

Review

## **Hobbes and Lockes' Theories of State of Nature and Social Contract Through Pragmatic Lenses**

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**Abstract:** This study looks at some of the philosophical ideas of early thinkers, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke, and applies a pragmatist twist to them in order to wade into the possibilities of finding new paradigms and approaches to practice, since pragmatism is focused on practical results and solutions. The main objective of the study was to interrogate a pragmatic speculation into the theories of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes on the concepts of social contract and the nature of man. The research questions are to examine if a pragmatic lens is even applicable in the consideration of their views on the social contract and nature of man, to assess possible consequences of such an application on the practice of the social contract and the nature of man as envisioned by the two philosophers, and to recommend philosophical pathways that appear possible in such an intellectual journey into the unknown. The method used in this research is discourse analysis. The recommendation is that the field of philosophy has always been a field of questioning reality and seeking further knowledge, and such escapades need to be encouraged rather than thwarted.

**Keywords:** State of nature, social contract, pragmatism, discourse analysis.

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Derived from the Greek term 'philosophia' (love of wisdom), philosophy is the intellectual science that seeks to discover knowledge, truth, and meaning in the world (Rakhimova, 2024). Part of the role of philosophy is to question assumptions, examine evidence, and consider alternative perspectives, continues Rakhimova (2024). Allyn Fives (2016) asks the question, 'Does philosophical reflection have a public or political role, and if so, what is it?' Chomsky (1967) contends in answer that, while the philosopher's aim is to arrive at the truth, the main aim of those in power is to hide that truth and conceal its

consequences. Still, Chomsky (1967) contends that the standards and ideals of philosophical ideas can remain upheld, and performances of public actors can be measured against them. From a pragmatic paradigm, the intent is to understand the world and solve its problems through the application of subjective and objective methods (Mohamed & Mahmoud, 2024). Knowledge, according to pragmatists such as John Dewey, is acquired by action, and that knowledge is changing, dynamic, and oriented towards its consequences in human nature, continues Mohamed and Mahmoud (2024). A pragmatic researcher prioritises the practical implications of the research outcomes in solving the problems under investigation. Barbara Simpson (2018) observes that pragmatism denotes the practicalities of just getting on with what the situation demands, inviting easy compromise, short-term expediency, and taking the path of least resistance without the encumbrances of philosophical principles or values. Quoting Peirce, the real has been defined as that whose characters are independent of what anybody may think them to be. Combined with the pragmatic maxim, the definition takes a different tangent: ‘The opinion which is fated to be ultimately agreed to by all who investigate is what we mean by the truth, and the object represented in this position is the real’ (Peirce in Paul and Aaron, 2018).

Some of the interesting thoughts of the early philosophers include the ‘State of Nature’ and the ‘Social Contract’ as explained by philosophers Thomas Hobbes and John Locke (Elizabeth, 2019). The social contract theory has been credited to three philosophers: John Locke, Thomas Hobbes and Rousseau (Anuja, 2022), but this paper focuses on the works of Hobbes and Locke. In Hobbes’ state of nature, he delivers an exposition where human beings are seen as matter in motion. He also pinpoints two kinds of motion in this regard: vital or involuntary motion, such as inhalation, digestion and circulation (involuntary motions that do not involve any thinking), and voluntary motion, such as walking and talking, which involve intent and the free will of man (Elizabeth, 2019). Hobbes, according to Elizabeth, believed that individuals were engaged in a continuous condition of movement and not rest, known as felicity, which was in pursuit of their desires and continual success. Before the emergence of the social contract, there existed the state of nature, a period of absence of government, regulations or laws. Anuja (2022) observed that such a state necessitated two agreements: ‘Pactum Unionis’ and ‘Pactum Subjectionis’. Under the agreement of ‘Pactum Unionis’, the people agreed to protect their land and lives by coming together in a union, while ‘Pactum Subjectionis’ involved people subjecting themselves and their rights to an authority, the Leviathan, in exchange for security from this

authority (Anuja, 2022). Jemira and Fekolli (2023) note the observation by John Locke, in contrast, that ‘Every man has a property in his own person. Nobody has a right to but himself. Locke therefore conceptualises man in the state of nature as endowed with rights that are fundamental to man’s being, and that only he has the right to.

Hobbes defines a contract as “the mutual transferring of right” (Glass, 1980, p. 4) to the sovereign in exchange for protection and security, and postulates that “in the state of nature, everyone has the right to everything – there are no limits to the right of natural liberty”, and the social contract is the agreement by which individuals mutually transfer their natural right. However, in this Hobbesian conceptualisation, man is not a social animal; he is in the state of nature leading a life that is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short – a state of war of all against all. According to the Hobbesian theory, there are various sources of quarrels for man: competition, diffidence, and glory. They fight the other person and claim his property, defend their lives and their loved ones for preservation and survival, and finally, they fight for their reputation (Cottingham, 2008). The social contract was presented by Thomas Hobbes as follows: “I authorise and give up my rights to governing myself to this man, and I authorise all his actions in a like manner” (Hobbes, 1950).

