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World Government: A Lockean Perspective

Michael Davis

Illinois Institute of Technology

ABSTRACT: Most discussions of world government seem to take place today, as they have for a half century at least, in what is largely, if not entirely, a network of concepts that go back to Hobbes. Though the concepts now belong to (political) realism, they seem to be on loan to almost all those participating in the discussion. We might summarize that conceptual network in this relatively simple argument for the inevitability of world government:

1. Without a world government, states ("nation-states") are like the sovereign individuals in Hobbes's state of nature, free and equal but miserable prey to both nature and each other.
2. By the same logic that drives Hobbes's individuals to give up their sovereignty to a state, states must give up their sovereignty to a world government or suffer destruction (by nuclear war, climate change, or other global catastrophe).
3. If a state is rational, it will (if possible) avoid its own destruction.
4. States are rational (and world government is possible)

Therefore, states will give up their sovereignty to a world government.

What I find most noteworthy about this argument is that it fails in two distinct ways. First, all four of its premises seem to be (more or less) false. Second, on a realist interpretation, the premises are inconsistent. Realism makes a world state conceptually impossible—and so makes rational defense of a world state impossible.

KEYWORDS: political realism, Hobbes, Locke, rationality, world government, world governance.

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What I find most noteworthy about this argument is that it fails in two distinct ways. First, all four of its premises seem to be (more or less) false. Second, on a realist interpretation, the premises are inconsistent. Realism makes a voluntarily accepted world state conceptually impossible—and so makes rational defense of such a world state impossible.²

Having demonstrated those two dramatic failures, I shall briefly sketch an obvious alternative to the realist’s way of thinking about world government, an alternative that, derived from Locke, seems to allow us to avoid global catastrophe without necessarily committing to anything so grand as a world state. Let us now examine the Hobbesian argument for a world state premise by premise.

1. STATES ARE LIKE SOVEREIGN INDIVIDUALS IN HOBBS’S STATE OF NATURE

For Hobbes, what makes the state of nature so unattractive is that “every man is enemy to every man.” In such a condition,

there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth; no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; . . . and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death.³

Since the sovereign state, whatever its imperfections, is better than the state of nature, any individual rational enough to see that superiority will put himself under government—indeed, under a sovereign state, since that is the only form of government that can end the state of nature. That, in short, is Hobbes’s argument for the (sovereign) state.

Premise 1’s analogy between individuals and states is one Hobbes himself proposed:

In all times kings and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators, having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their forts, garrisons,

and guns upon the frontiers of their kingdoms, and continual spies upon their neighbors, which is a posture of war.⁴

Yet even Hobbes noted one important weakness in the analogy: “because they [sovereigns] uphold thereby the industry of their subjects, there does not follow from it that misery which accompanies the liberty of particular men.” War between states—unlike war between individuals—leaves place for industry, agriculture, navigation, and so on. Indeed, if it did not, there would be no reason for anyone to put himself under government.

To this weakness in analogy, we must add one Hobbes did not note. *Individuals* are equal in the state of nature, that is, “the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others that are in the same danger with himself.”⁵ States are, in general, *not* equal in this respect. Small states, even in league, are generally no match for a great state. Large states may be far enough away, or otherwise so favorably situated, that they do not have much to fear from most others. The equality of states is a legal fiction. A follower of Hobbes who wants a world state should, then, favor the spread of nuclear-tipped missiles since any state, no matter how small, with enough of them, would be the Hobbesian equal of the greatest, that is, have the power to destroy the greatest just as the greatest has the power to destroy it. The analogy with Hobbes’s state of nature would be much stronger.

Until that time, however, the condition of states without a world government differs in at least two important ways from the condition of individuals in Hobbes’s state of nature. First, states lack the equality that supposedly produces the war of all against all. Second, even when war occurs between states, it need not produce the absolute misery that (according to Hobbes) the war of all against all must produce among individuals. States at war generally maintain peace among their own subjects even as they try to bring death and destruction to their enemy. Hence, insofar as a statement of analogy can be true or false, Premise 1 is false.⁶

2. STATES MUST GIVE UP THEIR SOVEREIGNTY TO A WORLD GOVERNMENT TO AVOID DESTRUCTION

So far, we have (like good realists) been assuming that Hobbes’s state of nature is the default condition whenever individuals cease to be under government. There are at least two decisive reasons not to make that assumption. One is logical. Hobbes’s state of nature is identical to a state of war because, and only because, of specific assumptions about how human beings typically act, especially the assumption of (what we now call) “economic rationality”—that is, that a rational agent seeks to maximize his own advantage at whatever cost to others. An odd thing about economic rationality, perhaps the oddest, is that it is fundamentally irrational, that is, humans can do better overall if they systematically decline to act like “economic man” in a wide range of situations. Hobbes may have been the first to make theoretical use of that oddity (later discussed under such headings as “prisoner’s dilemma” or “tragedy of the commons”). Hence, to find a competing default, we need only reject one of Hobbes’s assumptions. So, for example, Locke offered a state of nature that seems to avoid the war of all against all by, among

other things, assuming humans to be more willing to share than Hobbes did. Why, then, assume that the natural condition of individuals must be Hobbesian? Surely, what is required here is an argument, not an assumption.

