Western Canon Political Philosophers: Thomas Hobbes Versus Jean-Jacques Rousseau

Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau are two of the most recognized 17th and 18th century, Western canon political philosophers. In Hobbes's seminal work, Leviathan, he lays out his piece by piece conception of the world whereby man living in constant fear can escape the state of nature and find peace under the sovereign. In the Discourse on the Origin of Inequality, Rousseau lays out a competing conception of man in the state of nature excluding the corrupting influence of society. Hobbes's conception of man in the state of nature presents a more pessimistic view of human nature while Rousseau's offers a more romantic and optimistic view. In this essay I will compare and contrast Hobbes's and Rousseau's competing visions and argue that while we would hope Rousseau's conception is more accurate, in the end Hobbes's is more realistic.

Hobbes begins his conception of man in the state of nature by radically redefining human equality. He argues that all men are is motion and matter, and continues to propose: "For as to the strength of the body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself" (Hobbes 74). Hobbes is saying that men are equal by nature because a weak man can kill a strong man–even if it has to happen when the strong man is asleep. He then argues that men are also equal mentally because every man equally thinks he is the wisest. Humans overestimate their intelligence because they are aware of all of their own clever thoughts but only see what others externalize (Hobbes 74-75 / Class Notes).

Human equality leads to the "equality of hope in the attaining of our ends" (Hobbes 75). Hobbes argues that because men are equal, competition arises whenever two men want the same thing. He suggests that the state of nature is a state of scarcity where there is not enough stuff for everyone to have everything, so man's natural inclination is to fight for whatever scarce resources he can (Class Notes). Competition leads men to invade others for gain. From competition leads diffidence, where men mistrust others as they have the notion that nobody else respects their property and will steal it. Man is so terrified he will be attacked and have his stuff stolen that he often preempts these attacks by going on the offensive (Class Notes).

Finally, glory leads men to fight for their reputations. Human nature leads man to overvalue himself and want the same value to be demonstrated in interactions with others. When man is not shown the reverence he feels he deserves, he will resort to fighting to prove his dominance (Hobbes 75-76 / Class Notes). Taken together, competition, diffidence, and glory, render man stuck in the state of war where fighting is the disposition always lingering in the background. In Hobbes's state of nature, "[there are] 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" (Hobbes 76). Man is unsocial because he lives in constant fear and mistrust of others. He is so suspicious of others that he arms himself on a journey, locks his doors at night, and even locks his chest within his own home (Hobbes 77). Nevertheless, because of the Right of Nature, Hobbes argues that there is a way out of constant fear and the state of nature. Hobbes's Right of Nature is the liberty each man has to preserve himself using whatever means necessary (Class Notes). Through reason, man realizes he can escape war by giving up some of his

freedom under a sovereign in order to secure peace.

In opposition to Hobbes, Rousseau's conception of the man in the state of nature contests the notion that humans are inherently violent. Rousseau focuses his conception on the origins of man before society and culture has corrupted him. He refers to this pre-societal man as the savage man. The savage man is peaceful and has few needs. Rousseau begins his argument by comparing the physical nature of man in the state of nature to animals; "[When I see the savage man,] I see an animal less strong than some, less agile than others, but all in all, the most advantageously organized of all" (Rousseau 47). The savage man easily satisfies his needs of hunger, thirst, rest, and sex. Dispersed among the animal kingdom, he imitates and appropriates the animal instinct and feeds himself well scavenging for berries and other food. Rousseau agrees with Hobbes that man is not naturally social, but accounts for it in a different way. Rousseau explains that man is satisfied in his solitary existence and does not long for companionship while Hobbes argues mistrust and fear is what actively leads man to be unsocial. For Rousseau, being alone in the state of nature does not signify misery as man in the state of nature does not commit suicide while the civil man in society does. Rousseau continues to explain that stripped of all artificial faculties from society and culture, the savage man is stronger than the civil man. The savage man's body is his only tool, and he gains great advantage by learning to use it well. While Rousseau argues Hobbes says that man is "naturally intrepid and seeks only to attack and fight," Rousseau himself says that man is not afraid nor aggressive as he learns to recognize threats which pose real danger (Rousseau 48). Rousseau says there are few actual threats as the savage man possesses skillfulness that outweighs nearly all animals' strength.

