

Modern Political Thought

Essay I – Due Friday, March 8

In an 8-10 page essay, with your name and title only at the top, double-spaced, with a title, written within normal margins in .12 Times New Roman font, write on the conflicting ideas between two of the following political philosophers: Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Be sure to give an account of the *broad arguments*: do not focus on a single passage.

Option 1: What is the Purpose of Government? (Hobbes v. Locke)

Thomas Hobbes believed that all civil societies failed because all previous political philosophy had been a mere dream. His goal was to introduce a new teaching that would actually work: rather than propose things to think about, Hobbes' teaching could be *used*, and it promised to finally deliver us once and for all from our miserable human condition. If Nature was man's hell on earth, the state was our surest salvation. It came with a certain tradeoff, though: followers of Hobbes had to deny the existence of the soul; make the worst things in human nature the foundation of all political and social thought; and surrender themselves completely to the all-powerful Leviathan State. They would lose courage, greatness, human purpose, and Heaven itself – but in return, they would get comfort, ease, and personal freedom. John Locke, however, found such a proposal absurd. There was a Law of Nature that governed the human mind at all times, both before and after civil society. Conscience forced men to uphold it and protect all human kind; corruption and viciousness taught criminals to ignore it – whether thugs in the state of nature, or kings who abused the power entrusted to them. Locke proposed a system that had one single goal: a government that would protect the fundamental right to private property with an elected assembly and chief executive – both of which are always held in check by the final “appeal to Heaven,” i.e., the right of revolution by the people. So who is right? What is the purpose of government? Is the state man's highest and greatest hope, or is it the protection of his natural liberty? In answering this question, be sure to present the side you disagree with first, and then refute it with the side that you do agree with. Here are some points to consider:

Thomas Hobbes

- What is human nature? What kind of thing is man?
- What is man's religious impulse? What does it do to society?
- What is the state of nature? What is life like there?
- What is the basis of civil society?
- What kinds of things contribute to the endurance of the state?
How should a commonwealth be administered?
- What kinds of things cause a commonwealth to dissolve?
How should a commonwealth avoid them?

John Locke

- What is the human condition in the state of nature? What does the law of nature dictate?
- What is the state of war? What is the state of slavery?
- What is the right of property? What does the pursuit of property mean for the conditions of a commonwealth?
- What is the true origin of government? What does that origin mean for the purpose of government?
- How does an elected assembly fulfill the purpose of government?
How does an executive power fulfill it?

Option 2: Does Enlightenment Corrupt Morals? (Hobbes v. Rousseau)

Thomas Hobbes was true to his Enlightenment creed: education in the sciences was the surest way to elevate man out of his current condition. The chief duty of any Leviathan state, if such a thing was established, was to teach citizens the principles of their own materialistic nature; the foolishness of notions like courage and greatness; the strength of their desire for comfort and protection; and, ultimately, their duties as citizens to love and respect the commonwealth. Such an undertaking was never achieved before because education was focused on history, philosophy and religion rather than science, which teaches absolute and undeniable truth. Plato fanaticized about the “perfect city in speech”; Hobbes, though, promised to bring that city down to earth, and eliminate all ignorance. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, however, witnessed the full application of Hobbes' proposal a generation later. In his day, all citizens were literate, sophisticated, overflowing with smart opinions and fashionable tastes – and utterly miserable. Gone were the simple, wholesome, community-minded customs of earlier societies; now, people were barraged with all kinds of desires and luxuries – and worse, given all kinds of intellectual rationalizations for their misery. Rousseau looked at figures like Thomas Hobbes as the supreme corruptors of human innocence, and the sooner the world learned to ignore the Hobbesian call to mass-education, the better. So does enlightenment corrupt people? Does education elevate them out of myth and superstition, or does it make them unhappy? In answering this question, be sure to present the side you disagree with first, and then refute it with the side that you do agree with. Here are some points to consider:

Thomas Hobbes

- What is the enlightened view of human nature? How should people understand themselves?
- How should people understand the purpose of government?
What should be their attitude toward things like virtue and morality?
- What have all previous philosophers gotten wrong about society? How have they misunderstood human potential?
- What is a good government's duty in educating people? What should it teach them?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

- What are the achievements of the Enlightenment? What has it taught man?
- What effect did such teachings have on modern man? What effect did it have on society?
- What is the mistake of modern geniuses? What role do public intellectuals play?
- What is true genius? How should it relate to politics?

Option 3: Can Human Nature be Changed? (Locke v. Rousseau)

John Locke saw within the human heart one fixed and undeniable principle: the Law of Nature, which commanded every individual to preserve mankind, both themselves and everyone else. It was the motivation for making property, improving it, and engaging in trade with others for the benefit of all; it was the basis of the family unit; and, ultimately, natural law taught us the purpose of government – both when it fulfilled that purpose, when it failed, and when it was time for revolution. Mankind’s sense of right and wrong was fixed in the human heart for Locke; both “natural reason” and revelation (i.e., the Bible) proved that it would never go away. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, however, held that all of the things we took for granted in human nature – the will to do to protect one another, the desire for community, the family unity, as well as honor, courage, and the desire for God himself – were, in fact, made up. Human nature was not so fixed as Locke believed: it had *evolved* into what it was – which meant it could evolve again, with the right guidance and direction by an all-powerful state. All of the problems in human society were not the result of vice and sin, as people had believed for centuries; they were, in fact, simply bad evolution, which meant they could be corrected with the right evolution. So who is correct? Is human nature as fixed and unchanging as Locke believed (as well as centuries of Christian and ancient philosophy before him)? Or was it possible that mankind could be re-engineered, as Rousseau held? In answering this question, be sure to present the side you disagree with first, and then refute it with the side that you do agree with. Here are some points to consider:

John Locke

- What are the universal principles of human nature? What common goals do all people share in the state of nature?
- What are the universal features of the family? What is the basis of marriage?
- How does marriage and family relate to civil society? What is the true basis of civil society?
- What is the purpose of government? How does it fulfill that purpose?

