

**THE INFLUENCE OF HUME'S CONCEPTION OF
HUMAN NATURE ON HIS THEORY OF THE STATE:
A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF THE BASIS OF CIVIL
SOCIETY**

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Abstract

David Hume's conception of human nature played a significant role in shaping his theory of the state which serves as the basis for civil society. According to Hume, human beings are inherently social creatures who are driven by self-interest and a desire for happiness. In order to achieve happiness, humans must interact with one another and form communities. This idea of human nature as social and self-interest led Hume to develop a theory of the state that emphasized the need for government to protect individual rights and promote the common good. This research therefore will use the conceptual analytic method to breakdown concepts into components and critically analyse their implications in Hume's understanding.

INTRODUCTION

David Hume is characteristically an empiricist of the first order. His politics is not clearly stated like those of his predecessors Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Hobbes, Locke, etc. Perhaps, what we shall see about his political theory shall be resulting from his conception of the human nature. This conception of his on the human nature revolves around morality.

But before we can do justice to that claim, it is worthwhile to take a brief reflective trip on the preceding periods and the philosophers views involved there in on human nature in line with their political theories.

For the classical period, we see Aristotle and Plato discussing about the nature of man in terms of mind and body. Plato in his republic describes the soul as having three parts, the reason, spirit and appetite. He derived this tripartite conception of the soul from the common experience of internal confusion and conflict that all men share. Although Plato would begin with a study of the state, his whole argument was that the state grows out of the nature of the individual, so that the individual comes logically prior to the state. The state said Plato “is a natural institution, natural because it reflected the structure of human nature” (Cerlton, & others 1983, P.59).

Aristotle observed that “man by nature is a political animal” (Moray, R .H., 1929, P.8). He also considered the rational soul. For him there are in the soul two kinds of reasoning: the theoretical which gives us knowledge of fixed principles or philosophical wisdom. The other is practical, giving us rational guide to our actions under the particular circumstance in which we find ourselves. The peaceful understanding of these two bring men to happiness and this is virtue, which for him stands in the middle. In his politics then as is Ethics, Aristotle stressed the elements of purpose in the two division aforementioned. The state, as man, is endowed by nature with a distinctive function.

In the medieval period, Augustine and Aquinas stand distinct. For Augustine then, the soul is made up of love, which is the love God puts in man at the moment of creation as stated in his “*Rationes Seminals*”. Man inevitably loves. To love is to go beyond oneself and to foster one’s affection upon an object. Disobedience and injustice arises not at the absence of ignorance as Aristotle asserts, but in the absence of love.

For Augustine thus, public or political life was under the same moral law as man’s individual or personal life. This

is clearly brought out in his idea of the two states: "City of God and the City of the world" (Moray , P.12)

Aquinas considered man according to the division of his soul. He thus claims that man's moral constitution consist, then of sensuality, appetites, the will and reason. Upon this, we have three different laws, the natural, eternal, and human law.

In the modern period, the discussion turns on political philosophers like Hobbes, Locke and Hume the man who is the bane of this intellectual work. Though the different epochs in history featured different philosophers, with divergent views, one thing is obvious, namely, that human nature is the basis for society and society thus is treated as a moral person.

In an attempt to look into Humes theory in the light of inefficiencies of previous philosophers, this paper will expose his theory. In doing this, we have categorized for convenient sake the paper into four sections. We will briefly look into the epochal background of some political philosophers before Hume, his account of the human nature with a view to understand how these influenced his political theory of the state. It is also the task of this paper theory of the state. It is also task of this paper to evaluate this theory with the aim of seeing how such

theory witnessed the passage of time, that is the transition from the savage society to the new, civic society.

AN EPOCHAL BACKGROUND ON HUMAN NATURE AND POLITICAL THEORIES THE CLASSICALS

This epoch consist of Plato and Aristotle. Though they both viewed human nature and derived their political theories there from on the same pin-hole, their compositions were not identical.

