

The state of nature

THE IDEA OF THE STATE OF NATURE

The idea of a 'state of nature' is the idea of life without government, without a state or laws. To imagine a state of nature, we imagine away government, law, police, and see what we are left with. The idea has a long history in political philosophy, because it can help us answer the question – why do we, or why should we, live under the rule of law? In everyday life, we take it for granted that we do – that there are things we are not allowed to do, laws we should not break, that if we do, we will be punished, and that these matters are decided by other people. Why accept this? If we want to see what living under a state does for us, it is helpful to imagine being without it.

In imagining what it would be like to be without a state, we also imagine what it would take for us to create a state. Philosophers have used the idea of a state of nature to argue that the state is based on an *agreement* between people to live together under laws. So the idea of a state of nature helps answer another question – it tells us a story about how a group of individuals who are free become obligated to obey the laws of a state.

The story, however, is not meant to be factual. Perhaps human beings have never lived without group rules and submission to someone who has the power to enforce them. Nevertheless, we can come to understand what *justifies* this situation – why it is a good thing (if it is) and why we should accept it (if we should) – by imagining what it would be like to live without the state.

However, some philosophers object that it cannot answer these questions, because we are not just imagining something false, but something that goes against human nature. We *naturally* live together under laws, or something like them. Social and political organization is natural for us. To imagine living without it will not tell us anything helpful about ourselves or why we have the state. Furthermore, we don't need to justify the state – we haven't 'given up' natural freedom for obedience.

For example, it is an important fact that we start off as children. This has many implications – that we won't survive at all unless looked after by someone else, that to produce children requires two people, and to raise them often requires at least this couple or a wider group. Hobbes seems to think that we can imagine people as individuals prior to any social interaction at all. But we are part of a social group of some kind from birth, and must be to survive.

If human beings are social by nature, the state of nature must take account of this fact and its implications for our psychology. Perhaps the state will develop *naturally*, not through consent.

HOBBS: THE STATE OF NATURE AS A STATE OF WAR

Thomas Hobbes argued that to understand political society, we first need to understand its components – people. We then need to understand the agreements that form society, and from these agreements we will understand the form and status of the state.

Imagining a state of nature, said Hobbes, helps us understand what human beings are like simply as human beings.

‘Self-preservation’ is our most fundamental desire; and if there is no law or authority to override our acting on this desire, no one to tell us how or how not we may try to stay alive. So Hobbes argues that in a state of nature, we have the right to use our power however we choose in order to stay alive. (Hobbes’ argument about the state of nature can be found in *Leviathan*, esp. Ch. 10-14.)

However, second, our ‘natural right’ conflicts with other people’s natural right. Usually, if I have a right, someone else has a duty. For example, if I have the right to life, everyone has the duty not to kill me; if I have the right to what I own, everyone has the duty not to steal from me. But because in the state of nature, no one has the authority to say how or how not to exercise the right to stay alive, if someone judges that in order to stay alive, they will kill someone else or steal from them, then they have a ‘right’ to do this, and each person judges individually how best to do this. They have no duty not to kill or steal. So each person’s right to self-preservation conflicts with everyone else’s.

Third, each person must eventually rely just on themselves, on their strength and intelligence. This will lead to a state of war, not in the sense that people will always be fighting each other, but that everyone will be disposed or ready to fight if they need to, and will live in a state of ‘continuall feare, and danger of violent death’.

Under these conditions, people will not work nor study nor create:

In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth... no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters’. And so, as a result, our lives will be ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short. (*Leviathan*, Ch. 14)

The causes of war

How does Hobbes get from everyone having the right to self-preservation to war? The answer, he says, lies in human psychology and the conditions of the state of nature.

First, we desire power. By ‘power’ Hobbes means the means to obtain what we want. Or more accurately, to have power is to *now* possess the means to get what you want *in the future*. That we want power follows from the fact that we want anything – whatever we want, in order to get it, we need the means. There are many things that give us power, including how other people see us. For example, if people like us or if they are afraid of us, then they may give us what we want.

Second, our desires are never-ending. Once we have fulfilled one desire, there will be another. And so we do not try just to satisfy our desires now, we also try to make sure we can satisfy our desires in the future.

In the state of nature, first, we are roughly equal; no one is so strong that they can dominate others and overpower all resistance. Any difference of physical strength can be matched by the other person finding people to help, or by their intelligence, or by their experience. Second, there is scarcity. Not everyone can have everything they want – especially when what they want includes the power to get what they want in the future. Third, we are vulnerable – other people can cause us to fail to achieve the power we need to satisfy our desires.

