

Is “War of Everyman against Everyman” the State of Nature?

The Implications of Identity Theory for Self-Interest and Selfishness in Hobbesian Logic.

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Abstract

Hobbes's 17th century philosophy argues that war is an inevitable feature of the international landscape. This argument has been embraced by Political Realists, and as such forms a significant barrier to the acceptance of pacifism as a workable option in International Relations. This paper challenges the proof of human selfishness which lies at the core of Hobbes's argument.

Essentially, Hobbes defines all voluntary actions as self-interested and reduces all human motivation to aversion or desire. However, "self-interested" is not the same as "selfish." Theories on identity illuminate the ways in which a "self" is more than an isolated individual, and a person may sacrifice individual benefits, needs and even life for the relationships and groups making up his or her identity.

Without selfishness, Hobbes's description of the State of Nature as "war of everyman against everyman" does not attain. This finds empirical support in the existence of peaceful societies with too few instances of lethal violence to generate a homicide rate. Hobbes's subsequent claim that the international arena is in the State of Nature, making war inevitable, is thereby negated. The Iroquois Confederacy's use of multiplicity of identity to maintain peace between previously warring Native American nations is considered at the end.

Introduction

In this paper, I will attempt to negate Hobbes's thesis that war is inevitable in the international arena by negating the proof of man's selfishness on which the argument rests.

Hobbes makes this argument by a) demonstrating that all voluntary actions have their roots in desire or aversion (1651/1994; I, vi, 49-54)¹, which is the basis of his later summation that all voluntary actions are self-interested (I, xiv, 8). He then shows how man's selfish nature leads to the "State of Nature" (SoN) which he defines as social breakdown due to the violence or the threat of violence (I, viii, 8), and specifies that the only way out of this SoN is to have a ruler capable of keeping people in line by force (II, xvii, 13). He finally observes that because there is no ruler of rulers (single world leader), the international arena is necessarily in the SoN, or a state of war or the perpetual threat of war (II, xxi, 8).

The focus of this paper will be Hobbes's equation of "self-interested" and "selfish," which I will demonstrate are not equivalent terms. I will use the theories of Burton (1997) and Sen (2006) on identity to argue that the identity of an individual is not made up solely of the self, but is multifaceted in nature, consisting also of relationships with others and with groups. These identity facets are not subordinate to the individual self; on the contrary, in many cases, a person sacrifices his individual benefits, needs, and even life for the sake of these relationships or groups. This concept of multiplistic identity allows an action to be self-interested without being selfish.

Definitions

This paper will make use of the following terms.

State of Nature (SoN): Hobbes's description of a state of social breakdown in which people have no security, no laws, no sense of right and wrong or justice and injustice, and

¹ All Hobbes citations are from *Leviathan* and use Hobbes's own system for numbering his points, rather than page numbers.

everyone is fighting for their self-preservation (I, xiii, 1-8). In the SoN, this state of insecurity prevents positive aspects of society from developing (1, xiii, 4-9). Any society *not* controlled by a monarch is considered by Hobbes to be in the SoN, (including but not limited to the primitive past) (1, xiii, 8). Hobbes vividly describes this:

[M]en live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal. In such condition, there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently, no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building . . . no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, 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 (I, xiii, 9).

War: Hobbes defines the state of war which characterizes the SoN as not only fighting between individuals and small groups, but also the *threat* of such violence (I, xiii, 8). A major point here is that having to defend one's self, property, and future security against potential danger takes enormous resources, creates general social insecurity, and prevents society from developing. Hobbes also later describes war between countries as the SoN operating on an international scale (II, xxi, 8; II, xxx, 30). In this case too, both actual fighting and the state of insecurity resulting from the *threat* of fighting are included in the term.

Political Realism: the view that in politics, power trumps morality (Oxford, Realism).

Pacifism: the view that war and violence are not justified, and conflicts should be resolved by other means (Oxford, Pacifism).

Self-Interested: of some benefit to the person acting. Hobbes defines all voluntary action as self-interested, reasoning that if it is voluntary, the person must have some interest in doing it (I, xiv, 8)

Selfish: prioritizing the individual over others.

