Sydenham who later formed the prestigious Royal Society, of whom Locke was also a member.

A chance meeting with Lord Anthony Ashley Cooper changed Locke's life forever. Lord Ashley later became the first Earl of Shaftesbury and rose to prominence as Lord High Chancellor and played an active role in Charles II reign. He was later promoted to Lord President of the Privy Council and was also the founder of the Whig Party. Locke, during this time was a physician to the Earl but a later reversal of fortune saw Locke and the Earl as exiles in Holland when the latter fell out of favor with King Charles II. It was during his exile in Holland that he wrote *The Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (henceforth known as *The Essay*) as a result of several liberal discussions with his friends.

The Essay is divided into four books, the first being called *Of Innate Notions*; the second is *Of Ideas*, book three: *Of Words*, and finally book four, *Of Knowledge and Opinion*. Overall, the *Essay* is an examination of the nature of the human mind and its powers of understanding. Locke starts his argument in book one by launching an attack against the philosophy of Platonic-Aristotelian tradition prevalent in Locke's time, especially at Oxford. The essence of Locke's thought is his theory of knowledge and hence his opposition towards the innate ideas of Plato which Aristotle expanded soon after. According to the mainstream idea proposed by Plato, one's ideas or values are innate and remain hidden since the day one is born. These ideas or values are acquired from our previous world. We only recognize them when one enters the world and is exposed slowly by the process of learning, which now becomes a process of reminiscence. What Aristotle did later was to propose that the "power or reason was

not self-initiating but needed sensory stimulus”¹. Plato also gives credit to the human mind that develops from learning but Locke rejects this theory because the human senses are not taken into consideration. Locke rejects the notion of conscious thought because if it was true, then wars wouldn’t happen since we are born with innate moral principles.

In book two, Locke provides a lengthy account of the origin, the multiplicity and the extent of our ideas. He stresses that it is through our own experience that ideas originate from. Also, experience could be obtained from the observation of external objects or through the internal workings of our mental mind. Locke gives his famous example of the mind as a “white paper or wax to be molded”, a “tabula rasa”² that is waiting to be stamped by the formula of sense and experience.

The sense at first let in particular ideas, and furnishes this yet empty cabinet and the mind by degrees growing familiar with some of them, they are lodged in the memory, and names got to them. Afterwards the mind, proceeding further, abstracts them, and by degrees learns the use of general names. In this manner the mind comes to be furnished with ideas and language, the materials about which to exercise its discursive faculty. And the use of reason becomes daily more visible, as these materials that give it employment rise³.

In book three, entitled *Of Words*, Locke examines words, their substances, relations and modes including the problems of communication associated with them. According to Locke, words can easily be abused. Words stand for ideas in the minds of the user, and thus when a speaker coins a word; its meaning could differ to another listener. Since the mind is open to the composition of word and their modes, some words that are outside the mind an only at best, refers to their nominal essences (that is to the complex idea that the word stands for).

Book four meanwhile defines knowledge as the perception of the agreement and disagreement of ideas. According to Locke, ideas are intuitive, demonstrative or sensitive. Knowledge not under this categorization is opinions; and Locke discusses too, the relations between faith and reason. Faith, according to Locke is the firm assent of the mind, which should not be in agreement to anything except for

¹ M.V.C. Jeffreys (1967). *John Locke: Prophet of Common Sense*. London: Methuen and Co., p.45.

² *Ibidem*, p.46.

³ *Ibidem*, p.47.

good reason. Enlightenment must be judged by reason and Locke also mentions that God through our faith could help to add-on to our world of knowledge.

It is through his reasonableness and simplicity of seeing things through his own eye that he says, "Knowing is seeing, we cannot see through another man's eyes"⁴. Critics have said that no one else before Locke gave such a systematic account of the operations of the mind; his empirical theory of knowledge has captivated many 18th century scholars and logicians such as William Duncan, Edward Bentham and William Baron. It is thru Locke's classifications of the operations of the human mind "...simple apprehension, perception, judgment, and reasoning"⁵ that according to Robert Blakey "has given birth to more diversified series of logical systems and speculation, as well as modes of teaching than any other work since the day of Aristotle"⁶. Another note of importance is the contributions of Locke's work which help developed the foundations of psychology. It is through the careful analysis of the various operations, faculties and capacities of the human mind, including the mental activity discussed in the *Essay* that has laid the genesis to the emerging science of psychology.

Such was the impact of Locke's *Essay* that it very well set the tone of thinking well into the 18th century. It was not only the epistemology that was brilliant but his theory of knowledge, coupled with Locke's psychological-epistemological doctrines that opened the gateway to a whole new world of sciences equally important as the religious and moral doctrines of that era. Locke's doctrines were far reaching even to 18th century English and French philosophy. John W. Yolton comments in *The Locke Reader*:

Locke's influence on 18th century thought in Britain is extensive. Often that influence goes along with that of the Cartesians and Malebranche. The nature of human action (e.g., how I am able to move my arm), the physiological basis for thought and action, the connection or lack of connection between thought and matter: these were eighteenth-century issues that re repeatedly traced to Locke's formulation of them in the 17th century. One can find, in the tracts and pamphlets of the 18th century, frequent usage of Lockean terminology and concepts. That

⁴ *Ibidem*, p.55.

