A Comparative Analysis of Locke and Rousseau on State of Nature

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Abstract

Observers of human actions are in agreement that anti-social behaviours are an integral element in the nature of man in his quest for survival in the human world. In this article, I examine the concept of state of nature in the political philosophies of Locke and Rousseau. I contend that there are always causal connections between human nature, being what it is, and civil society and that both theorists recognized these connections in their various ways. I argue that the striking differences in their theories notwithstanding, similarities in their thoughts indicate and express an optimistic vision of progress and civilization in man's ability and attempt to grapple with the eternal problems of politics and group life.

Introduction

Observers of human actions are in agreement that anti-social behaviours are an integral element in the nature of man in his quest for survival in the human world. Man's instincts are essentially predicated on his desire to gain territorial edge and acquisitive superiority over his kind and lower species. Love, lust, adventure and ultimate death are the basic transient frailties of man that are associated with his crass materialist nature which culminates into a grim struggle between forces of light and darkness. Man's ferociously barbaric state of nature necessitated the coming into being of the political society by means of a social contract amongst free individuals, who wished to escape the original state of nature described by Thomas Hobbes as solitary, poor, nasty brutish and short. In the latter half of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau took a look at the bestial nature of man and sought the means by which his base instincts could be tamed for the good of society. Locke recognized that freedom is not license to do as we wish in exercise of our freewill. The natural law of reason commands us not to impair the life, health, freedom and possession of others. Even then, Locke still recognized the state of nature as "*full of fears and continual dangers*",

making man's enjoyment of rights "*very insecure*". So the community is supreme over government. As for Rousseau, man is basically good and sympathetic in his best elements. But in uniting himself to a community, man must be allowed his freedom as in the pre-state so long as he conforms to the general will.

Locke and Rousseau on State of Nature

For us to be able to locate political power and know its origin, says Locke, we must consider the original state of man (the state of nature). He saw the state of nature as a state of '*perfect freedom'*. This refers to the freedom of people in the state of nature had to act or dispose of their possessions as they deem fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, irrespective of the will of another person. This law of nature, which could be referred to as the law of reason, circumscribed the natural freedom. The law of nature could be seen as the manifestation of God's will in man. God's will is known to us through our reason and it is because we all possess reason, that is why Locke believed that we are born free as we are born rational and possess the freedom of acting in accordance with our own will, never to be subjected to compulsion by the will of other people. Reason therefore is a priori for natural liberty and equality.

Locke noted that the state of nature is not a '*state of license'* hence he wrote:

> *but though this be a state of liberty, yet it is not a state of licence, though men in that state have an uncontrollable liberty to dispose of his possessions, yet has not liberty to destroy himself, or so much as any creature in his possession…* (Locke, 1970, p.18).

The state of nature is governed by the law of nature which teaches all men not to impair the life, the health and the freedom or possessions of others. Though like in Hobbesian state of nature Locke's emphasizes the liberty which everyman had to preserve his life. Since all in this state of nature share the same faculty and one community of nature, no one subordinates one another since they are servants of one maker (God). That since every man is bound to preserve himself, he is in like manner bound to preserve others when his life is not at risk: "*everyone as he is bound to preserve himself, and not to quit his station willfully, so by the like reason when his own*

preservation comes not in competition, ought he, as much as he can, to preserve the rest of mankind" (Locke in Ashcraft 1978, p. 902).

The most distinctive feature of Lockean state of nature is the right everyman has to execute the laws of nature, thereby making everyman in that state a "*Rex judicata*" (a judge in his own case). The same law commands everyman in this state to help an offended person in punishing "*the transgressor of that law to such a degree as may hinder its violation*". This he noted is the only reason or occasion in which men may lawfully harm another. This makes the state of nature a precarious one. The inconvenience that abound this state of nature may be summarized as follows:

- Lack of established settled and generally acceptable law, allowed by the common consent of all to be the standard of right and wrong or in determining controversy.
- Lack of a disinterested judge with the authority to determine all differences in accordance with established laws
- Lack of power to back the sentence and give it due execution

For Locke therefore the political society comes into being by way of remedy to these inconveniences; of the state of nature, to avert not to escape from a state of war. By consent of all the commonwealth is formed. In order to forestall any objection to the theory of the state of nature, Locke stated that the state is like a baby whose date of birth it does not remember unless he was told; "*every child is born under an existing government and that government is everywhere antecedent of records*" (Locke, 1970, p.39).