Altruistic: an action having little or no benefit to the individual.

Identity: a person's understanding of who he or she is.

Importance of Question

The importance of this question lies in the centrality of Hobbes's logic to Political Realism, the dominant school of IR. Hobbes's argument for the inevitability of war forms the core of Political Realist theory (Gallarotti, 2008; Hofmann, 2013; Sahlins, 2008). Although Hobbes was not the first Political Realist (that honor may go to Thucydides), Hobbes's philosophy is the most thorough explanation of the psychology and dynamics behind this position. Hobbes so closely aligns with Political Realism that the former may be paraphrased to describe the latter (Browning, 2013, p. 14). Far from being an obsolete, 360 year old argument, this logic is the basis of how International Relations is currently conducted worldwide--not to mention a staple educational component in the training of future leaders.

The implications for Pacifism are dire. In claiming that the avoidance of war is an option, Pacifists seem to be ignoring Hobbesian logic that war is inevitable. Terminology compounds the problem, as Political Realism has laid claim to the term, "real," implying

accuracy to the world as it exists. This implies that Pacifism, as the opposite position, is out of touch with reality and is based in fantasy, ignorance, or naiveté. We can therefore see that the Hobbesian argument on the inevitability of war, especially to the extent that it is considered to represent reality, is a major obstacle preventing Pacifism gaining traction in IR.

Explanation of what is being asserted and challenged

Although Hobbes is sometimes characterized as claiming that people have violent natures, this is not the case. His first law of nature is to seek peace insofar as it can be obtained (I, xiv, 4). In describing the SoN, Hobbes is describing the results of a *social dynamic*, wherein even people who would otherwise be content are forced into violence to secure and defend their futures (I, xvi-xvii). It is important to note that Hobbes's theory is based on human *selfishness*, not human *aggression*.

Another point to note is that Hobbes claims to describe a *universal* social dynamic. To understand this, it is necessary to historically ground his theory. Previous to Hobbes, Skeptic philosophers had demonstrated that there are no universal morals, (Tuck, 1989, p. 46). Then, in an attempt to pull ethics out of total relativity, Grotius posited self-defense as a universal human reaction and right, giving it moral status (Grotius, 1625/2006). Hobbes enters at this point, starting with self-defense as the basic human universal, which he calls the Right of Nature (I, xiv, 1). From this point, he shows how society necessarily proceeds to violent insecurity, or the SoN. The universal aspect of Hobbes argument is important: he does not claim that war is possible or likely, but *inevitable*. This lays the basis for his claim

that because the SoN abides in the international arena, war between countries is therefore inevitable (II, xxx, 27).

In this paper, I aim to challenge that the self-interested nature of voluntary action constitutes selfishness. The absence of selfishness negates Hobbes's subsequent conclusion that the SoN is inevitable (absent a monarch). If the SoN is not inevitable on an interpersonal level, it cannot be said to be inevitable in the international arena. Thus Hobbes's conclusion that war is inevitable is invalidated.

Reason for Asking Question

But why question such a well-established theory? To justify this line of inquiry, we must turn to the evidence of societies and how they have or have not ended up in the SoN. Although some of the modern debate turns on the question of innate aggression rather than the social consequences of selfishness, many researchers have found that one way or another, the SoN does prevail. Ardrey (1961) wrote that an aggressive instinct was the major force driving human evolution. Lorenz (1967) theorized, based on animal studies, that humans developed an aggressive instinct through natural selection. E. O. Wilson (1975) established the field of sociobiology arguing for the adaptivity of aggression in both animals and humans. Peterson and Wrangham (1996) found that aggression is adaptive and instinctive among primates and humans. Pinker (2011) argued that all primitive societies were extremely violent. Morris (2014) argued that it is the very violence of primitive societies which has made social progress possible in that wars have produced stronger states.

