THEORY OF HUMAN NATURE: A REFUTATION OF HOBBES

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ABSTRACT

The understanding of human nature has been a major focus of philosophy since ancient times. Philosophers have offered diverse perspectives on human nature reflecting varying theories and emphases. Plato submits that man is rational because he is ruled by reason, but can behave irrationally if appetite controls him. The idea that humans are moral and reasonable beings but may be irrational sometimes is also reflected in the Aristotelian theory of bipartite human soul. Aristotle adds that man is a social being; hence, he loves interactions and relationships with other men and does not approve of isolated life. The centrality of rationality and morality in human behavior can also be found in Locke, Rousseau, Kant and many other modern philosophers and theorists. This study examines Thomas Hobbes's theory of human nature. It highlights the pessimistic and crude view of human nature by Hobbes. For Hobbes, humans are moved by desires rather than reason, hence, they are egoistic, self-centered, acquisitive and confrontational. Using philosophical refutation as its theoretical and methodological frameworks of analysis, this work argues that Hobbes's theory of human nature is parochial and largely reductive. The theory is narrow and overgeneralizes the potentials of human irrationality and ignores the realities of altruism, empathy and cooperation in human existence.

I.   INTRODUCTION

Thomas Hobbes, born in 1588, lived through the most turbulent period in England's history throughout the 17th century. Hobbes has a tendency of telling his friends that he was born twins with fear (Hobbes, 1972). This is because the Spanish Armada was launched against England in the same year that Hobbes was born. The Armada was a contingent of 130 massive warships dispatched by King Philip 11 of Spain to attack and invade England with the ultimate objective of overthrowing Queen Elizabeth 1 and restoring Catholicism in the country. This event must have evoked fear and panic in England, which is why Hobbes uses it to mirror the circumstances of his birth. Also, much of England of this period was divided sharply between the Royalists (supporters of King Charles) and Parliamentarians led by Oliver Cromwell. In all of this, Hobbes supported the King. Fearing that he would be killed by the enemies of the King, Hobbes fled to France before civil war broke out in England in 1642. While in France, Hobbes wrote his famous book, The Leviathan in 1651 in which he insists that absolute monarchy is the ideal system of government, and that its establishment should not be based on divine right of Kings, but on social contract, the basis of political community or civil society.

Hobbes begins his defense of the primacy of political community and absolute sovereign with an account of the state of nature which crystalizes his theory of human nature. According to Hobbes, in the state of nature (the natural condition of man), the life of man is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" (Hobbes, 1972). Thus, human nature is inherently crude and immoral, which is why men are selfish, greedy and acquisitive and inclined to go to war to satisfy their endlessly-changing and

inexhaustible desires and appetites. There is no point in human life when desires cease, so human beings are always in search of new satisfactions. A consequence of man's acquisitive nature is his natural inclination to fear death. The fear of uncertainty and of being killed robs men of the tendency to cooperate in securing or limiting their desires, so they come into violent competition with similarly motivated persons. Individuals are not sure that others will not take advantage of them and strike first to take what they want, therefore, they lack that virtue of trust in others. Is Hobbes's account a correct and balanced theory of human nature? This study is an answer on the contrary, and thus, a refutation of Hobbes's theory of human nature.

Theory of Human Nature

It is common for scientists to consider all living people members of single specie known as Homo sapiens or human beings. This suggests that human nature is composed of some unique traits that are specific to humans. Human refers to certain group of qualities belonging to all and only human beings. These qualities are both physical and non-physical or mental. Beyond physical human attributes, there exist mental characteristics of human beings that in turn determine the personalities of individuals. These include attributes like rationality, imagination, consciousness, emotions, language, appetite, will-power etc., all of which are native or natural to humans. In other words, if these characteristics are removed, there will be nothing called human beings. These inherent qualities of humans in turn form the bases for each individual to be nurtured in order for him or her to become a person.

Thus, human nature encompasses the bases for people to be addressed as human beings and to acquire personhood. It is intrinsic, inherent, native or natural to human beings; and constitutes the building block of their persons or personhood. As a result, the metaphysical explanation of human nature mostly focuses on the characteristics of people that enable their diverse range of skills and qualities. However, the linkage of man's inherent qualities to his person or personhood is usually achieved through nurture and adaptation. In other words, societal upbringing within culture, religion, education and other social institutions, coupled with how they adapt to the societal norms, all go a long way in influencing one's personhood. It is for this reason that "cultural psychologists seek to understand people as they are embedded within their various cultures" (Heine & Buchtel, 2009, p. 370).

There are many theories of human nature in literature. In western philosophical history, the first systematic theory of human nature is traceable to Plato's idea of tripartite soul (Plato, 1974). Plato opines that the human soul is divided into reason, high spirit and appetite and through this division it acquires rationality. The three elements are present in every person's mind and each of them has its proper role to play. Reason which resides in the head is responsible for thinking, discernment and understanding things as they should be. It is the most important part of the mind because it is divine and partakes of the eternal. Appetite residing in the stomach generates the craving for nourishment, the longing for eating, copulation and all other sensual pleasures. Spirit, situated in the chest, produces bravery and the willingness or readiness to act.