Plato for instance in "The Republic" treated human nature through the tripartite division of the soul into reason, spirit and opposite. According to him, the state grew out of the nature of the individual, man preceeds society.

According to him "since man's needs are insatiable and unlimited, the healthy state soon becomes affected by a wide range of desires of the soul bestowed with uncontrollable range of passions" (Stumph., 1771, P.70). But reason exercise restrain over these excessive passion and the spirit brings calm. In this light Plato classed the society brings calm. In this light Plato classed the society into three different classes, the serves the nobles and the philosopher king. The first two are controlled by inordinate desires of ignorance and disobedience. But this

is put in order by the philosopher kings who are the wise of the society like reason in the soul. For Plato competence should be the qualification for authority.

Aristotle as we earlier said divided reason in the soul into two, the theoretical which gives us philosophical wisdom and the practical knowledge which accounts for a rational guide to our station. The rational cohesion of both results to happiness and this is virtue, which should stand in the mean. Since the passions are capable of a wide range of action, all the way from too little to too much, a person must discover the proper meaning of excess and defect and thereby discern the appropriate mean. Man by nature is a political animal and is thus destined to live in a state. The function of the state is to ensure the supreme good of man, namely his moral and intellectual life.

Unlike Plato, Aristotle did not create a blue print for an ideal state. For him a community could organize itself into three forms or government, with a basic difference in the number of rulers, one, a few or many.

The state functions well it is the good of all, but perverted when rulers rules, work for their private gain.

1.2 The Medieval

The period witnessed a theocentric turn in philosophy. Augustine and Aquinas are eminent here in their contributions regarding the state and human nature.

Augustine considered nature in terms of love. The soul according to him is fashioned in love. To love God is then the indispensable requirement for happiness, because only Him who is infinite can satisfy the peculiar need in man.

Disordered love ensures all forms of pathology in human behavior and self love becomes pride. Appetite flourishes. Passion multiplies, and there is a desperate attempt to achieve peace by satisfying all desires.

Hence for Augustine, public or political life was under the same rule of the moral law, as man's individual or personal life. This is made evident in the division of the extant cities into two for the operation of love, the city of God and the city of the world. These two groups form the society.

In Aquinas, we see a projection of Aristotle's thought; Man by his nature is a social animal. The state according to Aquinas is a natural institution.

For human nature, Aquinas with a different conception holds that man's moral constitution consists then of sensuality, appetite, the will and reason.

In his politics thus, he holds that to ensure an ordered society, human laws are fashioned for the direction of the community's behavior. All these activities of persevering life, propagating species, forming an ordered society in the pursuance of truth pertains to man in his natural level. Hence we have internal law, external law and human law which refers to the specific statutes of government.

1.3 The Modern

Apart from morality which characterized the previous political views, there is a further consideration of the man in this period. The state of nature of man characterized the theme of the philosophers here, like Hobbes, Locke, and Hume.

Hobbes approaches the subject of the state in theory not from a historical view point. In his state of nature all men are equal, the strongest rules. Jungle justice operates in all strata of that society. Equality here means anyone is capable of hurting his neighbor. For him there is hope, he says "the differences in strength can with time be

overcomed, and the weak can destroy the strong” (Moghan, 1979, P.15).

Locke in his concept of the human nature thinks alongside with Hobbes. He adds reason to appetite and aversion.

Locke’s state of nature is contrary to that of Hobbes view of all against all. On the contrary, he claims that “man living together according to reason without a common superior on earth with authority to judge between them (Moghan., P.25) is the proper state of nature. According to Locke men were able even in the state of nature to know natural law.

As to emergence of government or civil society, Locke ask; “if men have natural rights and also know the more law, do they desire to leave together above the state of nature?” (Moghan, 1979:30) to this he answered that; “the great and chief aim of man’s entering into commonwealth, putting themselves under government is the preservation of their property- men’s lives, liberty and estates”(Morghen T.F:35). This is actualized by virtue of what he calls Tacit consent”.

