**Locke versus Hobbes**

Locke and Hobbes were both social contract theorists, and both natural law theorists, but there the resemblance ends. All other natural law theorists assumed that man was by nature a social animal. Hobbes assumed otherwise, thus his conclusions are strikingly different from those of other natural law theorists.

**Premises**

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| **Issue** | **Locke** | **Hobbes** |
| Human nature | Man is by nature a social animal. | Man is not by nature a social animal; society could not exist except by the power of the state. |
| The state of nature | In the state of nature men mostly kept their promises and honored their obligations, and, though insecure, it was mostly peaceful, good, and pleasant | “no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” |
| Knowledge of natural law | Humans know what is right and wrong, and are capable of knowing what is lawful and unlawful well enough to resolve conflicts. In particular, and most importantly, they are capable of telling the difference between what is theirs and what belongs to someone else. Regrettably they do not always act in accordance with this knowledge. | Our knowledge of objective, true answers on such questions is so feeble, so slight and imperfect as to be mostly worthless in resolving practical disputes. In a state of nature people cannot know what is theirs and what is someone else’s. Property exists solely by the will of the state, thus in a state of nature men are condemned to endless violent conflict. In practice morality is for the most part merely a command by some person or group or God, and law merely the momentary will of the ruler. |
| Epistemology | The gap between our ideas and words about the world, and the world itself, is large and difficult, but still, if one man calls something good, while another man calls it evil, the deed or man referred to still has real qualities of good or evil, the categories exist in the world regardless of our names for them. | It is the naming, that makes it so. Sometimes Hobbes comes close to the Stalinist position that truth itself is merely the will of the ruler. |
| Conflict | Peace is the norm, and should be the norm. We can and should live together in peace by refraining from molesting each other’s property and persons, and for the most part we do. | Men cannot know good and evil, and in consequence can only live in peace together by subjection to the absolute power of a common master, and therefore there can be no peace between kings. Peace between states is merely war by other means. |

**Conclusions**

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| **Issue** | **Locke** | **Hobbes** |
| The Social Contract | We give up our right to ourselves exact retribution for crimes in return for impartial justice backed by overwhelming force. We retain the right to life and liberty, and gain the right to just, impartial protection of our property | If you shut up and do as you are told, you have the right not to be killed, and you do not even have the right not to be killed, for no matter what the Sovereign does, [it does not constitute violation of the contract.](https://jim.com/hobbes_on_right_of_sovereigns.htm) |
| Violation of the social contract | If a ruler seeks absolute power, if he acts both as judge and participant in disputes, he puts himself in a state of war with his subjects and we have the right and the duty to kill such rulers and their servants. | [No right to rebel.](https://jim.com/hobbes_on_right_of_sovereigns.htm) “there can happen no breach of covenant on the part of the sovereign; and consequently, none of his subjects, by any pretense of forfeiture, can be freed from his subjection.” The ruler’s will define good and evil for his subjects. The King can do no wrong, because lawful and unlawful, good and evil, are merely commands, merely the will of the ruler. |
| Civil Society | Civil society precedes the state, both morally and historically. Society creates order and grants the state legitimacy. | Civil society is the application of force by the state to uphold contracts and so forth. Civil society is a creation of the state. What most modern people would call civil society is “jostling”, pointless conflict and pursuit of selfish ends that a good government should suppress. |
| Rights | Men have rights by their nature | You conceded your rights to the government, in return for your life |
| Role of the State | The only important role of the state is to ensure that justice is seen to be done | Whatever the state does is just by definition. All of society is a direct creation of the state, and a reflection of the will of the ruler. |
| Authorized use of force | Authorization is meaningless, except that the authorization gives us reason to believe that the use of force is just. If authorization does not give us such confidence, perhaps because the state itself is a party to the dispute, or because of past lawless acts and abuses by the state, then we are back in a state of nature. | The concept of just use of force is meaningless or cannot be known. Just use of force is whatever force is authorized |