

Seeing Two Sides of a State From Plato and Hobbes

Tianxiao Shen

In this paper, I will discuss Plato and Hobbes' different views on the nature of humanity and the state. Plato, from an idealized perspective, considers how people can fully realize themselves in a state; while Hobbes, from a pessimistic perspective, considers how people can avoid wars and conflicts in a state. I think both views have certain merit, but both are limited. In fact, they are largely complementary, and combining them will give us a more comprehensive picture of modern society.

Plato and Hobbes lived in very different social contexts. Plato was born in an aristocratic family in peacetime. He thought about how to make all citizens achieve their happiest life. Being wealthy and well-educated, he believed true happiness was psychic justice, and didn't value pleasures brought by food, drink, sex, etc. In contrast, Hobbes went through the English Civil War. He believed that without a powerful sovereign to maintain peace, people would fight each other for their self-interest, resulting in the worst disaster. Keeping their background in mind, we can better understand the political ideologies of Plato and Hobbes.

In the *Republic*, Plato claims that the human soul has three parts—reason, spirit, and appetite. The rational part loves knowledge and learning, the spirited part loves honor and victory, and the appetitive part loves money and profit. A just soul has each part doing its own work, and different parts bound together into a harmonious whole. It leads to the happiest life. Contrarily, in an unjust soul, one part conflicts with another like a civil war. Such a soul is miserable.

According to which part of the soul is ruling, people are divided into three kinds—wisdom-lovers/philosophers, honor-lovers, and profit-lovers. Plato argues that only the soul ruled by reason is just. Namely, the philosopher is the justest and happiest person. However, I find this argument disconnected. Which part rules and whether all parts are harmonious seem to me orthogonal. Plato illustrates that the three parts of soul are like the high, middle and low notes, and a just soul put them together to form a harmonious music. (*Republic IV*, 443e) Note that there are many different kinds of music, which have different composition of high, middle and low notes. A music based on high notes and supplemented with low notes can be harmonious, so does another music based on low notes and supple-

mented with high notes. Following Plato's analogy, a soul mainly ruled by reason and occasionally ruled by appetite can be harmonious, so does another soul mainly ruled by appetite and occasionally ruled by reason. In other words, claiming that only the soul ruled by reason is just, is like claiming that only the music based on high note is melodious.

Plato further argues that philosophers are the best judges of happiness, because they use experience, reason, and argument, which are the best means of judging things. (*Republic IX*, 582a-583a) For the other two people, even if they think they are happy, they are not really happy. Philosophers also have the knowledge to build a just city where everyone can accomplish a task they naturally fits. Someone who is by nature a carpenter practices carpentry, who is by nature a cobbler practices cobblery... In this city of justice, not only can everyone do their own proper work externally, but they are also best able to achieve psychic harmony internally.

I think Plato's model is oversimplified. He puts all knowledge and virtues on a philosopher, who plays the role of God's messenger and leads everyone to a happy life. However, even if we agree with him that the soul/human nature has three parts and reason should take precedence over spirit and appetite, one is not always governed by reason, or always by appetite. A person may especially like cakes, and he can't help eating too much when he sees them. He also likes candy, but can control himself from eating a lot. After several times of stomach pain caused by eating too much cakes, he decided not to buy cakes at all. So whether one can be rational varies from one thing to another and changes over time. There is no one who is more rational than others at all times. Dividing people into three types is coarse. Having one type ruling over the other two seems to me arbitrary and far from optimal. In fact, I believe that a solution people converge to through discussion is usually better than a decision made by "the most rational" person.

Unlike Plato dividing people into three distinct categories, Hobbes claims in *Leviathan* that by nature all men are equal in body and mind. Some people are stronger physically, and some people are more intelligent, but overall there is not much difference. Moreover, Hobbes doesn't think justice is true happiness, but everyone is selfish and wants to maximize their self-interest, that is food, drink, sex, etc. In the state of nature, everyone has a right to everything. When two people desire the same thing, because they are equal in ability, they both think they deserve it, and therefore become enemies. This hostility will develop to the extreme, where one party wants to destroy the other so that he or she can enjoy the

goods alone and is not threatened by the other's power anymore. Hobbes describes this state of nature as the war of all against all. Everyone is constantly in the fear and danger of violent death.

Here we see another difference between Plato and Hobbes: Plato considers the relationship between people as mainly cooperation, whereas Hobbes considers the relationship as mainly competition. Plato thinks that no one is self-sufficient, and people gather together as partners and helpers to better satisfy their needs. (*Republic II*, 369b) Hobbes, instead, would argue that a man is self-sufficient, and others are threats to him more than helpers. Although Hobbes acknowledges that collaboration can produce greater value, such as industry, navigation, knowledge, arts... (*Leviathan*, 78), he doesn't believe that people can maintain just and mutually beneficial cooperation out of reason.

For Hobbes, the only thing that unites people is the fear of death. Since self-protection is the most important self-interest, everyone must seek peace as much as possible. Therefore, they come together to make a contract, consenting to give up their right to all things, in particular, their right to kill others, in exchange for the same return from others not to kill them. To enforce the contract, they create Leviathan, the sovereign, and lend it power to rule everyone. Hobbes believes that to achieve peace, the sovereign's power must be absolute and unregulated, so that people will restrain their ambitions and greed due to their fear of the sovereign. This means everyone delegates all natural rights to the sovereign, retaining only the right to protect themselves from death.

What I like most about Hobbes is the social contract theory: the power of the state comes from people's consent to transfer their rights. It gets rid of a religious backing for the state and demonstrates that the state should serve the interests of all citizens. However, Hobbes goes too far on the authority of the state. He sees conflicts between people and between nations lead to war, but he fails to see that oppression and resistance are also causes of war. The many rebellions against tyranny in history are the best proof. We cannot and should not endure all suffering to avoid war. Moreover, the Leviathan described by Hobbes as having the greatest power and a united will is not practical. The stronger the sovereign, the larger the organization needed to maintain it; and the larger the organization, the harder it is to unify its will. The cohesion of a state depends on justice and happiness of its people, which are overlooked by Hobbes.

In summary, Plato and Hobbes see two sides of complex society, and I think it's good to combine their perspectives. We are different in talents and interests (Plato), but equal in the right to live (Hobbes). We compete for limited resources (Hobbes), and cooperate to create more resources (Plato). We care about our self-interests (Hobbes), as well as motivated by love, justice and empathy (Plato). We should aim for the best scenario of everyone's flourishing (Plato), while avoiding the worst scenario of war (Hobbes).