But this view has challengers, as well. Montagu (1973) claimed that Lorenz and Ardrey created violence among animals by overcrowding them, and pointed to studies of animal communities living without lethal aggression. DeWaal (2006) argued that primates, are not the violent animals portrayed by Wrangham and Peterson, but demonstrate sympathy, empathy, and reconciliation. Neurobiology has suggested that humans are hard-wired to relate, not as selfish and remote as Hobbesian theory portrays (Feldman, 2016; Narvaez, 2014). In sociobiology, recognition of the survival value of social groups, and of the contradiction between aggressive behavior and group cohesion, have led to the development of theories of the adaptivity of cooperation (Marean 2015, Nowak 2011)..

chimpanzees

It has been argued that because chimpanzees have a recent evolutionary ancestor in common with humans, they can inform our study of human instinct and development, (De Waal, 2006). Conversely, others argue that chimpanzees have been evolving separately from humans for at least six million years, are fundamentally different from humans, and are therefore not good predictors of human behavior (Endicott, 2013). This paper does not choose sides in that debate, but includes chimpanzees because they are frequently included as a dimension of relevance.

Pinker, a self-avowed Neo-Hobbesian, describes approximately 75 chimpanzee killings across nine communities and concludes, “little doubt remains that lethal aggression is part of chimpanzees’ normal behavioral repertoire.” (2011, 38) However, in a survey of 18 chimpanzee communities, including “all major studies,” (total 426 years of observation, minimum study duration four years), Wilson et. al. describe the incidence of violence

among chimpanzee communities as widely variable (2014, p. 414). In this survey, killings were observed in only nine (50%) of the chimpanzee communities. Researchers *inferred* killings at a further six communities (33%). Three communities (16.6%) displayed *no observed, inferred, or suspected killings* (M. L. Wilson et al., 2014). This clearly contradicts the Neo-Hobbesian assertion that killing is a universal chimpanzee behavior.

humans

Researchers on both sides of the debate agree that it is possible to learn about human instinct and social evolution by observing people in primitive forms of social organization, especially in the hunter-gatherer societies in which we evolved (Endicott, 2013; Fry, 2006; Pinker 2011). As with chimpanzees, the Neo-Hobbesian assertion is that primitive humans were violent, with lethal raiding as the leading cause of homicide (Peterson, 1996). A Scientific American article describes early human encounters with Neanderthals in gory terms, “These strangers even came at night in large groups, slaughtering men and children and taking the women.” (Marean, 2015, p. 39). The transition from hunter-gatherer to agricultural communities with governments is claimed to have brought about the first major reduction in rampant lethality (Pinker, 2011, p. xxiv).

But not all hunter-gatherer societies are the same. Fry (2006) calls for further distinctions, separating them into simple and complex. Simple hunter-gatherers are egalitarian and nomadic, without social segmentation, while complex ones have hierarchies and power structures (p. 103). It is the small, egalitarian, mobile forager band societies, not the stratified, complex societies, which represent the social structures we lived in for hundreds of thousands of years, and within which our deepest social patterns and instincts

have developed (Diamond, 2012, p. 14; Endocott, 2013). Fry and Soderberg's (2013) examination of a sample of 21 mobile small band forger societies reveals that almost half do not have *any* record of multiple attackers or victims, indicating the absence of lethal raiding.

The question of whether or not peaceful societies exist has been argued back and forth. Dentan's ethnography, *The Semai: a Nonviolent People of Malaya*, described a currently existing peaceful society wherein violence was extremely rare (Dentan, 1967). But Knauft argued that because of the low population, the two homicides that did show up produce a homicide rate of 30 per 100,000 per year (Knauft, 1987). Pinker popularized this argument in his bestseller, "Better Angels of our Nature," pointing out that the homicide rate is on par with Detroit in the 1970s, making this so-called peaceful society actually very dangerous (Pinker, 2011, pp. 54-55). Fry rebutted, pointing out that the actual population of the Semai is not 300, but 15,000, producing a homicide rate of 0.56 per 100,000 per annum, which is quite low (Fry, 2006, p. 73).