The most serious threats to man in the state of nature are childhood, old age, and illness. Nevertheless, man's weakness in childhood is comparable to hundreds of other species, and man benefits from mothers' abilities to feed children wherever they go. While the child is then dependent on the mother, this dependency is typical in the animal kingdom. In old age, man's ability to gather food reduces concurrently with his need for nutrition. Furthermore, when a man dies, nobody is aware they no longer exist, and the man nearly does not realize himself. In the state of nature, man suffers fewer illnesses than the civilized man because he lives a "lifestyle prescribed by nature" (Rousseau 50). The only illnesses the savage man knows are wounds and old age.

For Rousseau, it is important to distinguish that lacking the comforts of society is not a disadvantage to the savage man because he knows no differently. The savage man was brought up as a child without shelter or clothing, so having them does not aid at all in his self-preservation which is "practically his sole concern" (Rousseau 52). Strong senses rather than comforts are what is important to secure man's self-preservation.

Turning to the savage man's moral and metaphysical attributes, Rousseau argues that man is different from animals in two ways. First, while animals are nothing more than "ingenious machine[s]" guided by nature, man "contributes a free agent to his own operations" (Rousseau 52). He argues animals are forced to choose by instinct while man has freedom making him more adaptable. Next, man also maintains "the faculty of self-perfection," which is the "source of all of man's misfortunes" (Rousseau 53). Perfectibility is the human faculty that allows us to reconstruct our nature in culture/society (Class Notes). For Rousseau, it is perfectibility that causes man to slowly leave the state of nature. While Rousseau and Hobbes both agree that it is the advanced human mental faculties that allow man to leave the state of nature, Rousseau

argues that leaving is what makes man eventually miserable. In contrast, Hobbes would say leaving and unifying under a sovereign is what allows man to find peace and flourish. Rousseau would concede, however, that there are some benefits to man in leaving the state of nature especially the emergence of the arts.

The final important component of Rousseau's conception of man is pity. The savage man's ability to feel empathy and pity others differs drastically from Hobbes's conception. Pity in a way softens man's focus on self-preservation in Rousseau's conception. Rousseau argues that pity is a disposition "so natural that even animals sometimes show noticeable signs of it" (Rousseau 62). The savage man without reason still feels pity. Rousseau writes, "Pity is what carries us without reflection to the aid of those we see suffering. Pity is what, in the state of nature, takes the place of laws, mores, and virtue" (Rousseau 64). Pity acts in harmony with self-preservation in making the savage man peaceful. While strong in the savage man, pity and empathy are weak in the civil man as reason and "amour propre" lead man to be selfish. Rousseau's conception of pity and self-preservation for the savage man is in direct conflict with Hobbes's conception. Rousseau comments on Hobbes: "let us not conclude with Hobbes that because man has no idea of goodness he is naturally evil; that he is vicious because he does not know virtue; that he always refuses to perform services for his fellowmen he does not believe he owes them; or that, by virtue of the right, which he reasonably attributes to himself, to those things he needs, he foolishly imagines himself to be the sole proprietor of the entire universe" (Rousseau 61). Rousseau argues that Hobbes fails to recognize that the savage man ensuring his own self-preservation does not conflict with the self-preservation of others in the state of nature. Hobbes's conception leads to conflict among men because he is forcing a wide range of societal and cultural needs into man's drive for self-preservation.

In examining the two conceptions more broadly, Rousseau offers a more romantic vision where we are all individuals satisfying our basic needs while Hobbes's central focus is on the pursuit of power. Rousseau acknowledges power is important, but only at a specific time outside of the state of nature where societal and cultural pressures emerge. It is only then for Rousseau that wielding social capital is important to make us feel better about ourselves. A critical difference for Hobbes is that he thinks the pursuit of power is critical for man all of the time.

While I am attracted to Rousseau's optimistic and romanticized conception of man in the state of nature, Hobbes offers a more realistic and convincing account of man as he would likely behave in the state of nature. While Rousseau argues that Hobbes projects societal and cultural needs onto men which leads to conflict, I think many of these needs are innate to men. For example, Rousseau contends that man would not be miserable living on his own in the state of nature; however, a desire for community and shared bonds with others is a biological feature of humans. Furthermore, when Rousseau strips away all of the societal and cultural desires and needs of man to only be left with hunger, thirst, rest and sex, he is stripping away what it truly means to be human. Also, Rousseau's conception of man running around scavenging for food only works when resources are not constrained. As the population rises or man lived in a resource-constrained place like an island, either all men would slowly starve, or conflict would emerge. All in all, while Hobbes presents a more depressing assessment of human nature, he presents a more accurate depiction of the depravity that would occur in the state of nature.