

# Hobbesian Conception of Human Nature: Moral Implications for Nigeria Society

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**Abstract:**-This work is on Hobbesian Conception of Human Nature: Moral Implications for Nigeria Society. It will be absurd indeed to discuss about Ethics and Society without talking about the concept of human nature. In other words, there is no philosophy of life without a theory of human nature. Human nature can be defined as the psychological and social qualities that characterized humankind, especially in contrast with other living things. The problem here is that Hobbes believes that the state of nature was the worst case scenario. Hobbes was ready to sacrifice all of his freedom to avoid the state of nature. Applying this position to the Nigerian society, it is glaring that this view gives justification to authoritarian government and tyranny. This work therefore intends to expose Hobbes concept of human nature and then apply his view to moral issues in Nigeria society. Hobbes view of human nature has a much laudable appeal which can make available a structure for modern day politics in Nigeria. Notwithstanding the issues inherent in Hobbes concept of human nature it could be used as a yardstick in analyzing some perennial, moral and political issues in Nigeria society.

**Key Concepts:** Human Nature, Jen, State of Nature, Self-Preservation, Social Contract, Virtue.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The main or fundamental question in philosophy is, who and what am I? The most likely answer to this question about human nature-what a human being is-will profoundly affect how you see or perceive yourself, how you see others, and how you live. Human nature can be seen as the psychological and social qualities that characterized humankind, especially in contrast with other living things. In summary, human nature simply means what it essentially means to be a human being; what makes us different from anything else.

Psychologists long before now have looked and pondered on the question if human nature is essentially self-interested or whether unselfish concerns would be able to inspire human beings. Various psychologists have advocated the idea that humans are essentially cruel and selfish. Sigmund Freud the father of modern psychology posits “men are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, who simply defend themselves if they are attacked....”<sup>1</sup> Quite some number of philosophers concurred with Freud that human beings are essentially selfish and aggressive. For instance, Thomas Hobbes the British philosopher argued for a similar view. Hobbes who was a materialist holds the position that everything in “the universe, that is the whole mass of things that are, is corporal, that is say body”.<sup>2</sup> According to Hobbes

the mechanism of desire propel or moves, human beings to act. Therefore, anytime humans do something, they are clearly seeking satisfaction of their own mechanistic desires.

In Hobbes view of human nature, his great revolution was in seeing the state as a human, artificial creation. It is not based on eternal principles (as in Plato), nor is it intrinsic to human nature (as in Aristotle) nor is it a divinely predestined institution (as in medieval thought). On flaw with Hobbes view and argument is that he believes that the state of nature was the worst case scenario. He was ready and willing to sacrifice all of his freedom to avoid the state of nature. This view gives justification to authoritarian government and tyranny.

The aim of this work is to bring out the argument on the intelligibility and necessity of a Hobbesian conception of human nature applied to the current Nigerian situation. According to Thomas Hobbes idea and articulations, showing that man in the state of nature was poor, nasty, solitary and brutish and needed to form a society or government. One wants to insist that Hobbes concept of human nature has a lot of commendable appeal, which can provide a paradigm for the present day political demands in Nigeria by its citizenry.

However, the specific objectives of this study are;

- i. To look into some moral issues and challenges that have overwhelmed the Nigerian government and to proffer possible solutions on how to handle these moral issues.
- ii. To sensitize and make Nigerian understand that they have a right to place any government that has failed in its side of the contract and this could be done peacefully through voting them out.

This work centres on Thomas Hobbes conception of Human nature as articulated in his book the Leviathan. For the purpose of understanding the topic under discussion clearly, this work proposes, first, to treat the conception of human nature and its historical development. In course of this research, only related and relevant works will be used to evaluate the concept of human nature.

This work will employ the methods of exposition and critical analysis to get a clarification of Thomas Hobbes conception of human nature in the Leviathan. The historical and analytic methods were used to explore the conception of human nature in various philosophical epochs. This work will

extract from both primary and secondary sources. The primary source will be Thomas Hobbes book the Leviathan, and the secondary sources will include journal, text and internet sources that are relevant to the establishment of this work.