But what can we learn from only two instances of homicide? Not enough to generate a homicide rate, it turns out, because a rate extrapolated from so few events is unreliable. Relative Standard Error (RSE) is a measure of reliability of rates for low numbers of observed instances. It calculates the probability that the data will *not* represent the overall population. As data points get more scarce, the information generated from them becomes less reliable and the RSE goes up. The New York State Department of Health uses a reliability cutoff of 20 cases (RSE of 22%), considering rates generated by fewer cases to be unreliable ("Rates Based on Small Numbers: Statistics Teaching Tools," 1999). Similarly, the Australian Bureau of Statistics advises that rates

based on fewer than 20 cases are unstable ("Literacy Stats: What is a Standard Error and Relative Standard Error? Reliability of Estimates for Labor Force Data," 2010). The Washington State Department of Health points out that while different national bureaus in the US use different standards, the cut-off for reliability is at most 30%, requiring 11 cases ("Guidelines for Working with Small Numbers," 2012).

A rate based on four events has an RSE of 50%; two events means a RSE of 70%; one event means a RSE of 100%. With a RSE of 70%, it does not matter if the Semai population is 300 or 15,000; the rate generated from two instances is meaningless. It is, however, significant that out of the 21 mobile small band forager societies sampled by Fry and Soderberg, 90% had too few incidences of lethal violence to generate a reliable rate.

Instances of *no* observed or reported lethal violence do generate a reliable rate of zero. Three of the societies sampled by Fry and Soderberg (the Mbuti, the Semang, and the Micmac,) showed no lethal violence (Fry & Soderberg, 2013). In other research, Fry identifies the Chewong of Malaysia and the Ifaluk of Micronesia as societies with no record, history, or recollection of lethal violence (2006, pp. 66-67; 75). Younger's examination of a set of islands in Polynesia turns up several other societies with no recorded lethal violence. Selecting only the ones based on census data, which Younger terms the most accurate set of findings, two islands have no instances of lethal violence: Nukuoro and Nanumaga (Tuvalu) (Younger, 2008). This clearly contradicts the Hobbesian prediction about the SoN, and justifies a closer investigation of Hobbesian logic.

Hobbes's Logic in Detail

man's selfishness

To demonstrate that humans are selfish, Hobbes begins by asserting that without words, there is no thought (I, iv, 10), that true and false are attributes of speech, not of things (I, iv, 11), and that understanding is conception caused by speech (I, iv, 22). Therefore, if a man's speech is unique to him, so is his understanding. This is because speech is signifying conceptions, and conceptions differ from man to man; therefore the concepts signified by various words also differ from man to man (I, iv, 24). Because the definitions of virtue, vice, wisdom are not standardized, these can never be the grounds of rationality. (I, iv, 24) This establishes the basis for Hobbes's claim that "right" and "wrong" don't exist unless there is someone capable of enforcing a uniform standard, and therefore it is impossible for actions to be based on right and wrong in the SoN.

[in the SoN] [N]othing can be unjust. the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice, have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law; where no law, no injustice (I, xiii, 13).

Next, Hobbes negates the possibility of spontaneous or instinctive action. To do this, Hobbes differentiates between "vital" and "voluntary" motions. Vital do not require thought, such as pulse and breathing, whereas voluntary are movement of any of the limbs "in such a manner as is first fancied in our minds" (I, vi, 1). Because voluntary motions (e.g. speaking, walking) depend on precedent thought (what, where, which way), we therefore see that imagination is the origin of all voluntary motion. (I, vi, 1.) Hobbes further clarifies that it may seem to unlearned people that they are acting instantaneously, spontaneously, or instinctively, but that is because the motion from imagination to action is invisible and happens so fast that they can't catch it. (I, vi, 1.)

Next, Hobbes negates the possibility of acting based on will by pointing out that will is not “rational appetite”--if it were, nobody would do unreasonable things. (I, vi, 53) He then describes will as the decision to get or avoid something, made *after* the deliberation of how desirable the thing is. We therefore see that actions depend not on will but on appetite (I, vi, 53).

