Hobbesian and Lockean Responses to Aristotle on Political Association

Does a human being naturally live in association with others? What is the political structure that best allows for human flourishing? Questions concerning justice, human freedom, community, and political association have been central to philosophy and politics for thousands of years. In the line of Socrates and Plato, Aristotle sought to provide answers about human nature and how people relate to one another. While Plato focused almost entirely on the mind and reason and distrusted the physical senses, Aristotle also grounded his epistemology in perception and evidence. In addition to being a philosopher, he was also a marine biologist and scientist and viewed knowledge as a logical synthesis of reason and observation. The tutor of Alexander III of Macedon and founder of his own school, Aristotle drew conclusions about human nature found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, *Politics*, and other works, and these ideas have had a lasting influence on philosophy, politics, and ethics. In 17th century England, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke produced writings on the nature of the individual and political association. As a result of his observations and reasoning, Aristotle had believed that humans could figure out objective grounds for moral truth. He claimed that the human *telos*, or purpose, is *eudaimonia*, or happiness, and that people exist by nature in a *polis*. Hobbes, a monarchist, and Locke, a classical liberal, deviated from Aristotelian thought by expressing a material view of human nature in which humans create the *polis* by will and consent to exist under government rule.

Aristotle developed his claim that the state is as natural as the existence of an individual in his work *Politics*, which is a synthesis of his research and conclusions concerning the *polis* and political regimes. The Athenian philosopher, who wrote during

the Classical period of Ancient Greece, viewed politics as a branch of ethics that studied how to live well together in a society. While introducing his theory of political association, Aristotle contended that "it is evident that the city belongs to the class of things that exist by nature, and that man is by nature a political animal."[1] This quote is often misused in modern conversation, because Aristotle intended to emphasize that a human is a being that by nature lives in a *polis* and that this characteristic makes people distinctly human. Similar to his teacher, Plato, Aristotle sought to answer questions such as, "what does it mean to live well?" Because "we thus see that the city exists by nature and that it is prior to the individual," it is fundamental to living the good life for men and women to exist knowing their "natural impulse…towards an association of this sort."[2] Without the state to secure human flourishing, and therefore "isolated from law and justice," Aristotle viewed a man as "the worst of all [animals]."[3] Moreover, Aristotle, informed and shaped by his studies as a scientist, maintained that each thing had a *telos*, a purpose or aim. A human's *telos*, he concluded, is *eudaimonia*, or happiness, achieved by living ethically with virtues, character traits that are means between an excess and deficiency of attributes. The state, or *polis*, exists naturally to secure this good life. Therefore, the *telos* of a person is *eudaimonia*, and the *telos* of the state is living well. It is from this foundation that Aristotle continues in *Politics* to critique and analyze different political regimes and constitutions throughout Greece. Communitarianism, which is later seen in the early Christian church and is a philosophy that has continued into modern times, is central to Aristotelian thought. Aristotle viewed it as improper and

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1. Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2.1253a2.
2. Aristotle, *Politics* 1.2.1253a25.
3. Ibid.

wrong to think of humans in any context outside of the *polis*. Without the state and without justice, flourishing is unachievable. While the Founding Fathers of the United States agreed that the state existed for human flourishing, they believed that people entered into a contract with the state to secure happiness and individual rights. The roots of this belief, antithetical to Aristotelian political theory, are found in Thomas Hobbes and John Locke.

Thomas Hobbes, an English political and moral philosopher, developed social contract theory, which espoused the idea that the state is a creation of human will and that the individual precedes the state. Hobbes' conception of the nature of the state contradicted Aristotle's emphasis on the priority of the state. Contrary to Aristotle, the English philosopher believed that no human *telos* existed and that rather than being a political animal, man creates the *polis* by will and contract. Hobbes' views have continued to be central to political theory and were largely advocated in his book *Leviathan*, which was written in the middle of the 17th century to justify royalist claims during the English Civil War. Reflecting on the human condition when left to itself, he wrote that "the laws of nature, as justice, equity, modesty, mercy, and, in sum, doing to others as we would be done to, of themselves, without the terror of some power to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions, that carry us to partiality, pride, revenge, and the like."[4] This pessimistic view of human nature is linked to Hobbes' imagination of the "state of nature." While Aristotle viewed the natural state of man as living in a *polis*, Hobbes viewed man as naturally isolated. In this state, there is no government, and people are "in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of