With this background in mind, we can then understand the human nature treated by Hume and how this affects the formulation of his political theory.

HUME'S CONCEPT OF HUMAN NATURE PASSIONS AND UNDERSTANDING

Hume's understanding of the human nature is dual - passion and understanding. We shall briefly explain both concepts in Hume's understanding, to enable us know how he formulates his political theory.

UNDERSTANDING

By understanding as part of human nature, Hume recognizes all the perception of the human nature resolving themselves into two distinct kinds which he calls "impressions and ideas" (Middich,(ed), 1978, P. I). He differentiates between these in the degree of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind and make their ways into our thought or consciousness.

Hume's claims that these perceptions, which enter with most striking force and violence, we may refer to as impression, under which he claims an understanding of our sensations, passions and emotions as they make their first appearance in the soul. Hume understands ideas as the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning such as all the perceptions excited by mind. For instance our topic of discussion excluding those immediate pleasure or

uneasiness it may occasion. He also divided ideas into simple and complex ideas.

PASSIONS

Passions he explains has to do with virtue, that is morality. For the morality of an act depends on the state of the different passions involved.

Passion is divided into the direct and indirect passions. The direct arises from the idea of pleasure and pain, the indirect require additional presence of other qualities.

The direct passions which are the focus of Hume's analysis, pose the special problem of relationship between the arousing ideas and the subsequent impressions or passions.

To explain in that relationship, Hume introduces 'the double association theory of ideas and impressions, according to which each indirect passion has two accompaniments- an object and a cause. The object is that idea towards which the passion is directed and the cause is that idea which proceeds and arouses the passion. Indirect passions include fear, love, hatred, pride, thirst, humility and so on. For instance, Hume explains that in pride and humility, love and hatred the object is the self.

Hence the causes possess two characteristics:

1. The production of pain and pleasure (cause) directed towards;
2. Either the self or another who is close through tie or by acquaintance (object). The self is always excited above any other things around us. It is with this that Livingston, W. O. projects Hume thus:

“We are composite of mind and body, and when the idea of the self is produced by a passion, we have a vivid concept of ourselves and this is constantly inducing and influencing the exaltation of the self”. (Donald and King (ed) 1975, P. 180).

With this problem, the society is chaotic, and man is senseless and insensitive. But Hume reminds us that our minds work in event, objects and persons around us. Hence Flew in reflection of Hume’s conception of human nature observes that

“It is universally acknowledged that there is a great uniformity among the actions of men, in all nations, and ages, and that human nature remains the same in principles and operations”. (Flew, (ed) 1962, P.139).

The society experience inequality, injustice, obedience, happiness from the law because “ambition, avarice,

selfishness, generosity, public spirit, hate, etc, are passions mixed in various degrees and distributed through societ". This then is the basis for Hume's political theories.

HUMAN NATURE AND HIS POLITICAL THEORIES THE SAVAGE SOCIETY

Hume like his predecessors, Hobbes and Locke in his work on politics characteristically refers to man in the natural state or state of nature as "the savage man (Flew, (ed) 1962:139), and of course the society in which he belonged as "the Savage Society" (Flew, (ed), P.140).

He described the savage man as imbued with a literary wants and needs which appear unsatisfied as opposed to other animals. He thus says that "of all animals, with which this globe is peopled, there is non towards whom nature seem first sight to have exercised more cruelty than towards man". (Flew, (ed): 142).

He further observes that man's numberless wants and necessities are without a commensurate means to relieve them. But this is provided in other creatures. "If we consider the lion a veracious and carnivorous animal, we shall easily discover him to be very necessary, but if we turn our eyes to his force, we shall find that his advantages

hold proportion with his wants.” (Middlitch, (ed) 1978: 483).

Apart from insecurity, strengthens and inability which characterized the savage man, he was besieged further by inability to express his natural appetite of sexual union.