This establishes Hobbes’s point that all voluntary actions have their true roots in desire or aversion. (I, vi, 54) Having concluded that the true motivation for all voluntary actions is desire or aversion, Hobbes considers his point proven, and starts referring to all of man’s voluntary actions as “of some good to himself” (I, xiv, 8).

how man’s selfish nature develops into the SoN

Hobbes argues that peace is the first law of nature, and the essence of peace in human society is people should keep their agreements, (I, xv, 1). However, he has already negated a sense of right and wrong or justice and injustice, will, instinct, and altruism or generosity as motivations for people to keep their agreements. He then details the variety of motivations people have for breaking agreements, (II, xvii, 2-12). Hobbes describes almost no contrary motivation other than fear of the consequences (I, xiv, 7, 18, 31). Essentially, without a monarch to create and enforce laws, people cannot trust one another, and social breakdown will ensue.

Hobbes’s second law of nature (Grotius’s universal ethic) is that man should defend himself as necessary, which means that individuals have the *right* to use whatever means are necessary against their fellow man to secure their own security, including theft and even murder (I, xiv, 4). Therefore, only a monarch capable of instilling fear can make

people keep agreement and keep society out of the SoN (1, xv, 3). All situations without such a monarch are situations of war of everyman against everyman (1, xiii, 9).

relationship of SoN to war between nations

Because there is no ruler of all nations, Hobbes writes, “[T]he law of nations and the law of nature is the same thing. And every sovereign hath the same right, in procuring the safety of his people, that any particular man can have, in procuring the safety of his own body” (II, xxx, 30). He does not make an elaborate justification here, but simply states that the international arena is de facto in the SoN--meaning a state of war--and that sovereigns, like individuals in the SoN, therefore have the *right* to attack each other for the sake of their own security. It is this conclusion which renders Pacifism untenable to Political Realists. If, barring a single ruler of the world, war is the de facto state of the international arena, it would be irrational to fail to prepare for and engage in wars.

Identity

An examination of Hobbes’s equation of self-interest and selfishness starts with the question: what is a person? Besides the physical body, there is a mental understanding of one’s self, which may be called one’s sense of self, or identity. This identity is made up of associations with others and groups. For example, one may know one’s self to be a man because one recognizes the category of other men to which one belongs. Other aspects of identity, for example, gardener, writer, Iranian, or liberal, operate in a similar fashion. Some of these identity facets may be based in close personal relationships, such as

husband, father, or son. They all have in common that they depend on the context of others.

The need for identity is not a peripheral emotional wish, but is inherent in the human psyche to the extent that human security *depends* on a sense of identity (Burton, 1997, pp. 29-31). Although traditionally, it is assumed that physical needs will be sought first, we now know that relational needs such as identity are so important that a person may sacrifice physical needs, even including life, for them (Ibid. p. 36).

Nor can this identity be limited to a singular facet. Our example person is not a man *or* a gardener *or* a father *or* Iranian *or* liberal. He is all of these things at once. Sen describes the artificial narrowing of identity as an essential precursor for violence, writing,

Indeed, many of the conflicts and barbarities in the world are sustained through the illusion of a unique and choiceless identity. The art of constructing hatred takes the form of invoking the magical power of some allegedly predominant identity that drowns out other affiliations The result can be homespun elemental violence, or globally artful violence and terrorism. In fact, a major source of potential conflict in the contemporary world is the presumption that people can be uniquely categorized based on religion or culture (Sen, 2006, p. xv).

Sen further points out that people are not mindless slaves to their identities, but exercise choice in determining their own priorities regarding facets of their identity (Ibid. p. 182).

Applying this understanding of identity to the Hobbesian construction of self-interest illuminates the crucial distinction between self-interest and selfishness. Assuming

a singular, individualistic identity, as Hobbes does, places altruistic acts *in opposition* to the needs of the individual self. In this opposition, Hobbes theorizes that the individual wins.

But this opposition is a false dichotomy. Understanding the nature of identity as multiplistic allows us to see that acts benefiting groups or others are *not* self-sacrificing, but represent a person moving back and forth between poles of identity they choose to prioritize. When our example man buys a pair of shoes for his son instead of buying a pair for himself, he is acting from his identity of self-as-father. When he risks persecution to his individual self by publishing an essay defending the rights of women to choose whether or not to wear a burqa, he is acting from his identities as self-as-Iranian, self-as-liberal, and self-as-writer. All of these facets of identity are “self-interested,” but not all of them are oriented on the self-as-individual.