We might usefully put this logical point another way. Hobbes does not (and, given his assumptions, cannot) distinguish between anarchy (no ruler) and anomy (no rules).⁷ For Hobbes, to be without government is to be without (effective) rules of any kind. For Locke, however, a condition without government may be orderly enough to have contracts, property, private associations, and other elements of (what we now call) civil society. All that is possible on the assumption that people are sufficiently moved by considerations of fairness, family, friendship, faithfulness, and the like to keep their relations from often descending into war.⁸

That is the logical reason to reject Hobbes's state of nature as the default, the existence of at least one plausible alternative. There is also an empirical reason, one that reinforces the logical one. As a matter of fact, when government collapses, the result generally is not the war of all against all. Often, it is not even general war. So, for example, when the Soviet Union collapsed, there was a brief period of confusion after which various successor states took over parts of the old territory. Though there was some fighting, primarily among new states in the Caucasus, the process was generally peaceful. Even in a failed state such as Somalia, war was not all against all but between large entities, such as clans.

If even individuals need not put themselves under government to avoid the war of all against all, then states need not put themselves under world government to avoid destruction. World *anarchy* simply means a world without an overall ruler, for example, the world we have now. Our world has many institutions that together make it a relatively peaceful place. Some of these institutions are governmental; some, not. Some of the non-governmental institutions, such as Amnesty International or the Catholic Church, are not only international but exist even in states that try to keep them out. If these institutions are together enough to solve the problems that must be solved to avoid destruction, states need not put themselves under a world government. Since there is no decisive reason why current institutions (or ones much like them) must fail to avoid global catastrophe, Premise 2 is false.

3. IF A STATE IS RATIONAL, IT WILL (IF POSSIBLE) AVOID ITS OWN DESTRUCTION

The premise that states will, if rational, seek to avoid their own destruction, is doubly ambiguous. The first ambiguity concerns rationality. We have already distinguished one sense, economic rationality. Outside of economics, such "rationality" is considered a vice (a form of selfishness) in part because acting rationally in that sense tends to make all worse off than they would be if they instead acted according to (what we might call) "common-sense rationality," that is, according to principles that allow each to look beyond his own self-interest so that, for example, rational conduct can include keeping a promise against immediate interest or sacrificing one's own life to save one's child.

Given economic rationality, Premise 3 *seems* a conceptual truth. But, given the common-sense sense, Premise 3 is so far from seeming a conceptual truth that it seems to be empirically false. There have, after all, been states that preferred destruction to surrender, such as Poland in 1939: we need not, and generally do not, judge them “irrational.” We need not, and generally do not, act as if “economic rationality” were all there is to rationality.

The second ambiguity in Premise 3 concerns “destruction.” There are at least two ways to destroy a state: first, by dissolving it as a juridical entity; second, by destroying the population it governs. On the first interpretation of “destruction,” Premise 3 is (assuming economic rationality) indeed a conceptual truth, but only at the cost of making Premise 2 false (in a new way). A (sovereign) state that gives up its sovereignty to a world state would, by definition, destroy itself as a juridical entity; it would become a mere province of that larger sovereignty. It would, then, not have avoided destruction, but brought it about, the opposite of what Premise 2 says.

On the second interpretation of “destruction” (population), Premise 3 is not true if we assume states are merely self-interested. Of course, even a state that is merely self-interested would, all else equal, want to protect its subjects from complete destruction. Without a population, no state exists. But all else is not equal. The only alternative to destruction of its population is (we are assuming) the state’s destruction as a juridical entity. That too is destruction. Insofar as a state is merely self-interested, it must be indifferent between these two forms of destruction.

A state that is common-sense rational will, of course, try to avoid destruction of its subjects in part for *their* good. It might (reasonably) sacrifice its juridical existence to save its subjects (as, for example, the American states did when they formed the United States). Thus, Premise 3 can be made true only by abandoning the realist’s conception of rationality, the very conception that undergirds Premise 1’s analogy and Premise 2’s assumption of default status for Hobbes’s state of nature.

4. STATES ARE RATIONAL

The problem with Premise 4 is that it appears to be (more or less) true only of some states—whatever plausible interpretation we give to “rational.” Some states, such as Australia, Norway, and Japan, seem common-sense rational; they generally seek the welfare of their subjects. Other states, such as China, Russia, and Cuba, may seem to be merely economically rational, that is, they seek the welfare of the state, even at the expense of most subjects.⁹ And other states seem to be rational in neither sense. For example, in a kleptocracy, the ruler may be personally rational in the economic sense (stealing all he safely can) but rule in a way impoverishing most of the people so that, in time, he is likely to provoke a revolt leading to the state’s destruction, its collapse into disorder, while he retires to some neutral country to live off his stolen riches. His state will have behaved irrationally (though he did not). Since, as a matter of fact, many states are rational

in neither the economic nor common-sense sense, Premise 4 is false—on either interpretation of “rationality.”