Every woman was at the mercy of every man, and sexuality was rampant. The society was promiscuous. For him man at this period had no affection for anything beyond the self.

In this savage state, there was vanity, man’s inhumanity to man. Envy and revenge were operated and directed against particular persons who man considered as superiors or enemies. This, Hume comments is destructive of society. However, this maybe man’s very first state and situation which may justly be termed inordinately social.

If all these appear evident as it certainly must, Hume opined that we may conclude that it is utterly impossible for man to remain in that savage condition which proceeds society and organization. For Hume, this state is impossible to live and must be termed fictional. The savage state according to Hume is not however unlike the state of nature or golden age as pointed to us by poets and philosophers like Rousseau. The only difference

according to Hume is that while the former is described as full of war, violence and injustice, the latter is pointed as the most charming and most peaceable. The season were so temperate if we belief Rousseau so that there was no need for man to clothe himself and secure the violent heat and cold.

Cruelty and war were unheard of. Happiness, peace, sympathy were the only qualities known by man. But Hume asserts that this is no other than an idle fiction disputing Rousseau, who saw it as a perfect state.

BASIS FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

Hume's morality cannot be for removed from his political theories. For him, the morality of man is almost the idea the state is made up of.

Hume made use of three concepts here which stands as the basis for civil society according to him; they are virtue, justice and convention.

The first is virtue. He offers here an alternative hypothesis for ethics which he says defines virtue to be "whatever mental action or quality gives to a spectator, the pleasing

sentiments of approbation and vice the contrary” (Donald W.L. and Kiro T. K. (ed), 1976, P.20).

They are useful and agreeable. And their usefulness and agreeability brings happiness and peace to the individual, and once this is achieved, it is not only to our interest, but to universal interest-the society.

The second reason for the emergence of the society or civil state comes from justice. Hume recommends the intermingling of self interest and sympathy as an analysis of justice.

He explains here that justice which he describes as a general abstinence from the possession of others reflects the self interest of each person and property. This happiness and security can be achieved only in society, an arrangement of justice. Hume claims therefore that the reflections on the beneficial consequences of this moral quality (justice; are the sole foundation of society). This is called public utility- a pity for others. Hume explains in this regard that “self interest is the original motive to the establishment of justice, but or sympathy with public interest is the source of moral approbation... (Donald, and King, (ed) 1978, P.181).

In the third instance, Hume talks about convention which resembles the 'Hobbesian social contract' and the Lockian 'Tacit consent: he explains that after men had through education learnt the numerous advantages offered by society, gotten a new affection through company and conversation, and when they have observed that the principal disturbance in society arises from goods, and from their looseness and easy transition from one person to another, they must seek a remedy for putting these goods as far a possible on the same footing with the fixed and constant advantages of the mind and body. And this remedy is no other than by a 'convention' entered into by all members of the society, to bestow stability of external goods.

THE NATURE OF GOVERNMENT IN THE IDEAL SOCIETY

No one then doubts that convention brings establishment of a civil society. After convention, abstinence from possessions of others is entered and everyone has acquired stability in his possessions, there immoderately arises the ideas of justice and injustices, of property, rights and obligation.

There is harmony and concord. Vanity is rather to be esteemed as a social vice and pity and love are to be a

bond of union among men. Man is happy in this new state more than he did in the savage state. Every member of the society is sensible of this interest. No one is required any longer to induce any one to act or perform a duty in this new society formed by convention. This becomes an example to others. Thus, justice establishes itself by a kind of convention or agreement.

As for the organization of governments, Hume explains that nothing is more certain than that men are in a great measure, governed by interest. Men organized themselves within their families and do not look further than their acquaintance and friends. Men after convention are so attached to their interest due to the passion of the love of self. This interest is the cause of injustice. If this is true, what then is the cause of injustice and disobedience?. The simple answer is the will and passion turning attention to itself, which is easier for its to incline naturally than the difficult four object or laws –Hume observes thus “it has been observed that men are mightily governed by the in organization, and proportion their affections more to the light, under which any object appears to them, than to its real and intrinsic value which lies obscure”. (Middich, (ed) 1978, P.501). This quality of human nature not only is every dangerous to society, is incapable of remedy in a cursory look.