‘This, done in multitude so united in one person, is called a commonwealth, the generation of the great leviathan of that “mortal god” which we owe, under the immortal God, our peace and defence. The essence of the commonwealth is one person, of whose act a great multitude, by a mutual covenant with one another, have made themselves each an author to the end that he may use the strength and means of them all’ (p. 143). The commonwealth, as expressed in its definition and essence, may use strength and impose law and willed punishment to obtain common defence, order, and security for all (John, 2021).

Yuniar (2022) noted that the state of nature depicted a lack of government, which in turn meant that there were no restrictions on human actions against themselves or others—a situation which, in the contemporary era, would be rendered irrelevant. Yuniar (2022), quoting Haluty (2014), describes man as presented by various thinkers thus: Homo sapiens, according to Linnaeus, as the animal with reason; homo loquens, according to Ravesz in ‘Das Problem Des Ursprungs der Sprache’, as animals good at creating language, thoughts, and feelings in structured words; homo faber, according to Berson in ‘L. Evolution Creativ’, as animals good at making tools; ‘Zoon politicon’, according to Aristotle, as animals good at teamwork towards common needs’ satisfaction; ‘homo religiosus’, as religious beings;

and finally, 'homo economicus', as animals with economic sense. Khasinah (2015) also adds 'animal symbolicum', animals that can use symbols, and 'animal educandum', animals capable of being educated, to the list. These characterisations of man, it would seem, Hobbes largely disagrees with, as he fundamentally remains pessimistic about man, his selfish intentions, and ego. A pragmatic lens would, however, accept moments of various presentations of man in these characterisations, under varying practical circumstances, focusing more on outcomes than process. In Hobbes' conceptualisation, the goal of man is self-aggrandisement, and if the activity leads to that, so be it. The pragmatist paradigm would accommodate such a mindset. However, if one man is happy at the expense of many, John Locke's philosophy on the nature of man and the social contract is undermined, because certain fundamental freedoms of man cannot be sacrificed.

In examining the right to revolution, John O. Toole (2011) identified the works of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke as instrumental in analysing the rights of individuals within a political system or regime. He observes that while Hobbes regards the sovereign as all-powerful and immune from revolution, Locke's theory does permit the people to revolt in circumstances of long-sustained abuse. For Locke, the social contract is based upon consent. According to Hobbes, consent from the people occurs only at the beginning; once consent is granted, the people are forever tied to the sovereign's authority and cannot rebel. John Locke, wrote Eric Mack (2019), was a classical liberal political philosopher who proposed in his writing, 'An Essay on Toleration', that 'magistrates or polities are only made to preserve men in this world from the fraud and violence of one another; so that what was the end of erecting government ought alone to be the measure of its proceeding'. This view aligns well with the pragmatist approach of focusing on practical ways to achieve goals. The state of nature, according to Locke, has a law of nature to govern it; and that 'law is reason', which imparts that 'no one ought to harm another in his life, liberty or property' (Locke, 1948, p. 18). According to Hobbes, the only way to accomplish this is to establish the Leviathan – all men then give their rights and will to one single man, so that their strengths may be reduced to one strength, their powers to one power, their wills to his will, and their judgment to his judgment (Castel, 1963, in John, 2021). The social contract births the commonwealth, which is created either by institution (agreement) or acquisition (force) (John, 2021). Hobbes also categorised the commonwealth into three types: monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy; a democracy being an assembly of all, an

aristocracy an assembly of some, and a monarchy, ruled by one person – the leviathan (John, 2021).

Locke's philosophy is again more inclined towards 'Christian theology', while Hobbes is independent of any prior theology. The two philosophers seem to agree on a standpoint of equality among all men in the state of nature. Hobbes wrote thus: 'nature hath made men so equal in the faculties of mind and body...the difference between man and man is not so considerable' (Wootton, 2003, p. 158); while Locke defines the state of nature as a 'state of perfect equality, where naturally there is no superiority or jurisdiction of one over another' (Wootton, 2003, p. 288). In addition, Hobbes speaks hypothetically of states of nature, whereas Locke points out times when the state of nature exists. According to Wootton (2003), Locke believes that all rulers are in a state of nature, as are governors; the significant difference being the greater negativity of Hobbes and Locke's use of examples in contrast to Hobbes' hypotheticals.

Pragmatism, according to one of the most respected pragmatists of his generation, Abraham Kaplan, was widely misunderstood to the extent that a 'vulgar pragmatism' in which 'action' is opposed to 'contemplation', 'practice' to 'theory', and 'expediency' to 'principle' was born. This, to Kaplan, is almost the direct antithesis of pragmatism, whose intent is to dissolve all such dualities (William, 2018, p. 7). Indeed, the fusion of the contemplative-theoretical with the practical-contextual is what Laswell and Kaplan (1950) meant by the term 'pragmatic'. In 1971, Laswell acknowledged that the policy sciences were a product of the ideas of John Dewey and other pragmatists (William, 2018). One of Hobbes's positions on the social contract is to ask the question: 'What would be the alternative? A situation in which no legitimate authority to arbitrate conflicts exists is the state of nature that Hobbes argues; the rule of a leviathan would be far more preferable to it.'

