Prehistoric Myths in Modern Political Philosophy

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Chapter 6
THE HOBBESIAN HYPOTHESIS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY POLITICAL THEORY

Contractarianism and propertarianism declined in prominence in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as utilitarianism became the dominant political theory, but assertions of the Hobbesian hypothesis did not go away. Skeptical empirical writers appeared now and then, especially toward the end of the nineteenth century. But neither the skeptics nor the new evidence had much apparent effect on philosophers asserting the Hobbesian hypothesis.

Utilitarianism (and the broader concept, consequentialism) has many different forms but at the risk of oversimplification, we summarize it as the belief that the morality of an act or a rule depends entirely on whether it increases or decreases overall welfare, by measuring the sum total of all of its positive and negative effects on well-being (Kymlicka 2002: 10; Sinnott-Armstrong 2015). To summarize even further, the goal of utilitarianism is to maximize average well-being. Utilitarianism, propertarianism, and contractarianism are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but utilitarianism can stand alone. If so, a justified state maximizes average wellbeing, instituting whatever property rights system accomplishes that goal and altering it as necessary to improve average welfare.

Two features free utilitarianism from a need for a Hobbesian hypothesis. First, it has no natural starting point. The monistic goal of maximizing average wellbeing gives no special prominence to stateless societies. All social arrangements, including statelessness, have to be justified against all other conceivable social arrangements by beating them at the goal of maximizing average utility.

Second, utilitarianism has no proviso. It endorses unrestricted average utility maximization without concern for any minimum standard for particularly disadvantaged people (Kymlicka 2002: 10–52;
Sinnott-Armstrong 2015). Unlike contractarianism and most versions of propertarianism—both of which theoretically prohibit harming anyone—utilitarianism has no prohibition against harming some to further the goal of maximizing the average. Related theories, such as sufficientarianism and prioritarianism, do have special concern for the disadvantaged, but we do not think it is accurate to consider them as forms of utilitarianism (Widerquist 2010a).

Critics correctly recognize that utilitarianism has an enormous informational problem (Kymlicka 2002: 46). Even assuming well-being can be measured and compared interpersonally, how could one gather the evidence necessary to ensure the average person in arrangement X is better off than the average person in all other conceivable arrangements?

As common as it is to mention the informational difficulty in utilitarianism, hardly anyone mentions that any theory involving a proviso has one too. How can we ever be sure that the least advantaged person is better off in arrangement X than they could be in any stateless society? Utilitarianism’s informational difficulty is the greater of the two, but at least utilitarians do not assume they’ve answered it. They call attention to it. They ask people to adopt the goal of maximizing average utility. Presumably anyone who accepted that goal would begin researching how to move toward its achievement. Contractarians and propertarians devote great effort to establishing the moral importance of the proviso, and then the vast majority of them effectively ask people to assume it away: the goal is already achieved; no one should demand evidence that it is achieved; no one should consider the informational difficulties involved in achieving it. Utilitarianism is not clearly at the disadvantage in this informational issue.

Many critics argue that the great moral shortcoming of utilitarianism is that it ignores “the separateness of persons”; without a proviso, it lacks any moral limit to the sacrifices it might force onto some for the benefit of the average (Rawls 1971: 178; Nozick 1974: 39–42; Cohen 2003: 239–43). Contractarianism supposedly reflects the principle that “morality should never demand of us that we make ourselves ‘prey’ to others or risk the satisfaction of our desires for their good” (Hampton 1988: 4). And the protection against being prey is the proviso—at least it would be, if we took it seriously. But in the period up to 1800, we found only one philosopher, Thomas Paine, who took it as more than a rubber stamp.
A rubber-stamp proviso—always and everywhere assumed fulfilled, never in need of significant evidence—can’t protect anyone from anything. Utilitarians have no moral prohibition against preying on people if it improves average wellbeing, but at least they call for an investigation of evidence to determine the effects of policy on everyone to determine what maximizes average wellbeing. Most proviso-based theorists ostensibly have an overriding prohibition against preying on people, reject utilitarianism for lacking that prohibition, and deny any need to investigate the wellbeing of disadvantaged individuals to determine whether social arrangements do in fact prey on people in the relevant sense. Again, utilitarianism is not clearly at the disadvantage.

We do not endorse utilitarianism. Although it is relatively invulnerable to the subject of this narrowly focused book, other criticisms of utilitarianism raise serious doubts about it as an overall theory of justice. However, we don’t need to discuss them here. The only issue for us is what utilitarianism says about statelessness. A utilitarian justification of state society relative to statelessness would be a much easier requirement than the fulfillment of the proviso. The utilitarian would only have to compare the average person in state society with the average person in a stateless society. At the time of Hobbes, Locke, and Kant, states might even have failed this test (see Chapter 10), but it is probably fulfilled for all or most contemporary state societies. Utilitarianism’s dominance in the nineteenth century did not stop people from asserting the Hobbesian hypothesis. See the appendix for a more detailed discussion of utilitarianism.

