

# Locke and hobbes



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What is politics? Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as “ the total complex of relations between people living in society.” This phrase is the root of all politics and all governments. Whether we are a ruler or subject, in the end, we are all just “ people.” And how can “ people” best relate to each other? Over the years, countless individuals believed that they possessed the magic answer to this age-old question. Two figures, in particular, have endured the praise and the criticisms: Thomas Hobbes and John Locke. Each man represents a philosophy that has marked him in history and in the popular consciousness. And each man offers his unique commentary along with some surprising commonalities on this abstract word we call politics. How should an effective government approach its duties and functions? John Locke and Thomas Hobbes did hold some similar viewpoints on the government’s responsibilities. Both men favored a social contract between the government and its people. Hobbes stated in Leviathan, “ Whensoever a man transferred his right, or renounceth it, it is either in consideration of some right reciprocally transferred to himself or for some other good he hopeth for thereby.” In other words, a man must be willing to sacrifice some of his basic rights in exchange for a promise of security and stability from his government. Ever since Moses and Biblical times, Hobbes points out, Man has operated on a contract system. Likewise, John Locke also advocated this precursor to federalism: “ men, when they enter into society give up ... liberty of a kind; yet it being only with an intention in everyone the better to preserve himself, his liberty and property....”

Locke believed that entering into such a covenant with government officials would best serve a “ common good” and serve to create a “ common law”

ideals which were also shared by Hobbes. Hobbes himself claimed that “ the point of the social contract is to orchestrate a multitude into some recognizable whole....”. The government was dependent on the support of the people, and its “ legitimacy...stable only as long as the public continues to recommend it”. Once the function of a government is determined, the next question becomes, “ Who is the government?” On this point, Hobbes and Locke part ways. Since Hobbes held that human beings were essentially “ born bad,” then logic would follow that they are not fit to rule themselves. Instead, they need “ an overarching power to awe them”..... likened to a sea monster or a “ leviathan”. Hobbes argued for a single-person leadership by claiming that multiple voices of authority created “ too much diffidence”.

Such confusion would inevitably plunge mankind back into a primitive state of warfare, the very condition it sought to eradicate through laws and government: “ for powers divided mutually destroy each other”. Hobbes had witnessed firsthand the conflicts between the English king and Parliament, which hurled that country into a state of near civil war. War and conflict resulted from every man’s universal need for power. When one puts such strong egos into one room, resolution can never hope to be obtained. To Hobbes’ thinking, an entrustment of the power to one individual was the best way to ensure stability. And a monarchy, with its fixed and non-debatable succession of rulers, was Hobbes’ preferred choice of government. Although Hobbes anticipated such democratic mantras as “ the right to remain silent” and the “ right to property,” his association with democracy effectively ends there. His absolute monarchy refutes the people as a sovereign power, and his concerns for individual liberty are minuscule. In fact, Hobbes’

conservative views infuriated John Locke to such a degree that he published his own Treatises of Government, advocating a public-run government based on the liberty of the citizen. Locke raged that Hobbes' monarchy left ruler and subjects in the very state of turmoil it proclaimed to avoid.

A singular government could only serve to oppress and deny. The government should instead divide itself into branches, each serving its own specialized function while keeping the other branches from becoming too powerful (like the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of American government today). After all, Locke claims, the people cannot sacrifice more power than they possessed in their natural, pre-law state. Once the people enter into a social contract with their chosen government, then the sovereignty necessarily rests with the people. The people declare their leaders, and decisions rest with the "consent of the majority, giving it either by themselves or their representatives are chosen by them". The government may tax, it may allocate funds based on need, but it "can never have a right to destroy, enslave, or designedly to impoverish the subjects". Most crucial in Locke's philosophy, the people rule.

In the end, we are left with the question, "Whose philosophy is best?" Give us another thousand years, and we will still probably be quarreling about the answer. Perhaps it is best instead to let each man have his final say on the subject and leave it at that:

"During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that conditions called war; and such a war, as if of every man, against every man."

“ It is a power that hath no other end but preservation, and therefore can never have a right to destroy, enslave, or designedly to impoverish the subjects..”.

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