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4. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* XVII.

every man against every man."[5] An individual's only right in this scenario is self-preservation, and the option of entering into political association assists this preservation. The individual desires of man in Hobbes' political philosophy are restrained when people enter into a covenant with one another, creating the political state. This covenant, or contract, is initiated when people voluntarily introduce "that restraint upon themselves…[as] the foresight of their own preservation" and live a "more contented life thereby; that is to say, of getting themselves out from that miserable condition of war."[6] Hobbes thought that people should vest the power to restrain natural desires in an authority above themselves. He maintained that the best governmental structure was one of absolute sovereignty, a monarchy, and stood for the absolute power of the king. This absolutist right of a sovereign is seen in *Leviathan* when Hobbes asserts that the subjects "shall authorize all the actions and judgments of that man, or assembly of men [in power], in the same manner as if they were his own, to the end to live peaceably amongst themselves, and be protected against other men."[7] While Hobbes rejected Aristotelian notions of a human *telos*, *eudaimonia* in the Hobbesian political vision for community and association is only achievable through submission to a strong state authority that restrains individuals from natural inclinations and behavior. The authority achieved through social contract thereby creates an environment of freedom for people. While Hobbes created a notion of the state central to modern political theory and used it to defend the monarchy, another English political philosopher adopted the social contract in becoming the "Father of Liberalism." John Locke, writing around the time of the

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5. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIII.
6. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* XVII.
7. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* XVIII.

adoption of the English Bill of Rights, formulated natural rights of individuals and incorporated Hobbes' social contract theory to develop a philosophy on the nature of the state in relation to the individual.

Locke, in addition to Hobbes, represents a transformation in ideas about political association and human nature from the tradition of Aristotle. Locke wrote near the end of the 17th century, and his most renowned work on political theory, the *Second Treatise on Government*, laid a foundation for classical liberalism. Similar to Hobbes, Locke valued consent. He viewed humans as beings who are naturally free and independent and yet decide to join political societies. However, Locke's liberalism, a belief in the freedom and equality of all people, resonated with limitations on royal power and opposed the monarchy for which Hobbes advocated (a rebuttal of royalism was the focus of the *First Treatise*). While introducing his vision for a true civil government, Locke contended that "no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions."[8] The limited government humans created by will was to secure these rights. Therefore, if the government failed to secure these rights, the contract could be revoked, and the people had a right to rebel. While the concept of a social contract remained intact in Lockean political theory, the lack of absolute authority vested in a sovereign power contrasts liberalism with the Hobbesian vision. The right of the people to rebel and Locke's belief that people should not be taxed without representative consent in a parliament were both central ideas in the American Revolution. In England, the Civil War during Locke's life brought his parliamentary ideas against Hobbes' monarchical ideas. Locke articulated a set of natural rights that included property due to his claim that people have self-

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8. John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government* I.6.

ownership. The free person is not owned by anybody else, and therefore, "man has a property in his own person: this no body has any right to but himself. The labour of his body, and the work of his hands, we may say, are properly his."[9] As a result, property is an extension of the self. Because Locke believed taxation was a voluntary cession of property by an individual, the notion that taxation cannot be taken by a king without consent and agreement is an expression of Lockean natural property rights. The "state all men are naturally in" is "a state of perfect freedom to order their actions."[10] The limited government in which Locke believed and which was later adopted in the U.S. Constitution has been pertinent to adherents of strong libertarianism in politics today. While Locke and Hobbes were not united in their opinions on the most beneficial governmental structure or natural rights of human beings, both political philosophers from 17th century England maintained that individuals exit the state of nature to come into a social contract with government authority.

Aristotle, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke are all philosophers who were not just relevant to political and ethical debates during their lifetimes but also central to philosophical discussion that has been ongoing for thousands of years. Aristotle, influenced by Athenian democracy and Platonism, developed political theory based on his reason and his empirical observation, a combination that constituted true knowledge to him. Locke and Hobbes, writing approximately two thousand years later across the European continent from Aristotle's Athens, enlivened and contributed to the discussions of the individual and the state. While Hobbes' and Locke's development of social contract theory stands in opposition to Aristotle's emphasis on the preeminence of the

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9. John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government* V.27.
10. John Locke, *Second Treatise on Government* II.4.

polis, all three men viewed law and justice through political association as essential to

living well in community.

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