Although G. W. F. Hegel was neither a contractarian nor a propertarian, he asserted the Hobbesian hypothesis both in terms of the state and of the property rights system. For example, in the Hobbesian sense, he wrote, “The characteristic of man as rational is to live in a state; if there is no state, reason claims that one should be founded. . . . it is absolutely necessary for every one to be in a state” (Hegel 2001: 78, §75). See the online appendix for more on Hegel.

Frédéric Bastiat (1996: xxxii, 4, 61, 201, 206, 212–16) was a French propertarian who repeatedly asserted the Hobbesian hypothesis in the most explicit empirical terms as a comparison of the lives of the least advantaged people in a capitalist state with those of people in a stateless society. For example, Bastiat wrote:
Workers, I promise to prove that you do enjoy the fruits of the land that you do not own, and with less pain and effort on your part than you could cultivate them by your own labor on land given you in its original state. (Bastiat 1996: xxxiii)

Unlike most people who have asserted the hypothesis, Bastiat dedicated several pages of empirical argument to support it. Building on Locke’s day-laborer example, he attempted to show that everyone could obtain more food, clothing, and transportation in nineteenth-century France than anyone could at the “dawn of civilization.” For example, using wage and price statistics, Bastiat argued:

humanity, as represented by its most backward element, the day laborer, obtains . . . three hundred liters of wheat . . . the value of his subsistence with forty-five to sixty days out of his year’s labor. . . . to determine whether or not progress has been achieved and, if so, measure it, we must ask ourselves what this same ratio was on the day that men first made their appearance. . . . [Imagining the laborer dropped into a virgin wood, Bastiat supposes] he would not raise one hundred liters of wheat every two years. (Bastiat 1996: 212–13)

Bastiat (1996: 212) might strike the reader as unfair for representing “the dawn of society” with a nineteenth-century city dweller thrust into the woods with no prior knowledge of hunting, gathering, or subsistence farming and without a band to work with. Bastiat made no effort at all to research the lifestyles of people who live without the property institutions he seeks to support. But he is valuable because he avoids the ambiguity that affects most propertarians and contractarians. His plain-language philosophy makes clear: the Hobbesian hypothesis is an empirical claim about the relative welfare of the least advantaged people in capitalist states and people in stateless societies, and it is subject to verification or falsification by empirical investigation. He removes the suggestion that the Hobbesian hypothesis is either obviously true or somehow beyond empirical investigation.

Henry David Thoreau’s (1971) book, Walden, was not aimed at contractarianism or propertarianism, but it certainly contradicted the Hobbesian hypothesis. It attempted to show by direct demonstration that people could live more simply and easily outside of contemporary
capitalism. Herbert Spencer (1960: 176) referred directly to Hobbes as he criticized the violence hypothesis: “there are some small uncivilized societies in which, without any ‘common power to keep them all in awe,’ men maintain peace and harmony better than it is maintained in societies where such a power exists.” Spencer included a citation to verify his quote of Hobbes, but none to support his claims about uncivilized societies. Thus, Spencer provides another example of the lack of attention to evidence displayed by both sides on this issue. See the online appendix for more detailed discussions of Spencer.

Henry George’s (1879: §06) position was similar to Paine’s and Spencer’s with the added insight that the loss of independence was the main disadvantage for a worker in a capitalist state relative to someone in “a savage tribe.” Living in the post-Crawfurd world, George felt compelled to explain that he was not “romanticizing” the noble savage by writing, “I am no sentimental admirer of the savage state,” before he wrote:

there are in the heart of our civilization large classes with whom the veriest savage could not afford to exchange. . . . if, standing on the threshold of being, one were given the choice of entering life as a Tierra del Fuegan, a black fellow of Australia, an Esquimau in the Arctic Circle, or among the lowest classes in such a highly civilized country as Great Britain, he would make infinitely the better choice in selecting the lot of the savage. For those classes who in the midst of wealth are condemned to want, suffer all the privations of the savage, without his sense of personal freedom; they are condemned to more than his narrowness and littleness, without opportunity for the growth of his rude virtues; if their horizon is wider, it is but to reveal blessings that they cannot enjoy. (George 1879: §08)

George presented detailed information about the lives of people in state societies and little about the lives of people on the other side of his comparison. But at least he did not portray his findings as obvious, writing, “I challenge the production from any authentic accounts of savage life of such descriptions of degradation as are to be found in official documents of highly civilized countries” (George 1879: §09). See the online appendix for more detailed discussions of George.
Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were far more engaged with anthropology and other empirical sciences than most philosophers. Although their portrayal of stateless societies was unflattering, their portrayal of life for many people in capitalist states was bleak (Marx 1887 [1867]; Marx 1993; Marx and Engels 1994 [1848]; Engels 2005). They presented empirical evidence that poor people in capitalist states were often miserable (Marx and Engels 1994 [1848]; Engels 2005) and Marx’s (1959) theory of alienation added a theory of psychological misery to their observations of material poverty. They also cited anthropological evidence that stateless peoples are not as miserable as usually assumed (Engels 2004 [1884]), but they never connected that information to an attack on the theoretical conclusions of contractarianism or propertarianism.