Hobbes view of human nature and his idea of the world is strikingly original and is still important to contemporary politics. His major consideration is the issue of political and social order. This in other word means how humans can live together in harmony, peace and avoid the danger and fear of civil conflict. This work exposes Hobbes conception of human nature, which prepossess that going into a contract “with the sovereign or leviathan means that one must have to be loyal even when the sovereign is going for and unjust cause just to avoid sanctions. Using this point, it is clear that those who are supporting the sovereign in Nigeria are obviously living up to the terms of the covenant into which they had entered.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Approximately a century before Plato and Aristotle set the way for western philosophy by their well thought investigation into the nature of reality and the soul, a unique method to philosophy was being developed in China. Confucious, ordained to become the most influential thinker in the history of china, came up with the methods and concerns in philosophy which were quite different from that of Plato and Aristotle.<sup>3</sup>

Confucious’s ideas are showcased or seen in his main work *The Analects*. His philosophy concentrated mainly on ethics and humanity. In fact, his philosophy is regularly seen as “ethical humanism”. In other words, this means that his ethics is not based on religion but on human nature. This main idea is said to be the unifying principle behind all his philosophy:

4:15- The master said, “shan, my doctrine is that of an all pervading unity” the disciple Tsang replied, “yes”. The master went out, and the other disciples asked, saying, “what do his words mean?” Tsang said, “The doctrine of our master is to be true to the principles of our nature and the benevolent exercise of them to others-this and nothing more”.

The question that comes up here is that, what are these “principles of our nature”? Confucious pointed out that for us to develop or improve our human nature, we have to develop *jen*, or virtue. According to him, virtue means those exceptional human qualities of benevolence and humanity that make up foundation or base of all human relationships. This feeling or sense of love for humanity is what Confucious posits as the standard of all morality and the quality that differentiates humans from animals. For him, without it, life is not worth living. According to him, virtue should be our

ultimate value. He went further to say that we should even forsake riches or honor instead of to act contrary to virtue:

4:5- The master said, “riches and honors are what men desire. If they cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should not be held. Poverty and meanness are what men dislike. If they cannot be obtained in the proper way, they should not be avoided”. The superior man does not, even for the space of a single meal, act contrary to virtue. In moments of haste, he cleaves to it. In seasons of danger, he cleaves to it”.<sup>3</sup>

According to Confucius, reciprocity is what he called the heart of virtue. The firm agreed to treat others as you would like others to treat you. Meriting virtue is not an easy matter. Self-restraint in the use of one’s senses and in one’s conduct is a requirement of virtue. It needs us to put our selfish impulses into civilized way of behaving. This type of self-control, he pointed out, is something every person must get or achieve for himself or herself.<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, he pointed out that virtue should only serve as the basis of person behavior but should also serve as the foundation of political authority. For him, if the ruler exercised virtue, then the citizens will by all means follow his leadership. Consequently, if the ruler gives position to virtuous persons, social unrest will come to an end. Therefore, virtue is the foundation of a well-ordered society and also the key to peace within the state.

Plato’s idea of human nature is clearly or obviously a direct consequences of his theory of forms. This is because we know the forms, it follows that we have souls and our souls existed separate from our bodies before we were even born into this world. Meanwhile our bodies are visible changing and subject to decay our souls are like the forms and so they are invisible, eternal, immortal, and godlike.

Concluding that our soul’s i.e. our inner selves existed before we were born and will continually exist even after our deaths, Plato felt that it is necessary to care for our souls. According to Plato the soul is made up off three parts that most times struggle against each other.