Locke further sought to distinguish the state of nature from the state of war, which in Hobbes's view abound the state of nature. The state of nature is the original state in which nature placed all men; when which the powers to execute the laws of nature was in the hands of everybody, it had not been made communal. The state of war unlike the state of nature, is a "*state of enemity and destruction*". It is a state clearly defined by words and action, in which there is absence of passion. *"…a sedate settled design upon another's life" that he who declares war against another, "exposed his life to the other's power to be taken away by him, or any one that joins with him in his defence*" (Ibid). Locke therefore thinks it natural and reasonable to "*destroy that which threaten one with destruction*". This is so because like he noted,

"*by the fundamental laws of nature, man being to be preserved as much as possible, when all cannot be preserved, the safety of the innocent is to be preferred, and one may destroy a man who makes war upon him, or discovers an enemity to his being for the same reason that he may kill a wolf or a lion, because such men are not under the ties of the common law of reason, have no rule but that of force and violence and so may be treated as Beasts of prey… that will be sure to destroy him whenever he falls into their power*" (Ibid). This injunction became a weapon with which Locke sought to fight absolutionism.

Locke bequeathed to the common law of all nations, the heritage, which puts man at war with any other who would try to put him under his absolute power. Hence he wrote: "*and hence it is that he who attempts to get another man into his absolute power, does thereby put himself into a state of war with him, it being to be understood as a declaration of a design upon his life, for I have reason to conclude, that he who would get me into his power without my consent, would use me as he pleased, when he had got me there, and destroy me too when he had a fancy to it…*". He added that no man can have you in his "*absolute powers*" unless he compels you, thereby violating your right to freedom i.e make me a slave. "*To be free from such force is only security of my preservation and reason bids me look on him as an enemy to my preservation, who would take away my freedom*". Locke saw freedom as the foundation of things, so that he who takes it away is putting himself in a state of war. Therefore, the law which absolves one for killing a thief who would forcefully take away his belongings absolves him too.

Locke further distinguished the state of nature and the state of war in the following words: *"…the state of nature and the state of war, which however some men have confounded, are as far distant, as a state of peace, goodwill, mutual assistance and preservation, and a state of enemity, malice, violence and mutual destruction are one from another…*" men living together according to reason, without a common superior on earth, with authority to judge between them is properly in the state of nature. But force of another, "*where there is no common superior on earth to appeal to for relief is the state of war and it is the want of such an appeal gives a man the right of war even against an aggressor*" (Locke, 1970, p.139).

For those in society, the state of war ceases to exist when actual force is over and both sides subjected to law for fair trial. This is expedient to wipe out traces of injury and to avert future occurrence.

Again, to Locke man in the state of nature was not egoistic, selfish, irrational or sinful, though he accepted that men were driven by passion, men were on the whole rational peaceable, sociable; they could do good for each other. However, a careful exegesis of Lockean state of nature would imply that since everybody in that state is a judge in his own case (*Rex judicata*), the state of war obviously cannot be avoided. Another contraction in the Lockean conception is that of his views on natural equality. Locke contradicted this view in his book concerning human understanding wherein he wrote:

> *there is it is visible, a great variety in men's understandings and their natural constitutions*… (Locke, 1986, p.20).

Even though that by so doing Locke has denounced his earlier view of natural equality, one can still question the basis from which Locke derived his idea of natural equality; when people like Robert Filmer and even some ancient philosophers like Plato and Aristotle believed in natural inequality. What does Locke mean by equality and how does this reconcile with the saying that "*each individual is of unique worth*". Does equality in Lockean tradition imply equal talent, equality before the law, equal capabilities etc? Locke failed to grant an explicit explanation to this ambiguity perhaps, because of his determination to counter Filmer's royal fanatism and chart the course of destablishing royal supremacy of Stuart Kings and protect private property.

On the otherhand, Rousseau's idea of state of nature could be located in his famous second discourse on the origin of inequalities, in human society. Contrary to Locke's view, Rousseau identified two types of inequalities in human societies namely the natural and moral inequality. Rousseau saw man which he called "*gentle savage*" endowed with three qualities namely- perfectibility, free agency and pitie. The quality of perfectibility is the ability to think through which man can perfect himself. The idea of reason is man's virtue of perfection. Free agency is the quality which distinguishes man from animals and this can be interpreted

as the quality of adaptability. Pitie (pity) is the quality of natural passion in men which makes them to "*empatise*" with others in pain.

