4010946

Political Philosophy

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10 May 2017

The Purpose of Government

A government, whether performing well or not, has an intended purpose. This purpose of government can be explored throughout how society would act without government. Hobbes and Locke both explore a state of nature and the problems that arise in this state. Hobbes’ state of nature is a brutal, competitive one while Locke’s is ordered by natural law. Throughout the problems arising in these, we can see that the purpose of government is to keep humans from hurting and exploiting each other. In Hobbes’ state of nature, he argues that humans are naturally each other’s competitors. He argues, unlike Rousseau, that the human desire for self preservation (Amour de Soi) leads to a desire of domination over one another (Amour Propre). Because resources are scarce, humans are naturally each other’s enemy as they compete over them. Humans, in Hobbes’ state of nature, are roughly the same in physical and mental abilities - therefore no one is smart enough or strong enough to constantly be safe from being attacked. Because of this, Hobbes’ state of nature creates an environment in which domination is prevalent, because offensive moves become defense. Hobbes’ state of nature is a state of war – man constantly pinned against his fellow man. He describes this state of nature as a way of telling the reader how he feels life would be without government. This life is “solitary, poore, brutish, and short” (Hobbes). He describes that in this state without government, or of man vs. man, nothing can be unjust. There are no notions of right and wrong or just and unjust. Therefore, the world is a brutal place where you have no rights. Hobbes uses the state of nature to represent how awful and brutal life would be without government. His entire state of nature is a specification of the problems that would arise without government. In Locke’s perspective, the state of nature is a state in which humans follow the natural law. Unlike Hobbes, it is not a state in which we are allowed to do whatever we want to do. Locke’s perspective is called the state of liberty, which contrasts with Hobbes’ state of license. License is the freedom to do whatever you want, like Hobbes’ state of nature. Liberty is the freedom to do whatever as long as it agrees with the natural law and with other people’s liberties, which is defined by their natural rights. Our first natural right in Locke’s state of nature is our right to choose our own ends and have ownership in our labor – this is our architectonic right. Our next right is the right against assault. In this right, we have ownership of our body and decide what happens to it. We have ownership of our body because it is our immediate way of accomplishing our ends. Thus, we have a right against assault because it infringes on accomplishing our ends. Our final right is a right to property. We acquire ownership of something by mixing our labor with it – or making it a means toward our ends. Property is necessary for us to exercise our agency. This is because if someone else owned everything, we would need their permission to use it, which would restrict our ability to express agency. If these rights are violated, everyone in the state of nature has the right to enforce the natural law. These punishments are supposed to be as severe as needed to make sure the person will not violate rights again. A number of problems arise from the lack of government in Locke’s state of nature. The first of these is conflicting rights. If two people’s rights conflict, there is no government available to provide all citizens with compatible rights. The next problem that we are faced with is that some people are inherently bad. These are people who do not respect the natural law. A government could offer law that would punish these people and keep them from violating other’s rights. The next problem that arises without government is limited perspective. Because everyone experiences life differently, a situation that is threatening to one’s perspective may not seem so to someone else’s. An example of this is a woman walking alone at night – to a man, walking alone at night does not seem like a threatening situation. To a woman, the situation is very threatening. Law provides a common standard that allows us to overcome bias and adopt other people’s perspective. The last problem that may arise is how vague the natural law is. Positive law is much more concrete than natural law, with specificities in what is and isn’t allowed as well as punishments. This also helps eradicate bias – under the natural law, some people could give a worse punishment to someone just because they didn’t like them, not because of the severity of their crime. I personally believe that Hobbes’ state of nature is more plausible than Locke’s state of nature. A “natural law” is not feasible because there would be nobody to enforce the natural law other than those governed under it. And, without language, there would be no way to communicate the natural law. Punishments under the “natural law” would turn more and more brutal and people would want revenge on those who punished them. Thus, a state of war, just like Hobbes’, would arise. Also, without language in the state of nature, humans could not coordinate skills in order to yield the most food and crops. Therefore, resources would be very scarce, forcing competition. When competition is a matter of life and death, offensive attacks are the most effective way of obtaining these resources. Hobbes’ idea that the only natural law is that everyone has the right to do what it takes to survive is much more plausible. This is because nobody needs to enforce it, because it basically is just chaos. Due to Hobbes’ state of nature being the more plausible one, the purpose of government must me to keep each other from hurting one another. Therefore, it also keeps us from constantly living in fear of being hurt. The state of war arises out of peoples competing rights to do whatever it takes to survive. Once the right to do whatever it takes to survive is taken away, humans no longer have the right to hurt one another and they achieve freedom from attack. Because humans have no standard for “good” in the state of nature, government must establish a common standard for good. They must take into account what hurts human beings and create ways to protect against that. After this, they must create laws for the people that make their rights more compatible. The right to do anything to survive is not compatible – thus, they must encourage cooperation rather than competition. The state of nature is not concrete, so we cannot all agree on the purpose of government. I personally believe in Hobbes’ chaotic, brutal state of nature in which every man is for himself. This can be contrasted with Locke’s state of nature governed under the natural law. Because of this, I believe that the purpose of government is to create compatible rights, which stops us from hurting each other.

Hobbes, Thomas, and C. B. Macpherson. *Leviathan*. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.