Putting these claims together, one can draw the inference that nineteenth-century capitalist society was mixed at best and perhaps substantially worse for some individuals relative to stateless societies. But Marx and Engels did not put the pieces together in this way. They were more interested in building up their own applied theories than in entering an existing abstract philosophical debate on its own terms, and apparently so were most of their successors. If any later Marxian philosopher criticized the Hobbesian hypothesis, it had little impact on the contractarian and propertarian literature reviewed below. See the online appendix for a more detailed discussion of Marx and Engels.

In the late nineteenth century, many non-Marxist political theorists also began moving away from abstract to empirical theory, eventually leading to the split between “political philosophy” and “political science.” John Robert Seeley (1896: 1, 4), Henry Sidgwick (1966: 240), and Henry Sumner Maine (1861: 90–1, 114–19) all contradicted Hobbes and Locke at least partly on empirical grounds, but distanced themselves from abstract normative philosophy. Seeley (1896: 28) dismissed Hobbes and Locke as “political speculators,” but he did not address their specific claims about the state of nature.

Sidgwick’s (1966: xii, 348–72, especially 353–5, 365, 372) discussion of Hobbes’s and Locke’s states of nature was more concerned with the irrelevant question of how the state originated than with the relevant claim we call the Hobbesian hypothesis. He described Hobbes’s view of the miserable state of nature as a “half truth,” but he did not present evidence against it. Like Seeley, his concern with
Hobbes and Locke was primarily with their abstract methodology rather than with the truth or falsity of their claims.

Of the three, Maine most clearly called out Hobbes and Locke for empirical errors. Referring to them, he wrote:

Their originators carefully observed the institutions of their own age . . ., but, when they turned their attention to archaic states of society which exhibited much superficial difference from their own, they uniformly ceased to observe and began guessing . . . One does not certainly see why such a scientific solecism should be more defensible in jurisprudence than in any other region of thought. (Maine 1861: 119)

Maine called for an investigation, but he did not conduct one himself. Ultimately, all three of them attacked Hobbes and Locke for their abstract methodology rather than for their foray into empiricism with the Hobbesian hypothesis. In Maine’s (1861: 86–7) words, which Sidgwick (1903: 380) later quoted to endorse, their methodology was “that Historical Method before which the Law of Nature has never maintained its footing for an instant.” See the online appendix for a more detailed discussion of Seeley, Sidgwick, and Maine.

Peter Kropotkin was the one nineteenth-century philosopher who conducted a relevant empirical investigation and at least partly applied it to the debate in question. According to Alan Barnard (2004b: 5), “The first thing Kropotkin does is to dispel the Hobbesian notion that primitive life was one of ‘war of each against all.’” Of course, Kropotkin (2011: 204–5) made the obligatory post-Crawfurdian disclaimer: “In the last century the ‘savage’ and his ‘life in the state of nature’ were idealized. But now men of science . . . began to charge the savage with all imaginable ‘bestial’ features . . . this exaggeration is even more unscientific than Rousseau’s idealization.”

Drawing on a wide variety of sources from anthropology, history, and archaeology on contemporary stateless societies, historically observed stateless societies, and Paleolithic societies, Kropotkin remarked on how wrong Western characterizations of violent savages are:

When first meeting with primitive races, the Europeans usually make a caricature of their life; but when an intelligent man has stayed among them for a longer time, he generally describes
them as the “kindest” or “the gentlest” race on the earth. These very same words have been applied to the Ostyaks, the Samoyedes, the Eskimos, the Dayaks, the Aleoutes, the Papuas, and so on, by the highest authorities. I also remember having read them applied to the Tunguses, the Tchuktchis, the Sioux, and several others. The very frequency of that high commendation already speaks volumes in itself. (Kropotkin 2011: 175)

Kropotkin added similar observations about the “Bushmen,” the “Hottentots,” and the natives of Australia. He did not connect his observations as closely with the Hobbesian hypothesis as he did with the violence hypothesis. He showed that many stateless societies succeeded in establishing cooperative society, maintaining peace, and providing mutual aid, but he made no welfare comparison between people in state and stateless societies. See the online appendix for a more detailed discussion of Kropotkin.

These nineteenth-century philosophers raised doubts about the Hobbesian hypothesis and the violence hypothesis. Although most of them did not apply their empirical findings to the contractarian and propertarian arguments that rely on these claims, one might have expected some response. Yet, our search of the literature found none. The relevance of their findings is simply ignored in debates over these theories.

The increasing specialization of the academic disciplines probably helps explain why. The empirical arguments of these theorists were taken up by the more empirical disciplines, such as anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science, none of which involved debates over the Lockean proviso. As disciplines became increasingly specialized, and there was less overlap between normative and positive theorists, it became easier for normative theorists to pass on the Hobbesian hypothesis even as empirical research uncovered more substantial evidence against it.

Note

The online appendix has more detailed discussions of utilitarianism, Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thoreau, Spencer, George, Marx, Engels, Emile Durkheim, Maine, Seeley, Sidgwick, and Kropotkin.