Jean-Jacques Rousseau

- What was human nature originally in the state of nature? What did other philosophers get wrong about natural “savage” man? What was the true state of nature for Rousseau?
- How did we lose our natural condition? What were the steps that led us out of the state of nature?
- What were the consequences of moving into civil society? What new miseries did we bring on ourselves?
- What is the solution according to Rousseau? What must we do to human nature to make the social contract legitimate?

Citations

Be sure to follow all of the standard citation methods of the Turabian Manual of Style. Be sure to consolidate quotes: only one footnote is necessary per paragraph.

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Essay II – Due Friday, May 3

In an 9-11+ page essay, double-spaced, written within normal margins, in .12 Times New Roman font, with an original title and a cover page, following all of the standard citation methods for History & Political Science Majors, address one of the topics below. In answering this question, be sure to give a full and thoughtful account of the text, including supporting quotes with proper citations. Be sure to include in your introduction a discussion of at least one scholarly source, in about a paragraph.

Option 1: Topics in Modern Political Philosophy

Choose one of the following topics in modern political philosophy as it appears in the works we've studied. (Do not choose the same two you wrote on for Essay I.)

- **Citizenship.** What makes a citizen? What sorts of things does the state assume about a citizen? What is the citizen's role in the city? (Hobbes, Rousseau, Burke, Mill)
- **Corruption.** What is the reason for corruption of the city? What is the reason for corruption of the individual? How might the two relate? (All)
- **Family.** What is the nature of the family? What does it do for the citizen and for the state? How does it relate to the state? (Locke, Rousseau, Burke, Mill)
- **History.** What is the modern view of history? How does it explain the development of things? How does it mark progress or corruption? (Rousseau, Burke, Mill, Nietzsche)
- **Knowledge.** What is the source of political knowledge in modern times? How do we know human nature? How do we know political truths? (All)
- **Liberalism.** What is liberalism in modern life? What does it mean for the state? What does it mean for individual citizens? (Locke, Mill, Nietzsche)
- **Love.** What does modernity do to love? What form does love take in modern times – whether for friendship or erotic love? (Locke, Rousseau, Burke, Mill, Nietzsche)
- **Men and Women.** What are the differences between men and women? What do those differences mean for society and the state? What is the relationship between the sexes? (Locke, Rousseau, Nietzsche)
- **Morality.** What is morality in the modern world? What is the basis for right action, especially natural law? What are its first principles? (All)
- **Nature.** What is the concept of nature in modern times? What is the natural world? What is human nature? (Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Burke)
- **Power.** What is the problem of power in the human soul? How does power relate to justice? When can power and justice be in a good relationship? (Hobbes, Rousseau, Nietzsche)
- **Regimes.** What does the state do to the regime? What does it mean for monarchy, a republic? What is a democratic culture? (All)
- **Religion.** What is religious tradition in modernity? What happens to Christian faith in such a context? What is man's view of God? (All)
- **Revolution.** What is a revolution? When is a revolution justified? What condition should a successful revolution end in? (Locke and Burke)
- **Rights.** What are rights? Where do they come from for people living under a state? What do rights mean for government? (Hobbes, Locke, Burke, Mill)
- **Tradition.** What is tradition in modern times? What is the condition of social traditions in modern times? What is the value of tradition? (All)

Option 2: Can Modernism Survive Nietzsche?

At the end of the nineteenth century, the entire modern project seemed to approach completion. Not only was society more enlightened, literate, and freer from customs than ever before; now, it faced the possibility of re-making itself completely through science, administrative government, and the gradual spread of John Stuart Mill's style of liberal democracy. There was still a long way to go, of course, but confidence in the modern project was never so great as it was at the end of the nineteenth century: mankind was indeed approaching an "end of history," where its ideals would prevail all over the world, in thought and eventually in practice. Yet this was precisely the era when Fredrick Nietzsche attacked it with all his fury. For Nietzsche, the modern project had been far too successful: it had brought the "death of God," left human life without purpose, and was now close to blotting out the noblest things in human nature. Modern people still talked of their highest "values" – "rights," "equality," etc. – but could give no justification for these things: the habit of believing in them was stripped of inner truth, revealing that all along, they had been little more than assertions of power. What was worse, the modern project had rendered life aimless and starving for meaning, as it moved the world gradually toward the condition of "the last man" – a truly post-human artifact. There would be violent reactions against such a condition; but it would ultimately prevail according to Nietzsche – unless a true "Superman" finally appeared to create new values for a self-destructing mankind. So how seriously should modern advocates of liberal democracy take Nietzsche's criticism? Can we still maintain that progress has a definite goal that lasts beyond our time? Can modern liberal democracy – and the whole modern project – be rescued from his attack? If not – then what?