Furthermore, Plato (1974) posits that a man is just if the three elements carry out their naturally assigned roles without interference. However, when the three elements encroach into one another's duties, there is always a civil war going on in the soul. This conflict is usually between appetite and reason. The third element, spirit, which ordinarily should be an ally of reason, sometimes supports appetite in the struggle in a man's soul. When reason proves superior, the spirit implements decisions, whose outcome is beneficial to mankind, but when appetite/desire rules in us, the spirit takes actions whose results are totally irrational.

But Aristotle (1988) supports the idea of bipartite soul, thus he classifies the soul into rational and irrational parts. The two components of the soul, however, can be further divided into the rational speculative and rational practical, as well as irrational appetitive and irrational vegetative. According to Aristotle, the rational speculative is completely rational because it contains reason within itself; the rational practical participates in rationality but only to the extent that it recognises the rationality of the speculative and accepts instructions from it; the irrational appetitive resists the urge to over things in morally strong people, but in morally weak persons resists the urges of the rational which advises caution; and the irrational vegetative is totally irrational and belongs not only to humans, but to all living things.

Aristotle's notion of the soul crystalizes his theory of human nature which consists of the idea that men are rational and social, but sometimes selfish, savage and lawless in their desires. For Aristotle if the irrational part of the soul neither haughtily rejects the instructions of the rational soul nor greedily insists on following its own impulses, and willingly implements the reasonable instructions, man becomes what truly he is, a rational being who is at his best when he uses his reason in the best way. Simply, what Aristotle's theory of human nature establishes is the possibility of attaining the good life through reason which reflects the pre-eminence of the rational element of the soul over and above the passions or desires of the irrational part.

The idea that humans are decisively rational entities is also found in the philosophies of Aquinas and Kant, among others. This perspective involves seeing humans as rational beings. This viewpoint holds that humans' rational nature is the aspect of their nature that merits the greatest philosophical attention. Thus, Kant is mainly interested in "human nature" as a means of instantiating rational moral principles (Kant, 1974, pp.64-85). A modern articulation of man's rationality as the basis of civil society can be found in the social contract theory of John Locke. According to Locke, it is because man can reason that he decided to exit the state of nature and live a more secured life regulated by laws made by the state or government (Locke, 1980). He argues that humans are endowed with reason which teaches them that being equal and free, no one ought to harm another in his life, liberty and property. This is unlike Hobbes who had earlier presented a crude view of human nature according to which men are moved by their desires rather than their reason. Hence, according to him, men are evil, selfish and acquisitive (Hobbes 1974). Rousseau also rejects the anarchic view of human nature by Thomas Hobbes. According to Rousseau, men are naturally good, unselfish and non-violent (Rousseau, 1968).

Hobbes's theory of human nature may be considered a variant of realism, a broader doctrine which posits that human beings are by nature selfish and love to dominate. In international relations, a common understanding in the realist theory of human nature is that there is an inherent urge in man to dominate which makes conflict or war inevitable. A contrary perspective is liberalism, a theoretical position that assumes that man is naturally good, not evil, and therefore has the capability of living more cooperatively and peacefully in a less conflictual and anarchical international system. The basis of man's goodness is reason; hence, he is capable of making rational decisions. It is because of the centrality of reason, a mental attribute, in human behaviour that liberalism is sometimes seen as a broader theory of which idealism is part. Consequently, some liberals are also idealists such as Immanuel Kant and Woodrow Wilson.

II. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL FRAMEWORKS

This study adopts philosophical refutation as its theoretical and methodological frameworks of analysis. Philosophical refutation makes the assumption that knowledge is gained by demonstrating the falsity of a claim, individual, or theory. In philosophical research, the process of providing a reason or reasons against a stance or positions is crucial. Plato's dialogues, which feature Socratic elenchus—dialectical verbal exchanges between two interlocutors—a questioner and an answerer—in front of an audience—possibly with a referee or judge—constitute the source of philosophical rebuttal. In chapter three of Plato's Republic, the point is made that;

You can say that a person does not know the Good itself or any kind of good if he is unable to rationally distinguish the Form of the Good from all others, does not, like in a battle, survive all refutations, is eager to argue based on reality rather than opinion, and passes all of the tests without faltering in reasoned discourse (Plato, 19742).

From the passage above, it could be seen that key components of the elenchus or dialectics are the attempts by the questioner to refutate and the answerer to avoid being refuted. The Republic contains several cases where Socrates, by means of questions, elicits a number of answers from his interlocutors, only to go on to prove that those answers are incoherent. The Socratic elenchus, described as "a test that shames those who fail it, and which cleanses their soul through that shaming," can be seen as an evaluation of the coherence of an individual's beliefs (Castelnérac & Marion 2009, p. 51). It is important to note that refutation is not the exclusive preserve of any discipline. In legal system, especially in litigations, the goal is usually to show the untenability of the positions of one's opponent. Additionally, formulas in mathematics are rigorously examined and disproved when errors are discovered. In philosophy, refutations are also essential to the process of challenging concepts.