⁵ John W. Yolton (ed.) (1977). *The Locke Reader: Selections from the Works of John Locke with a General Introduction and Commentary*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.6.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

usage is found not only in the logics but in works on science, in the sermons and books of theologians.⁷

To conclude, one could very well say that John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* is a remarkable piece of work that very well set the standard for the new age of philosophy. Often described as a witty person, Locke's yearnings were simple but his thinking was great, the pursuit of truth is all that he seeks. He describes truth as the "proper riches and furniture of the mind"⁸.

Thomas Hobbes, another great philosopher whose work *Leviathan: Or the Matter, Forme, and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil* strongly influenced the way political thinking was shaped, was born in 1588 at Westport and lived to an old ripe age of ninety one. Educated at Magdalen Hall, Hobbes later became a tutor to the son of William Cavendish, Earl of Devonshire, and was privileged to make use of the family library where he indulged himself in the classics.

Leviathan, published in 1651, is a voluminous work on a treatise of political philosophy. This was done, after his tiresome study of the classics for solution to the potential instability of English society and the English state. Hobbes wrote at a time of great political upheaval. At that time, the parliament had beheaded King Charles I and this caused much uproar because the beheading of an English monarch was considered barbaric. Cromwell took over the reins of government with autocratic fervor but created a stable English society devoid of chaos and insurgencies. Hobbes thus thinks that absolute governance is the best because through this way, law and order is ensured for the good of the society and the individual. Hobbes thus stresses on the importance of the concept of absolute power that should eventually be given to the sovereign. The *Leviathan* which contains such a discourse is Hobbes prescribed formula of political science for the attainment of civil peace and "commodious living"⁹. Deeply influenced by Francis Bacon and Galileo Galilee whom he had met in Florence, Hobbes adopted the methods employed in the world of sciences, mathematics and especially geometry in the research of his work, as a result, Hobbes

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ M.V.C. Jeffreys, *op cit*, p.49.

⁹ C.B. Macpherson (1968). "Introduction to *Leviathan*", in Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*. C.B. Macpherson (ed.). Harmondsworth: Penguin, p.30.

published in 1640 *Elements of Law, Natural and Politics*, which was a study on political theory using the methods of geometry.

Hobbes was engrossed with Galileo's law of inertia of whom the latter postulated that all matter moved unless something else stops them that he applied this to the motions of men and he came up with a theory that would explain their motions as relative to one another. Hobbes then could explain what kind of government would enable them to maintain and make full use of their motions.

Such was the thinking of Hobbes that he divided some chapters of the *Leviathan* according to the mechanism by which a human being operates. All in all, the *Leviathan* consists of four parts with a total of 47 chapters. Hobbes' first proposition is the theory of human nature in society. "Men are moved by appetites and aversions"¹⁰. Hobbes simplifies this by calling "appetites" and "aversions" as endeavors which sets the pace for motion. Thus, Hobbes theorizes that the "appetites" and "aversions" determines men's voluntary actions. A man's power is defined as being two kinds, "Natural" or "Instrumental".

Natural Power is the eminence of the Faculties of Body, or Mind: an extraordinary strength, Fame, Prudence, Arts, Eloquence, Liberality, and Nobility. Instrumental are those Powers, which acquired by these, or by fortune, are means and instruments to acquire more: Riches, Reputation, Friends, and the secret working of God, which men call Good Luck.¹¹.

Thus, Hobbes defines men's power as the faculties of body and mind plus what further powers he acquires by using them. He postulates also that every man's power resist and hinders the effects of other man's power. Therefore, there is competition in the seeking of riches, friends, and reputation as well as the overlapping spheres of power. Things become complicated when some men's desires are without limits and they desire more power than others. Therefore the competitive struggle for power over others that is universal becomes a harmful thing.

Hobbes proceeds further to talk about nature and contract. He begins with the idea that life is motion and "every man...shuns what is evil, but chiefly the chief of natural evils, which is death; and this he doth, by a certain impulsion of nature, no less than that whereby a

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p.30.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p.34.

stone moves downward”¹². Thus Hobbes introduces the term of “the state of nature”. The state of nature is one of general war where there is no law and regulations, man would be open to invasions to his life and property and thus commodious and civilized life is impossible. Civilized men would be wise enough to leave this state of nature. Hobbes then introduces the term “natural rights” and “natural law”.