5. CONCLUSION

Given this critique of the Hobbesian argument for world government, I’m inclined to turn for guidance to Locke, the great alternative to Hobbes.¹⁰ Locke is, I think, surprisingly helpful. Here are three suggestions I derive from him.

First, Locke offers another reason to reject Premise 2. Locke generally thinks in terms of “supremacy” rather than “sovereignty.”¹¹ Supremacy can be divided among several entities. World government need not be an all-or-nothing choice (world sovereign or world anarchy). States might need to give up only some of their supremacy to avoid destruction, keeping enough to remain (more or less) sovereign. The world might work like the European Union rather than a unified state. In this spirit, some writers have tried to switch from talk of “world government” to talk of “world governance.”¹² That switch in terms seems to have changed the discussion little—perhaps because those making the twitch have tacitly continued to accept too much of political realism—or because the ear too easily confuses the terms.

Second, according to Locke, the crucial step in leaving the state of nature is not establishing a legislature or executive but a judiciary.¹³ Much that a world state is supposed to accomplish might be possible using international law, international courts, and international equivalents of vigilance committees (such as NATO provided in Kosovo and Libya). There is no conceptual need, and perhaps no practical one, for even a world legislature or world executive.

Third, Locke distinguishes between the “original covenant” by which a state is established and the legislation by which taxes might be imposed. Government does not, according to Locke, automatically have the right to tax.¹⁴ Thus, we might establish a world government without the power to tax—as well as without an executive or even a standing legislature. Whatever money needs to be raised might be raised ad hoc, much as money for intervention in Kosovo or Libya was.

The lesson I draw from the arguments made here is that discussion of world government should avoid not only the term “sovereignty” and all the absolutist ideas that go with it (for example, “monopoly of legitimate force”) but also even the terms “government” and “world.” Perhaps we can avoid the destruction we fear not only by institutions that fall short of government but even by institutions that fall short of global. The terms of our questions should not foreclose such answers.¹⁵

Endnotes

I presented the first version of this paper to the Philosophy Colloquium, Illinois Institute of Technology, September 13, 2012, and the second at a session of the Annual Meeting of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics, March 2, 2013. I would like to thank those present for helping to polish this paper—without polishing it off.

1. See, for example, Alexander Wendt, “Why a World State is Inevitable,” in *Global Governance, Global Government: Institutional Visions for an Evolving World System*, ed. Luis

Cabrera (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011), 27–63; or David Rodin, *War and Self-Defense* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

2. Interestingly, even among realists, few, if any, seem willing to defend achieving a world state by conquest.

3. *Leviathan*, Ch. XIII.

4. *Leviathan*, Ch. XIII.

5. *Leviathan*, Ch. XIII.

6. There is another disanalogy worth mention, if only in an endnote: One factor contributing to war among individuals in the state of nature is their being a “great multitude,” making informal coordination impossible. States, in contrast, are few (about 200) and already organized both geographically (for example, China and its neighbors) and in a rough hierarchy of big powers and smaller powers. Their coordination problems are much simpler than those of individuals in the state of nature.

7. I spell “anomy” this way both to avoid association with the sociological term “anomie” and to stress the parallel with “anarchy.”

8. For more on this interpretation of Locke’s state of nature, see my “Locke (and Hobbes) on ‘Property’ in the State of Nature,” *International Philosophical Quarterly* 53 (September 2013): 271–87.

9. These examples may be challenged. The states listed as economically rational may be described instead as seeking the welfare of a faction, a party or clique, rather than that of the state as such. If so, then my critic should offer better examples or admit that no state today is economically rational, a conclusion that serves my purpose well enough but should discomfort realists.

10. I shall not try to explain why Hobbes’s categories have so long enchanted discussion of world government. I shall not in part because I think such explanations belong to the history of ideas, a field in which I have no expertise; but, in part too, I shall not try to explain because I have no idea why that should be so.

11. I am not the first to note this distinction between sovereignty and Locke’s supremacy. See, for example, John T. Scott, “The Sovereignless State and Locke’s Language of Obligation,” *American Political Science Review* 94 (September 2000): 547–61.

12. See, for example, Richard Falk, “Toward Humane Global Governance: Rhetoric, Desire, and Imageries,” in *Global Governance, Global Government: Institutional Visions for an Evolving World System*, ed. Luis Cabrera (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2011), 165–82.

13. *Two Treatises of Government*, II-§87: “Those who are united into one body, and have a common established law and judicature to appeal to, with authority to decide controversies between them, and punish offenders, are in *civil society* one with another [that is, under government].”

14. *Two Treatises of Government*, II-§138.

15. So, by a quite different route, I seem to have reached a conclusion close to that James A. Yunker defends in “Recent Considerations of World Government in the IR Literature,” *World Futures: The Journal of General Evolution* 67 (2011): 409–36.