In many other fields, however, empirical testing is the most widely accepted method of refuting scientific statements (Strevens 2021). However, in philosophy, argumentation is the main method of refutation (Popper, 1989), which can be accomplished through direct refutation, indirect refutation, or a combination of the two. In the indirect method, one refutes a formula by failing to prove it. For example, you search for a proof of A, and if all the likelihoods of finding a proof for A have been exhausted, you say that A is refuted. In the direct method, a single refutation of A, with a counterexample, justifies refuting A. This can be exemplified in universal claims (such as, "All men are proud" is refuted by the presence of a humble man) or conditional statements (such as, "If there is smoke, then there is fire," which is refuted by an instance of smoke arising without fire). The third method involves a combination of indirect and direct refutations. Combining the indirect and direct methods, that is, using a proof and a refutation at the same time, seems appealing and may produce fresh outcomes that are both interesting and useful (Pulcini & Skura, 2020).

Refuting Hobbes's Theory of Human Nature

Hobbes paints a negative picture of human nature. He asserts that humans are egoistic, materialistic, and glory-seeking. This is because nature has endowed men with the violent competition and war with others to satisfy their desires. In other words, the whole life of man is that of power struggle, and the more power he has, the more he wants to preserve what he already possesses. According to Hobbes (1972, pp. 57-61):

> As a matter of power, it is noble to be admired, feared, or adored by many. It is disgraceful to get little or no honor. Because they were obtained through power, dominion and triumph are noble, while slavery out of need or fear is disgraceful; so that in the first place, I attribute to the universal human tendency an unrelenting and restless thirst for power that only ends with death. Competition for wealth, prestige, authority, or other resources may lead to conflict, animosity, and war when one competitor's path to achieving his goals is to murder, subjugate, supplant, or repel the other.

Thus, Hobbes's theory of human nature presents man with an exceptional crudeness and without moral consideration. In fact, man for him is more-or-less an animal, and a congregation of men, an animal kingdom characterized by the principle of survival of the fittest. But, the pertinent question to ask is – is man actually as 'raw' as Hobbes claims he is? To this, Newman in Brow (2005, p.302) opines that "if Hobbes' view of man is real of man, human race would have long vanished from the earth's surface for none would have survived the hostilities that would have resulted from this "war of everyman against everyman".

If what Hobbes says is true of man, then man is no longer a rational being which Plato and Aristotle, Locke and Rousseau say he is, nor is he a moral agent which Kantians say of him. In fact, one begins to wonder if Hobbes's idea of nature which endows men with immoral vices and instincts is the same nature which in the Platonian, Aristotelian, Lockean and Rousseauian perspectives adorns man with rational power (what may be called the angelic one) which gives him the ability to reason, discern and come to the knowledge of the true nature of things.

Since obviously the intention of nature is not to bring an end to mankind by creating men with vices rather than virtue, Hobbes' view of human nature can only be seen as bringing out those salient instincts and drives in men which can only manifest itself at the level of Sigmund Freud's 'ID'- the pleasure seeking part of man resulting from its contact with the external world (Freud in Coleman, 1989, p.20). Unfortunately, Hobbes loses sight of the fact that nature also endowed men with the moral capacity of controlling these instincts and that is why some people even in the state of nature acted rationally and morally. Indeed, it will take a moral agent who has concern for his security and those of others to enter into the social contract. Hence, Locke and Rousseau have a contrary view to the crude opinion of human nature as expressed by Hobbes. For them, men are endowed with reason which enjoins them to obey the laws of nature. Such laws include the preservation of their lives and those of others.

Therefore, men are not egoistic, greedy, unreasonable, or wicked, though they can be motivated by passion; but generally, humans are rational, peaceful, gregarious, and are able do good to one another.

III. CONCLUSION

It can be concluded that Hobbes's theory of human nature is incorrect because it is parochial and largely reductive. The theory overgeneralizes the possibilities of human irrationality and ignores

the realities of altruism, empathy and cooperation in human existence. It lacks empirical support as there are anthropological, psychological and sociological evidence of both selfish and selfless behaviors by human beings. Hobbes fails to acknowledge the contextual nature of human behavior to the effect that cultural, environmental and spiritual factors influence the actions of people. Hobbes's view of human nature is excessively pessimistic and underestimates human rationality and capacity for moral action. Thus, the point which the narrow and bleak idea of human nature by Hobbes misses is that although man has the tendency to act unreasonably, he is largely a rational and moral being. To be fair to Hobbes, the England of his time witnessed wide-raging crises such as the civil war, execution of King Charles, rise of Protestant extremism and anti-Catholic sentiments, land ownership disputes, witch-hunts and general disorder which must have contributed in influencing his unidirectional theory of human nature. In fact, these existential conditions might have been the reason Hobbes opted for absolute monarchy or totalitarian state which in his thinking would restore order and peaceful coexistence.

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