For this reason Hume holds that all governments are monarchical at first without mixture and variety. Government at its first establishment therefore would naturally suppose to derive its obligation from natural laws. But men in order to maintain peace and execute justice would choose magistrates determine their power and promise obedience. Promises separate the boundaries of our public and private duties.

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

So far, we have given a somewhat comprehensive exposition of both Hume's psychological theory about the nature of man and how it influenced him to come up with a political theory and how society should be organized and who should govern society. To appreciate Hume, one will see that Hume's reputation as a thinker rests mainly on his contribution to man which he propounded an influential egoistic psychology like that of Hobbes.

Hume tackled the substantive question of political obligation faced by politicians and citizens alike unlike his predecessors. He was not interested in abstract moral justification because of his inclination to empiricism, but he was also deeply concerned about the practical and institutional problems faced by basing authority on the

continued convention or agreement of the individual members of a society.

It must be admitted though, that the specific promise terms espoused by Hume are not attractive to contemporary political theorists, since His convention did not provide sufficient safe-guards against the abuse of power by the magistrate. Nevertheless, the above examination of the structure of his convention theory and the moral theory of justice and virtue could be instructive to political and legal theorists today who are increasingly aware of the need to bridge the gap between hypothetical justification and real constructional problems.

It must be noted that one of the most important contribution of Hume's convention is that it sets the rights of the individual in accordance with that of the group. This finds its culmination in Flathman's maxim that "your freedom to fling your hand stops where my nose begins" (Fathman, 1978, P.201).

This is in the light of Hume's support for non authoritarian sovereign and non absolute monarchy. Hume, in another vein is offering an empirical hypothesis because he says that the main fact of society is that moral judgments are formed not by reason alone but by the sentiments of sympathy.... What limits the role of reason

in society is that reason makes judgments concerning matter of facts and relations. (Donald, & King, (ed) 1975, P.202). Another difficulty in Hume can be found in his discussion on the passion, where he consistently argued that when the self is involved, sympathy cannot operate to produce the double relation of impressions, and ideas. But we argue that when the self is the object of a passion, it is not natural to quit the consideration of it till passion is exhausted. In bringing this paper work home, it is the position of this paper to say that the difference existing between Hume and other political thinkers like Locke, Hobbes, Rousseau, etc on the nature of man and its influence on their political theories render Hume's unattainable in a civilized society.

Hume's interest is on man's indirect passion especially of love which esteems self interest and hate. Hume formulated the self agreement theory entered into by man and referred to as "convention" by Hume. Accord to George H., Hume puts it thus:

"But in the main, we may affirm that man in general or human nature is nothing but the object both of love and hate and may require some other cause which by a double relation

of impressions and ideas may excite
passions. (George, and Thorson, 1973, P.422).

This has affected our contemporary civil society especially the Nigeria democracy. For instance in the Saturday Punch of December 4th, 1999, vol. 17, there is a caption referred to as “The Yoruba’s call for a “Surveying Convention” in page five which discussed National issues. This convention is a reflection of Hume’s convention whereby apart from the senators and representatives who have become mere stooges and puppets there is a tribal representative each from the six geo-political zones, who will not only represent, but will feed and discuss the proceedings of both the Senate and the Assembly on matters affecting the people. This becomes Hume’s convention and its application to the emergence of a civic society.

Recommendation

From our understanding of this research Hume’s interest was far based on the empirical to the neglect of moral justifications. I recommend that there ought to exist a blend of moral justifications, extraction, practical laws and institutional problems faced by constituted authorities on the agreement of the individual members of a society if contract of governance is anything to go by.

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