The reality of multiplistic identity cripples the Hobbesian proof of selfishness which is essential to his demonstration of the SoN. If people cannot reliably be said to prioritize their identities as individuals over all other facets of their identities, the SoN is not the inevitable social outcome (absent a monarch). And if the SoN is not the inevitable outcome on a social level, it cannot be said to be the de facto state of affairs in International Relations. Meaning, war does not have the inevitability ascribed to it by Political Realists.

Possible Objections

One possible objection to the argument I have made in this paper is that I have not established that war is a social ill which *should* be overcome. Neo-Hobbesians assert the value of war as a driver of social progress, not least of which is the formation of stronger states which are better able to protect their citizens (Morris, 2014; Pinker, 2011). These

arguments take the inevitability of war as axiomatic, rendering the logic of war as a social driver somewhat circular. To my knowledge, no study has been done comparing the social developments during peacetime to the social developments spurred by war, especially one factoring in the funding and broad mandate of war-driven research. Furthermore, war and military preparedness are enormously costly in terms of funds, death, and ongoing trauma, including PTSD and veteran suicides. Even Neo-Hobbesians like Pinker and Morris assert that war is a terrible social mechanism and we are hopefully evolving away from it.

A second possible objection is that the concept of “war” has moved beyond military action between states, and now includes non-state actors such as terrorists and private enterprises (for example the private militia maintained by oil companies in the Niger Delta). However, Hobbes does not differentiate between types of actor when he develops his theory of the SoN as a social dynamic between individuals and then replaces individuals with states. It likewise follows that the inclusion of non-state actors in international conflicts would not present a problem. The focus is on the dynamic of the inevitability of violence, not the particular identities of the parties involved.

Conclusion

In summary, if Hobbes is correct in dismissing a sense of right and wrong, spontaneous action, and will as bases of voluntary action, and asserting that all voluntary action stems from attraction or repulsion, it still does not follow that such action is necessarily selfish. If we update our understanding of identity from individualistic to multiplistic, and include in our concept of “self” the various roles and relationships which make up a real human identity, we see that the sacrifice of the interests, needs, and even

life of the individual is consistent with the self-interest of other identity facets.

Fundamental identification with other people and social groups represents an additional motivation for people to keep their agreements and maintain peace, not accounted for by Hobbes.

Selfishness drives the formation of the SoN. If self-interest cannot be reduced to selfishness, this means the SoN does not have the inevitability that Hobbes claims for it. It further explains how some chimpanzee and human communities have naturally avoided the SoN without being under authoritarian control. (This is not to say that they are uncontrolled, but merely that the social means they have found for keeping their covenants with each other do not rely on lethal force.) If the state of war characterizing the SoN is not inevitable on a community level absent a monarch, it cannot be said to be inevitable on an international level absent a single world monarch, either. The suggests that models of security which do not rely on war might usefully be explored.

One such possibility is to make use of the multiplicity of identity in designing political systems. The Iroquois confederacy made use of the multiplicity of identity in establishing security for its political system. One aspect was clan. Under the Iroquois system, it was forbidden to marry within one's own clan. This made it much more difficult for clans to separate themselves and go to war with one another. This was coupled with an ideology that peace is preferable to war, education on the history of the Iroquois Confederacy as a process from war to peace, and an ethic of non-coercion among leadership. This system was successful in peacefully uniting formerly warring tribes, as well as absorbing new tribes, for hundreds of years (information in this paragraph from Dennis, 1993; Johansen, 2000). They were eventually overrun by Europeans with vastly

superior technology and the system was destroyed, although it has since served as a model for the development of the European Union.

Although the Iroquois Confederacy was demolished by a European colonizers with vastly superior fire power, it is important to note that the difference in technology between the Iroquois and the Europeans was far greater than the difference in technology between any of the world's current major superpowers. The application of governance structures utilizing the multiplicity of identity in the modern world could very well be a promising area of future research.

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