Plato thought that his findings of the three parts of the soul gave us the key to happiness and virtue. Personal happiness and virtue Plato held, can be gotten only when the three parts of the soul are in harmony with one another. Here happiness is possible only if reason rules the desires and emotions and both emotions and desires have been trained to be ked harmoniously by reason. We therefore become unhappy when the three parts of ourselves are regularly fighting against one another so that we lack inner harmony and we fall victims to vice when we are ruled by our emotions or desires.

To train the emotions and appetites so that they will readily obey reason was important for Plato. He compared our

emotions and appetites to two winged steeds that can either drag our reason downward into the confusions and illusions of the visible changing world or can help carry our reason upward to contemplate the world of unchanging perfect forms through the study of sciences and the acquisition of wisdom. In a beautiful and clear image Plato made comparison between the three part soul to a chariot with the charioteer driving a white winged horse and a black winged horse:

Let me speak briefly about the nature of the soul by using an image. And let the image have three parts a pair of winged horses and a charioteer...one of the horses is of noble breed, the other ignoble and the charioteer controls them with great differently...the vicious steed goes heavily weighing down the charioteer to the earth when it has not been thoroughly trained...above them...in the heaven above heaven...there abides the true reality with real knowledge is concerned: the forms which are visible only to the mind and have no color, shape, or hardness...it is the place knowledge...where every soul which is rightly nourished feeds upon pure knowledge rejoicing at the once again beholding true reality. The souls can behold perfect justice and temperance...not in things which change, but in themselves. The souls that are most like god are carried up there by their charioteer....although troubled by their steeds and only without difficulty beholding true being. Other souls rise only to fall again, barely glimpsing it and then altogether failing to see because their two seeds are too unruly.<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion Plato posits that we can be completely virtuous only if our reason knows the forms. In particular, our reason must know the form of good, since only by knowing what goodness is can we know what the three parts of the soul must do to be good. Therefore, for Plato, complete virtue can be achieved only by coming to have knowledge of the form of the good, which exists unchanging in a world of forms separate from ours.

Plato points that the best ruler, the perfect king, would be a person-male or female whose soul was self-disciplined enough to enable him or her to contemplate true being in the perfect form. For Plato, such a person should be classified as a true philosopher, which in Greek means “lover of wisdom”.

Aristotle began his *Nicomachean Ethics* by making it clear that all human actions are targeted to some end. For him, some ends are just instrumental. We pursue them because they aid or help us achieve other goals. Nevertheless, this thread of instrumental goals cannot go on forever or there would be no point to the whole process. According to Aristotle, happiness

is the final goal of all human activities. He tagged this “eudaimonia” which mean “happiness” in Greek, and this should not be mixed up with pleasure but is best seen as meaning “well-being” or “living well” or “having a life worth living”. Various persons allied living well with pleasure, honor, wealth, and a wide range of things. For Aristotle, he acknowledges that “to say that happiness is the chief good seems a platitude and a clearer account of what it is is still desired”.<sup>4</sup>

Looking at Aristotle’s metaphysics, the purpose of something makes up its real nature. Besides, this will constitute its virtue or the standard of its excellence as well. Aristotle cautions that we will certainly go astray if we try to equate happiness with pleasure. Persons that do this are “preferring a life suitable to beasts” instead of what should be right fulfillment for human beings.<sup>4</sup> Aristotle concludes towards the end of his *Nicomachean Ethics*:

Happiness, therefore, does not lie in amusement; it would, indeed, be strange if the end were amusement, and one were to take trouble and suffer hardship all one’s life in order to amuse oneself. For in a word everything that we choose we choose for the sake of something else—except happiness, which is an end. Now to exert oneself and work for the sake of amusement seems silly and utterly childish.<sup>4</sup>

Though Aristotle makes it clear that pleasure cannot be equated to happiness he still went further to point out that a minimum amount of pleasure is an ingredient in the good life. For him, “those who say that the victim on the rack or the man who falls into great misfortunes is happy if he is good, are, whether they mean to or not, talking nonsense”.<sup>4</sup> Conclusively, while pleasure is not the aim of human life, it follows the life that is morally excellent.