Rousseau noted that men are not as Hobbes painted them, though they are capable of good and bad. This means that his state of nature is amoral but not in Hobbesian way. Of his state of nature in which man lived according to nature and had natural liberty, Rousseau wrote that:

> *Man as he comes from the hands of nature would have been in terms of bodily skills and endurance vastly superior to his modern descendants whose dependence on tools and contravance of civilization has undermined their natural unaided capacities. Mentally too, he would have had few and easily gratified desires and would have been accepting natural processes such as ageing and death; his smell, sight and hearing would have enabled him to discern things at great distance….* (Rousseau, 1987, p. 198)

For him, man in the state of nature is at once good, stupid and childish. Man sits under the tree, occasionally goes out for fruits and aggresses only when his territory is attacked. Man is not naturally aggressive and does not plan evil; he has passions and self-love. He feeds, clothes and generally takes care of himself. This self-love soon degenerates into selfishness; but has natural pity for others which makes him to be generous. In the state of nature, man has licence, not freedom. Man is not free in the state of nature because he depends on the things of nature and lives in the eyes of other men as he acts to please his fellow men. For this dependence, man is being dominated. While the essence of man is freedom, the dependence of man on man as he attempts to please his fellow man, militates against his freedom, and this breeds inequality. He says: "*man is born free and everywhere he is in chains. One man thinks himself the master of others, but remains more of a slave"* (Rousseau, 1987, p. 45).

There is no sociability in the state of nature as men do not relate with one another; any new relation with men takes the form of savage clashes. This obviously is in

contrast to the idea of civil society where civilization implies dependence and co-operation amongst men.

Rousseau attempts to resolve the problem of inequality which militates against man's freedom by institutionalizing the law through the formation of association in which men give up their rights; a social compact, in which each associate puts his person and all his powers in common under the supreme direction of the "General will" (Masters, 1968; Ellenburg, 1976; Croker, 1968, Green 1955; Gay, 1971; Cobban 1934; Broome 1963; and Grimsley, 1973). Thus, the state that emerges from Rousseau's social contract theory is at once a moral being whose aim is the preservation of union and the self-preservation of its members, with powers to deal with any person or part of the union that threatens its own preservation. This is so because, the social compact gives the body politic absolute power over its members in order to ensure freedom, the realization of which, is in essence, the link between human nature and civilization. (Noone, 1980, Plattner, 1979).

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion on the views of Locke and Rousseau on state of nature, it has become evident and obvious that both views share some basic characteristics ranging from the fact that both views on state of nature are frameworks in support of political theories which aim at achieving freedom and harmony in human society through their normative prescriptions, flowing from the bid to reform the existing order which they saw as inherently bad. However, the striking differences between them are the method prescribed by their political theories which they hoped to achieve the change. So that while in the Lockean conceptions, actual freedom inhales in the practice of liberal democracy in which individual rights are protected and guaranteed, in Rousseau's conceptions, freedom inhales in the practice of a totalitarian/authoritarian democracy in which the rights of individuals are inhibited.

Another area of congruence is the implication their views on state of nature have on the essence of the capitalist state. Both Locke and Rousseau though in different ways accepted the fact that the essence or the end purpose of the state is the preservation of private property. The driving force of Locke's theory is private property which he saw as consisting in "*life, liberty and estate*". Hence Locke agreed

that "*the great and chief end therefore of men's uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government is the preservation of their property to which in the state of nature there are many things wanting*" (Locke, 1970, p.59). For Rousseau, the state itself emerged as a moral being to reconcile man in search of freedom with civilization.

Conclusively, it may be said that on the state of nature or human essence, the slight disparity between Locke and Rousseau lies in where Locke located his. But it is evident from their writings that both of them accepted 'labour' as part and parcel of human nature, as well as the basis of the ownership of property and the inequality that ensues from it. Their views on human labour is virtually the same, even though Locke was more elaborate and attached great importance to labour. He saw the body of man and the works of his hand (labour) as his first article of property; labour therefore is the basis of ownership of private property and a justification for the inequality in society. But Rousseau on the otherhand, distinguished between natural inequality and moral inequality and argued that moral inequality is superior and therefore should serve as the basis for proper organization of society.

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