### **Statement of the Problem**

The social contract and the state of nature are foundational philosophical concepts upon which many persuasions have been born. Numerous ideas have also been proposed regarding the actual meaning of pragmatism and its various interpretations. The debate on pragmatism as an approach continues, and this paper contributes to this debate by using the paradigm to examine the social contract and state of nature ideas of Thomas Hobbes and John Locke in a theoretical discourse. The ongoing debate on these philosophical concepts

is further extended in this paper by applying a pragmatic paradigm to the two concepts of the state of nature and the social contract.

### **Study Objectives**

The main objective of the study was to interrogate a pragmatic speculation on the theories of John Locke and Thomas Hobbes regarding the concepts of social contract and the nature of man.

The research questions were to examine whether a pragmatic lens is applicable in considering their views on the social contract and the nature of man, to assess the possible consequences of such an application on the practice of the social contract and the nature of man as envisioned by the two philosophers, and to recommend philosophical pathways that seem feasible in this intellectual journey into the unknown.

### **Methodology**

This study was literature-based research that examined various publications on the relevant theoretical works of Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and other authors, reviewing the literature and drawing conclusions to answer the research questions.

### **Findings**

In contrast to positivism and constructivism, which conceive of a value-free and value-bound standpoint of inquiry, respectively, pragmatists believe that human action and interaction shape the scholarly pursuit of description, theory, explanation, and narration (Kaushik & Walsh, 2019). In the state of nature, according to Thomas Hobbes' philosophy, man is a selfish being whose only concern is with his own welfare. From the pragmatist view, if all men selfishly took care of their own issues, social problems might be reduced considerably, as each man would be able to tackle individual problems before they became social problems. Pragmatism would endeavour to find how best the Hobbesian perspective could work. However, it also implies a continuing state of flux, with issues changing from time to time based on practical incomings and outgoings.

Thomas Hobbes saw political society as an artificial creation invented to prevent the natural anarchy that preceded it in the state of nature, where all men were egoistic and selfish and could easily have driven themselves to a state of war of all against all. Author Henderson (2000) has contended that the Hobbesian conceptualisation of the state was the basis of many disagreements on how to organise state affairs, providing justification for many political systems and events in history, such as colonisation and imperialism. Modern European political thought had its roots in the state of nature theory propounded by Thomas

Hobbes, a renowned 17th-century English philosopher. The derivatives of Hobbes' vision have been the source of our difference, our suffering and our pain, and it is our experience of them that unites us against continued domination and oppression (Henderson, 2000). This side effect of Hobbesian philosophy would be seen from a pragmatist lens as leading to efforts to improve governance and society in the form of resistance to all forms of oppression.

Under the John Locke perspective, man in the state of nature was at peace with nature, not in need of any intervention. However, man was equally aware that he was born with certain rights that remain inalienable, such as the right to life, liberty, and property. The state of nature in Locke's perspective is a world of perfect freedom but not perfect licence. When a man entrusts his rights to the protection of a ruler, the pragmatist approach would be to tighten the safeguards against abuse, as opposed to the Hobbesian approach, where the power of the monarch is considered absolute, while the monarch is not subject to those same edicts. Pragmatism looks at what is practical and is open to changes based on trends. Under pragmatism, it is easier to compromise in order to keep things working. What, under Locke, would be kept working are the safeguards against abuses of individual rights and freedoms.

The social contract under Thomas Hobbes' conceptualisation of society was tailored to grant unquestionable authority to the Leviathan; therefore, the pragmatist emphasis would be ensuring that man took such good care of his responsibilities that the king or ruler found no reason to create laws that hurt the people or act in a punitive manner, since the Leviathan was unchallengeable. The pragmatist's rules are not cast in stone; therefore, a pragmatist approach opens the door for any changes that may appear more practical.

### **Conclusions**

The research created speculative scenarios about how the state of nature and the social contract would be viewed through a pragmatic lens. The results indicated that the scenarios that emerged would be equally too speculative, even if counterfactual claims and process tracing were conducted to attribute outcomes more accurately to any interventions. Barbara Simpson's contention that pragmatism was less encumbered by philosophical nuances and more in favour of practical solutions suggests that principal and dogmatic approaches would be less applicable in a pragmatic worldview. The views of both John Locke and Thomas Hobbes would immediately gain a fluidity that would not assist in defining the boundaries for the two conceptualisations of the state of nature and the social

contract. Examining both concepts through a pragmatic lens would be tantamount to dissolving the arguments and adopting a non-philosophical approach.

A pragmatic view of the social contract and theories of human nature, as presented by the two philosophers, would converge, as the pragmatist's focus is on the practical achievement of goals in which dogma and principles can be fluid.

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