The question that is to be answered here is what is the purpose of human life? Aristotle in the most central parts of his ethics answers the question “we state the function of man to be a certain kind of life, and this to be an activity or actions of the soul implying a rational principle, and the function of a good man to be good and noble performance of these”.<sup>4</sup> First of all we do not give ourselves a purpose. The end of every human life is something that is given to us by nature and makes up the essence of our humanity. It differentiates the types of beings we are from plants, rocks, beast and even computers.

Secondly, the aim or purpose of human life is seen in a kind of performance or activity that shows excellence. Happiness is not a passive state we attain, but it characterizes what we do and how we do it.

Thirdly, the former explanation of the purpose of human life also stresses that it means a life lived according to a certain plan or strategy that is furnished by reason. Hence,

the good life involves both thinking and doing. This is because we are beings that are rational, beings that feel, desire, and act. Thus, the road to happiness has two dimensions. You must rationally judge what the right principles to follow are, and your appetite, feelings, and emotions must be discipline to follow those rules. According to Aristotle, more is needed in addition to intellectual excellence. For we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since or else our inquiry would have been of no use<sup>4</sup>. Here, what is required is moral virtue or the capability to balance ones desires and emotions.

Epictetus who was an ancient stoic philosopher wrote the following:

The business of the wise and good man is to live conformably to nature: and as it is the nature of every soul to assent to the truth, to dissent from the false, and to remain in suspense as to that which is uncertain; so it is its nature to be moved toward the desire of the good, and to aversion from the evil; and with respect to that which is neither good nor bad it feels indifferent...when the good appears, it immediately attracts to itself; the evil repels from itself.<sup>5</sup>

By this, what he means is that if we look keenly at human nature, we will get to see that it is made up of certain natural inclinations. We have a natural inclination to believe what we found out to be true, to also reject what we see as false, and also to suspend believe about issues we are not certain. Alike, we have a natural inclination to desire what we judge is good for us and also a natural inclination to feel repelled by what we judge is bad for us. We have a natural inclination to feel differently about what is neither beneficial nor harmful to us. According to Epictetus, the morally good person is one who lives according to these basic natural tendencies. The morally evil or bad individual is the one who breaks or violates these basic tendencies. Thus, moral rightness is the conduct that conforms or adheres to these natural inclinations.<sup>5</sup>

The question here is how does this have to do with God and His commands? The main point here is that God made human nature. This presupposes that if one lives according to what human nature requires, one is living according to what God intended when he made humans. Epictetus posits that if one lives according to nature, then one can always be “conscious that you are obeying God”. In summary, the prerequisite of human nature are the commands of God. Here, humans would be able to discover these commands by looking into their own nature and in following these commands they are morally good.<sup>5</sup>

Aquinas is the classical proponents of the view that reason can discover God’s command by reflecting on human nature. According to him since God created the universe, the

laws that govern the universe are the laws that God imposed on it. Specifically, God imposed on human beings certain “natural laws” through the natural inclinations that He put in human nature when He created humans. The most pertinent of the inclinations are our reasoning abilities.<sup>6</sup>

For Aquinas, morality arises when our reason notices the “natural inclinations” that God has put into human nature. Specifically, Aquinas posits that our reason tells us that we have a moral obligation to pursue those goods toward which we are naturally inclined and to refrain from destroying them:

A thing is good if it is an end that we have a natural inclination to desire; it is evil if it is destructive of what our nature is inclined to desire. Consequently, those kinds of things that our nature is inclined to desire are perceived by our reason as good for our human nature. And our reason will conclude that those kinds of things ought to be pursued in our actions. But if our reason sees a certain type of thing as destructive of what human nature is inclined to desire, it will conclude that that type of thing ought to be avoided.<sup>6</sup>

Hence, by reflecting on our natural human tendencies or inclinations we can discover the specific goods that God commands humans to pursue: human life, family, knowledge, and an orderly society. Actions are morally right when they aim at securing these goods, and they are morally wrong when they aim at destroying these goods.

