

The State of Nature in Hobbes's *Leviathan*

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HOBBS AND *LEVIATHAN*

1. Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was the son of a clergyman, who spent most of his career employed as a tutor and secretary to the wealthy Cavendish family. He traveled throughout continental Europe and, through the Parisian intellectual Marin Mersenne, met and corresponded with some of the most eminent European intellectuals of the time, including Galileo and Descartes. He was the author of the third set of Objections published with Descartes's *Meditations* in 1641. He wrote books on physics, mathematics, human nature, and political philosophy, and was a famous and controversial figure in his own time.
2. Hobbes's life coincided with a period of religious strife, civil war, and political unrest in England. From the early 1600s on, there were growing religious tensions in England, which were related to ongoing conflict between the king and parliament and debates over political and religious authority. The king asserted a divine right to rule, but parliament controlled the power to raise taxes. Anticipating civil war, Hobbes fled the country in 1640. He wrote his most famous book, *Leviathan*, in France during the 1640s, where he lived during England's two civil wars (1642-6, 1648-51).
3. Hobbes was a *materialist*, meaning that he held that the "the world (I mean not the Earth only ... but the *universe*, that is, the whole mass of things that are) is corporeal, that is to say body" (*Leviathan* 4.46). He eventually applied this doctrine even to God, holding that God was an extended being.
4. Hobbes can also be regarded as an early *empiricist*: "concerning the thoughts of man ... the original of them all, is that which we call sense, for there is no conception in a man's mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense" (1.1-2).
5. *Leviathan* is primarily a work of political philosophy, aimed at arguing for the absolute authority of the civil state and explaining how such a state can be structured to sustain a peaceful and orderly society. The title "Leviathan" is taken from the Old Testament, where it is the name of a terrifying sea creature whose overwhelming strength makes it "king over all the children of pride" (Job 41:34). Hobbes argues that in order to eliminate and prevent the "state of war" that is the natural condition of humanity, people must be governed by a state with unlimited powers.

THE STATE OF NATURE

1. A common argumentative strategy for political philosophers centers on claims about the “state of nature,” a hypothetical situation in which human beings have no government, laws, or civil authority. Features of the state of nature are then used to defend the legitimacy and structure of the author’s preferred political system. *Leviathan* contains one of the earliest and most famous examples of this strategy
2. Any state of nature argument depends upon two sets of assumptions: first, assumptions about what *human nature* is like, and second, assumptions about the *natural circumstances* in which humans find themselves.
3. Hobbes makes two key assumptions about human nature. First, that people are fundamentally self-interested; second, that they are roughly equal in strength and ability:
 - (a) Hobbes was a *psychological egoist*, holding that “of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself” (14.8). In other words, whenever we act freely, we are acting in our own perceived self-interest. This doesn’t mean we never act for the sake of someone else — it just means that, when we do, we do so because we perceive altruism to be in our own interest (if for no other reason than the pleasure it gives us). Here’s an illustrative anecdote from Hobbes’s first biographer, John Aubrey:

One time, I remember, going to the Strand, a poor and infirm old man craved [Hobbes’s] alms. He, beholding him with eyes of pity and compassion, put his hand in his pocket, and gave him *6d*. Said a divine (that Dr Jaspar Mayne) that stood by—“Would you have done this, if it had not been Christ’s command?”—“Yea,” said he.—“Why?” quoth the other.—“Because,” said he, “I was in pain to consider this miserable condition of the old man; and now my alms, giving him some relief, doth also ease me.”
 - (b) He also thought that men [Hobbes always uses the term ‘men’ and it’s not clear whether he means *men* or *people*] were of roughly equal intelligence and strength. Though some are stronger or quicker than others, these differences are fairly minor: “the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others” (13.1). Hobbes thought there was “yet a greater equality” among men when it came to mental abilities (13.2).
4. The key assumptions about humanity’s natural circumstances: are first, that the goods people need in order to serve their own interests are *scarce*; and second, that people have the *liberty* to act however they see fit in order to further their own interests (“doing any thing, which in his own judgment, and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means [for the preservation of his own nature]” (14.1)).
5. Given these assumptions about human nature and natural circumstances, Hobbes thinks the state of nature will inevitably give rise to “quarrel” (13.6). Conflict arises from three sources: *competition*, *insecurity* (which Hobbes calls “diffidence”), and *glory*.
 - (a) *Competition*. Suppose we desire the same thing. Given that we’re both self-interested, we are both motivated to obtain it. Given that we are equal in strength and intelligence, each of us has as good a chance of obtaining it as the other. Given that we’re in

conditions of scarcity, there will be cases where we can't both fulfill the desire. And given that we're both at liberty, unrestrained by any superior power, there is nothing to stop us from doing everything we can to obtain it. So the state of nature leads to competition. Hobbes is not thinking of the polite competition of a rule-governed marketplace; he has in mind a no-holds-barred ruthless competition where we "endeavor to destroy, or subdue one another" (13.3).

- (b) *Diffidence*. Knowing that I'm in competition for scarce goods with my equals, I have reason to fear for my security. This provides an incentive for me to take pre-emptive measures to ensure my own safety; i.e., to pre-emptively eliminate any threats: "there is no way for any man to secure himself, so reasonable, as anticipation" (13.4). Again, Hobbes does not simply have in mind taking modest measures like installing a security system. He means "by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can, so long, till he see no other power great enough to endanger him" (13.4).
 - (c) *Glory*. Finally, in this competition among equals, it is in each of our interest to have a reputation for power, wisdom, strength, and so on. For example, having a reputation for power "draweth with it the adherence of those that need protection" (10.5). Having a reputation for wisdom "makes men either fear him, or rely on him" (10.8). More generally, having a high value – "which is commonly called honouring" (10.17) – requires having a good reputation. Thus we are led to use violence to protect our reputations, using "violence ... for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue" (13.7).
6. Thus, Hobbes concludes, in the state of nature men live "in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man" (13.8). By "war" Hobbes doesn't only mean actual fighting, but also the state in which we know we are at constant risk of fighting. The state of nature, Hobbes thinks, is a state of war.
7. In this state of war:
- ...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; no instruments of moving, 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, and short (13.9).
8. Throughout the rest of *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that, given the state of nature, we have reason to cede our natural liberty to an absolute sovereign.