The right of nature is the liberty that each man uses to do whatever that he can, for the preservation of his own nature and life. Similarly with the law of nature, which every reasonable man should adopt is a law governed by reason. Men then should act according to his reason and should not do what is destructive to his life. The first law of nature is that “every man should endeavor Peace”¹³, while the second law is that “that a man be willing, when others are so too...to lay down his right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself”¹⁴. A reasonable man must therefore, if he was in a state of nature, give up the right to do or to take anything and invade anybody else, provided everyone would do the same. This would then acquire a covenant, a contract or agreement by which all men should renounce their rights of nature to establish an external power. Since men are creatures with “appetites” and “aversion” they might rebel at any given time and take back their rights. To avoid this, a transfer of their right to a person or some persons to make the covenant valid must be done. Hobbes comments “covenants, without the Sword, are but Words, and of no strength to secure a man at all”¹⁵. Reasonable men in the state of nature thus must give up their right to everything and also to transfer their natural powers to protect themselves from the “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short”¹⁶ life of the natural world. The transfer of the right and power will constitute the obligation of the person to the established authority, a sovereign monarch or a sovereign assembly. What constitutes, as a “commonwealth” then, would be established.

Hobbes was very careful with the dominion of the church, in his work; he plays safe by justifying the power of the sovereign by putting the church under the jurisdiction of the state. However the

¹² *Ibidem.* p.39.

¹³ Margaret Drabble and Jenny Stringer (eds.) (1996). *The Concise Oxford Companion to English Literature*. Oxford University Press, p.335.

¹⁴ *Ibidem.*

¹⁵ C.B. Macpherson, *op.cit.*, p.44.

¹⁶ Margaret Drabble and Jenny Stringer (eds.), *op cit.*, p.335.

sovereign or assembly of men is subject a certain a limitation. If the said authority fails to discharge it duties or breaks the covenant made for which the sovereign is established, then the people could refuse obedience.

One can say that Hobbes has proven his point, that if men were in state of nature, the only reasonable thing to do would be to leave it by means of handing over all their rights and powers upon one man, or upon one assembly of men. What then could Hobbes is saying to civilized men who did not live in state of nature? What Hobbes was trying to reaffirm was that, unless they fulfilled the same responsibilities; they were in a constant danger of falling back towards a state of nature. Therefore, they must knowledge their full allegiance to the sovereign.

Similarly, Locke wrote on the same subject of nature and his justification for government. This could be found in Locke's *Two Treatise of Government* written in 1690. What is of importance is the "Second Treatise" (specifically entitled *Of Civil Government*) in which Locke discusses the notion of the state of nature. The state of nature according to Locke is one state of complete freedom. In this sense, it is only freedom from the will of other men. It is also a state of equality since all men have "the same advantage of nature and the use of the same faculties"¹⁷. This equality however is only in terms of "power" and "jurisdiction", because in the state of nature, men have no political superiors. However the complete freedom of man is on the condition that they do not violate the law of nature. Locke sets in further condition to the law of nature; that men shall not harm one another or any way including his life, freedom and possessions.

One might content to argue that if the state of nature is so peaceful, why then should men leave it. The solution that Locke advocates is similar to Hobbes. In such tranquility, there exist offenders to this idyllic state, men who act against reason and invade the rights of others. Thus, men can punish such "offenders" but such reparation is bound to be emotionally led or the punishment meted out could be carried out unfairly. Locke then brings in the role of the government to "provide an impartial authority to punish offence against the law of nature and to decide controversies between individual citizens"¹⁸.

¹⁷ J.D. Mabbott (1973). *John Locke (Philosophers in Perspective)*. London: Macmillan, p.142.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p.144.

Locke's overall view of men is that they are a peaceful lot and abide the law of nature. The state of nature is unpredictable according to Locke and what men face as the greatest obstacle is the threat to their property by men who does not abide by the law of nature. Men will be thus driven onto society by the constant threat to their property.

If one were to make a comparison between Hobbes' *Leviathan* and Locke's *Two Treatises*; it become clear that the latter views men in the state of nature as naturally good, inclined to listen to reason and thus having natural rights. Hobbes meanwhile dismisses the natural man as having no rights and moral standards; they are "by nature evil"¹⁹. Locke highlights that the one great threat to men in the state of nature is the threat to life and in order to provide such security, they must enter a civilized society. For Hobbes, it is the threat to life in the natural state and any men with enough reason should abandon this state and enter into the protection of the sovereign power.

The work of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke has filled the vacuum of intellectual thought, propelled the study of philosophy to greater heights and created an impact so great in their time; that many generations would benefit from their deep and powerful insights. Their works provide a glimpse into the society of 17th and 18th century England, a glimpse at the economy, history, revolution, struggles and conflicts that will be noted down in the annals of history. Hobbes achieves this by means of various propositions, in Galileo's method of resolution and composition, observation, logical combination through the imagination of the human mind and strong composite reasoning and for his effort we must truly give him credit for his contributions. Locke does brilliantly as well, his theories revolutionize the way we think and behave and such were his contributions to the multiple fields of knowledge it has enriched it to unimaginable extends. Their works contribute to the good will of men, seeking peace and stability in what they thought to be an era of conflict, oppression and struggle. It was such a time that their works gave that much sought after light in a time of political upheaval that threatened the stability of 17th and 18th century English society. Such revolutions in thought and philosophy thus propelled Hobbes and Locke into the annals of the great thinkers of our civilization.

¹⁹ Leo Strauss (1963). *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Its Genesis*. Trans. Elsa M. Sinclair. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, p.13.

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