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Perception Versus Reality: The Conflict Between Individual Freedom and Authority

In the study of political science, there exists an ever-present tension between the leader and the citizens. Philosophers and politicians alike have to reconcile how the state should treat and recognize those they are leading. As present in a plethora of political writing, there does exist a conflict between individual freedom and authority, since conflict arises when the idealism of state action comes at odds with the pragmatic reality of the citizens. Hence, a middle ground needs to exist where the state recognizes the diverse and intricate lives of those they are leading.

Foremost, the role and benefit of the state is outlined bluntly and pragmatically by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan*. In his piece, he argues that life without a social contract and any mechanism to enforce such is undesirable. Specifically, interpersonal conflict arises as a result of competition, diffidence, and glory, resulting in a life - or state of nature - that is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Cohen 178-179). He outlines a reality in which man’s self-interest becomes the guiding principle for individual action leading to a plethora of violence and conflict. As such, the state arises as a means to mitigate this conflict and enforce any interpersonal contracts that are created. In establishing a commonwealth, Hobbes argues that a state can operate in a manner that allows for the respect and dignity of all the men within society (194). Though Hobbes does argue for a monarchy and a highly consolidated structure of power, the core of his argument nonetheless stands; a state is a necessary tool to ensure that man is safe from transgression. Through the presence of the state, society is able to flourish in spite of any conflict that may arise between men by their very nature.

Yet, it is important to understand the potential reality that can exist when the state abuses its function and fails to acknowledge or address the quality of life of the citizens. In *1984*, author George Orwell portrays a future where the arms of the state - referred to as Big Brother - reach into every aspect of the citizens' lives. Big Brother's presence permeates into the market of goods, the occupations of the people, and - most notably- in the thoughts that the people are experiencing (Orwell 19). As a result, a culture arises whereas cruelty and insecurity are the norms while attributes of single-mindedness and purity are worthy of esteem from the public (47,73). As such, Orwell proposes a situation whereas a society operates in a manner so harmful to the individual that its role begins to mirror that of the Hobbes state of nature. This points to the important notion that the state can actually have an adverse effect on its citizens if their practices fail to acknowledge any negative effects or externalities of their actions.

Conversely, whereas the state must not be overbearing to the point of having an adverse effect on the citizens, it must serve a purpose greater than mere interpersonal contract-enforcement. The shortcomings of such an approach become present when analyzing and critiquing the writings of Robert Nozick in his piece *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*. In his writing, Nozick venerates to high regard the individual and the natural rights granted to them and to be exercised by their autonomous agency (Cohen 710). Hence, he argues that only a minimal state primarily consisting of contract-enforcement and individual protection can occur, since anything of great influence and power would violate these rights and thus become unjustifiable (709-710). Though this approach to government falls mainly as an argument against distributive justice, Nozick's notion of justifiable government forgoes the idea that great interpersonal harm can arise through the contracts between individuals. If society were to relegate resource

distribution solely to the markets and the people, great socio-economic inequality can occur. In this reality, market-power results in profound economic duress upon the citizens, primarily those of lower-income who have limited options in areas of transportation, housing, and basic necessities. This not only normalizes harm against poor individuals, but it results in an unregulated economic elite who can act insofar as they do not violate any contracts or exact physical harm upon others. Therefore, Nozick's proposition of a minimal state - contrary to that in Orwell's *1984* - inadvertently lends itself to harsh critique once they are viewed against the realities of market behavior.

Thus, these three philosophers demonstrate two important facets of the relationship between individual freedom and authority. Foremost, Hobbes demonstrates the importance of this relationship in and of itself. Without any state or form of authority, individuals would have no incentive to not harm each other, unless it comes at greater personal harm. Yet, analyzing Orwell and critiquing Nozick demonstrates that having a state is not the most justifiable option. Rather, a state should neither be authoritarian nor grossly minimalistic.

As such, the works of Iris Marion Young and Friedrich Hayek demonstrate that recognition by the government of the diversity of its citizens is an important step to address the conflict between these two bodies. Even though they address this concern through different means and with different ends - Young with the using distributive justice to address inequalities among social groups and Hayek with the protection of individual liberties - their writings share many important similarities. Young argues that governments whose foundations are universal abstracts are in fact ineffective and may allow for the continuation of any oppression to occur (730-731). In addressing the oppression that occurs to different intersectional social groups, the

state must have complete awareness of this group and of the unique challenges they face (732). Though focusing more on the individual level, Hayek argues that there is no “single end” to an individual; rather, the pursuances of a universal good by the state comes in conflict with the innate diversity of the populous (558-559). Additionally, he specifically foresees that the will of a specific will be imposed upon the society, since they are of the few that can find consensus on what should be this universal good (561). Both of these philosophers highlight the importance of the pragmatic realities of the citizens in light of what the government may wish to exact. To Young, these realities manifest when different groups of people become oppressed; their quality of life falls short of the happiness that is possible and which may be wished for by the state. For Hayek, this pragmatic reality is similar; it is the failure of the state to properly tend to the needs of the individual while pursuing an unobtainable universal good.

Both philosophers discuss the importance of forming a dichotomy between the state’s intent versus impact. Even though the state may have virtuous motives of either social welfare or mere social stability, its abilities enact these goals become compromised by the reality of diversity and man’s complex nature. In an attempt to generalize the human condition in order to universalize the actions of the state, tension arises between these two bodies of people. Though the government may be able to ensure a reality better than a Hobbesian state of nature for its citizens, that is not to say that it is as effective as possible.

Two columns should be present by which the body of authority should be supported. First, the state should be neither authoritarian nor harshly minimalistic, with both being to the detriment of the people. A middle-of-the-road approach must be taken between these two extremes, where the state protects the agency of the individual insofar that it does not come at the

brazen harm of another. Second, the state must acknowledge that the realities of the public may come in conflict with the idealism or intent of the actions exerted. When this occurs - as it most naturally will - the state must be ready to address these needs and not try to further universalize any ineffective legislation. These actions help to ensure that there is a balance between one's individual freedom and authority. In turn, a society is set forth which protects the individual from harm by others and the state itself. It is only then that a man can be free to live their life in peace and be free from undue dangers that come in conflict with such.

The conflict between the individual and the state has been recorded and observed since the beginning of civilizations themselves. Yet, this tension has manifested in many unique and diverse ways, and we must ensure that we use these past experiences to guide our current notions of government and social contracts. In doing so, we can ensure that we leave future generations, not with the remnants of history but instead the blueprints with which to ensure better lives for themselves and others.

Works Cited

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