All this leads to a vicious circle. We might not be inclined to attack other people, but we know that some of them may attack us. The best form of defence, the best way to get what we want, is to attack first. Furthermore, the only way to have enough power is to have more power than other people. So even people who are not violent have reason to become violent if they fear losing what they want. We will fight for gain, to get what we need; we will fight for security, to get what we need in the future; and, says Hobbes, we will fight for 'glory' – the reputation of being powerful, either because we simply enjoy it or because it is a kind of power in its own right (people tend to be compliant towards people who are known to be powerful).

LOCKE ON THE STATE OF NATURE

In his *Second Treatise of Government* (Ch. 2-5), John Locke agrees with Hobbes that the state of nature is a state of perfect freedom and equality. But he understands both these terms differently. For Hobbes, equality is about our ability to gain power and satisfy our desires, and liberty just means that we each have the natural right to do *whatever* we think is necessary to secure self-preservation. Locke argues for a *moral* interpretation of each term. Equality means no one has the right to hold power over anyone else. And while we have the right to self-preservation, there are limitations on what we may do, given by what Locke calls the Law of Nature. The Law of Nature says that no person may subordinate another, harm his life, health, liberty or possessions (except in self-defence), and furthermore, that we should help each other when this does not harm ourselves. And so, Locke says, the state of nature is a state of liberty but not a state of 'licence', because it still falls under a law, viz. the Law of Nature.

But laws are usually made by states, and there is no state in the state of nature. So where does this Law of Nature come from? Ultimately, Locke argues, it comes from God, and it is because we are created by God that we have the duty to preserve and not to harm life, both our own and other people's. However, if we do not want to appeal to God, Locke also argues that the Law of Nature is discoverable by reason.

We may object, on Hobbes' behalf, that the existence of a Law of Nature is not enough for the state of nature to be peaceful – in addition, people have to obey it. But Hobbes has argued that we need power and we act out of the fear created by the conditions of the state of nature. So even if we *should* obey the Law of Nature, we won't.

Locke, however, disagrees with Hobbes about scarcity, one of the conditions that leads to war. In the state of nature, there is plenty of land for each person to have some for themselves, which they can cultivate and so provide themselves with food and shelter. And most people will prefer to do this than try to attack someone else to steal what they have grown, so it is possible that we live together peacefully. In fact, we can argue that we have a right to own land, because ownership is the most efficient and effective way of securing what we need to live. As long as there is enough land for other people as well, then taking land for ourselves is no violation of the Law of Nature.

HOBBS ON THE LAWS OF NATURE

We noted above an important difference between Hobbes and Locke on their interpretations of liberty and equality, viz. that Locke gave these concepts a *moral*

meaning, backed up by the idea of a Law of Nature. This may form an objection to Hobbes, viz. that he has no place for morality in the state of nature.

In one sense, this is true. He declares that there are no rights (apart from the natural right to do whatever one chooses as a means to self-preservation) and no justice, since both depend upon laws. However, he also has a theory of the Laws of Nature. He differs from Locke in presenting the Laws of Nature as purely rational, rather than moral – what people should do, rationally speaking, in pursuit of self-preservation.

Because the main threat to our self-preservation is violence, the fundamental Law of Nature is

That every man, ought to endeavour Peace, as farre as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of Warre'. (*Leviathan*, Ch. 14)

However, this is not enough to lead to peace. For example, if we agree with someone not to attack each other, the question arises whether we can trust them. If they are prepared to break the agreement, then it is not safe for us not to guard against them. So it is possible to follow the Law of Nature, but still be violent or be prepared to be violent.

Furthermore, we can't trust people to be rational and seek peace in the first place. Some people, Hobbes thought, will be irrationally moved by their desires and emotions, taking more than they need, taking pleasure in their power. Feelings of honour or pride or revenge may motivate them. Other people may simply be short-sighted, and not see the long-term benefits of keeping an agreement when it involves short-term costs. Look at how suspicious we are of other people even when we do live in the state – we hide our valuables, we lock our houses, we take precautions against being attacked. If we can feel this way when there is law and order, think how much worse our fear and suspicion will be when there is no law.

Because we cannot be sure that other people will keep their agreements to seek peace, then we all have a reason to fall back on acting violently if we think it is necessary. And this is the basis of Hobbes' objection to Locke. Even if there is a Law of Nature, and even if many people – seeking peace where possible – may prefer to cultivate their own field than attack and rob others, we cannot be sure that *someone* won't come along and do this. Attack may be foolish, it may be risky, but it is also less work than growing crops! And so we are back in a situation in which we live in fear of having the 'fruits of our labour' stolen from us – it will become pointless to try to cultivate land if, as soon as we have harvested, we are robbed.