Karl Marx view denied the existence of any significant human nature that is something that is accurate of all persons at all times everywhere. According to Marx, humans are social beings. For him, to talk of human nature means to speak about the totality of social relations. Therefore, whatever any of us does is a social act, which means the existence of other persons standing in certain relations to us. In summary everything is socially learned.<sup>7</sup>

The social impact is mostly detectable in all activity of production. Producing what we want or what is needed to survive physically is a social activity. It regularly demands that we interact and cooperate with others. Narrating Marx view, it presupposes that the type of persons we are and the types of things we do are regulated by the type of society in which we live. In other words, for Marx it is not the consciousness of persons that defines their beings, but their social being that determines their consciousness.<sup>7</sup>

Notwithstanding Marx denial of individual human nature, Marx offered at least one generalization about human nature; which is that humans are active, productive beings who differentiates themselves from other animals by the central, preeminent or outstanding fact that they produce their own means of livelihood of subsistence. For him, it is not just natural for humans to work for their livings but right as well.

Hence, by Marx narration, the life of productive activity is the right one for humans.<sup>7</sup>

### III. THOMAS HOBBS VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE

Hobbes lived in a chaotic period in English history. He was caught in a civil war between the defenders of the throne and the anti-loyalist. He changed allegiances many times but his timing was always off. All the times he tried to appease the side in power, he only ended up putting his life in jeopardy with the other side. From this experience, he came up with three lessons:

- i. Where there is not a stable government, there is chaos.
- ii. Chaos is to be avoided at all costs.
- iii. Chaos is prevented only if the government is strong.<sup>8</sup>

These three points stand in the forefront of all Hobbes political views or thoughts. Because of issues, Hobbes tries to consistently apply his methodological principles to resolving the problems of political theory. The zenith of his program is to examine the composition and nature of the political state in terms of moving bodies.

Hobbes makes available a logical explanation that seeks to examine or look into the phenomenon of society. Using the method of geometry, which he commended, he starts with a set of axioms about human nature he considered undoubtedly and then infer a series of theories from them. It is pertinent to comprehend that he does not claim this is a historical account of how society actually originated. Rather, he tried to show why government is justified in terms of laws of human nature and what form it's to take if it is to be rational. Using this example, the laws of physics will not be able to explain where a particular or certain baseball came from. But, a physicist can give a reasonable explanation of why a baseball behaves the way it does, say, when a pitcher throws a curve and what kind of conditions must be present for the ball to perform fully or optimally.

Hobbes starts with a thought experiment. What exactly will our condition look like if there was no government? Hobbes calls this a "state of nature". According to Hobbes everyone in the state of nature is equal and have the right to do whatever is necessary to do to survive. Evidently, he does not suggest we are all physically alike or equal. What he means that without society, no one has any special rights, privileges, restrictions, status or ranks.

Since Hobbes stated that we are all egoistic, the state of nature is evidently not going to be very hospitable. According to Aristotle humans are naturally social animals. Nevertheless, Hobbes would say that without social conditioning, we do not have any built-in affinity or sympathy for the other of our species. This simply means that the state of nature therefore is a state of fear. Just like billiard balls moving about and crashing into each other, we are bodies in motion driven only by our individual impulse to survive and

with nothing that would assure any kind of harmony amongst our motions:

In such condition, there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation or use of commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of building, and removing, such things as require much force; no knowledge of the face of the earth; no account of time; no arts; 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, short.<sup>8</sup>

In conclusion, Hobbes great revolution was in seeing the state as a human, artificial creation. It is not based on eternal principles (as in Plato), nor is it intrinsic to human nature (as in Aristotle), nor is it divinely predestined institution (as in medieval thought). In addition, by explaining the state of nature as a collection of various persons, he gingered the spirit of individualism which has been both a blessing and a curse in modern age. Hobbes concept of state of nature and the social contract would become significant models for philosophies of human nature and politics in centuries to come.

### IV. THOMAS HOBBS VIEW OF HUMAN NATURE AND ITS MORAL IMPLICATIONS FOR NIGERIA SOCIETY

According to Hobbes he clearly makes us to understand that he is not a fan of man in the state of nature and this is because for him life in the state of nature is solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. Humans by nature had competitive tendencies or inclinations and therefore man was in perpetual war with his fellow men. As a result of this character domicile in human nature i.e. self-preservation, men were at war with their fellow men.

Hobbes in his renowned book *The Leviathan* makes us to understand that the state of nature was not convenient for man, so therefore man decided to form a society and in this society man will have to give up all his right to a commonwealth or a sovereign which Hobbes described as the Leviathan. This at the long run led to the social contract in which men give up their rights to a sovereign or chosen men to make laws and rule over them. Clearly, though man has given up such right it does not stop man from self-preservation. In other words, if man is faced with issues pertaining life or death and the laws says otherwise man has no option but to defend himself which is what is termed as self-preservation.

Tracing Thomas Hobbes conception of human nature down to the Nigerian context we would be able to relate it with the moral issues the country is facing in our current day

society. Undoubtedly, it is obvious that Nigeria is a great country and is blessed abundantly with so much human and natural resources. But unfortunately, since our political independence in 1960 various divides in the country have put forward the argument that the developmental strides in the country does not commensurate with or equate with the natural resources the country has in stock. From various views we can come to the conclusion that one of the greatest thing that the country can give back to its citizens or boast of is the security and peace of its citizenry.<sup>9</sup>The question here is how much has the government of Nigeria done in this aspect since its political independence.

The human person is a development oriented being; obviously we have developed pass the state of nature in Nigeria and this presupposes that man here has conquered nature but man has to do more in order to conquer himself. In current day Nigeria there are so many moral issues which the citizens are facing. One of such is the brutal killings of people by herdsmen in some parts of the country, especially the middle belt. Critically looking at the issues surrounding this menace, it is obvious that the reason behind the crisis is linked to land. Here the question that arises is, who owns these lands? In response to this question we will ask ourselves if there exist a society or government before this crises started? And the answer undoubtedly is yes. So if there is a government what has the government done about this looming problem? The government itself is a fundamental necessity for civil peace, but at the point where personal security is not guaranteed as a result of government failure to maintain peace, it is natural that the citizenry will fall back to individual capacity for self-defense.

Self-defense or self-preservation, looking from either the personal or rational is a natural right, consequently, it is mandatory that the Nigerian government provides the adequate and necessary security so as to stop the citizens from reversing back into the poor, nasty and brutish state. The Nigerian government has failed by all standards in curbing this menace that has resulted to the loose of many lives. The record of death keeps increasing and the reaction and intervention of government has clearly shown how uninterested the government is in stopping or seeing to an end this problem between the herdsmen and the owners of the land

they are grazing the cattle's on. Even record has it that the herdsmen do not only invade their lands but also involve in other immoral activities such as stealing their farm produce and when they are been confronted they do not only kill them (men, women and children) but they also go as far as raping their women and also burning down their houses. All these have led to man being at war with one another as Hobbes postulated in his view of human nature in the state of nature.

## V. CONCLUSION

A government or society is formed when people come into a social contract where they give up all their commonwealth to a sovereign or group of men. This is done in return for the sovereign to provide the basic which includes security and this the Nigerian government has failed in doing with respect to the herdsmen crisis in the middle belt of the country. The government has failed and the citizens need an alert, active, informed and thoughtful government to protect its citizenry. Nigerians are known to be peaceful people, hardworking and always ready to support their leaders in nation building. The Nigerian government must do the needful which is providing security for its citizenry so as to stop them from going back into the poor, nasty, solitary, brutish state where men were at war with their fellow men.

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