

## Would life in the state of nature, without government, be “a state of war”?

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Hobbes and Locke had very different views on the state of nature (SoN) (the state of human beings outside civil society) (Blackburn, 2016, p. 458) which depended on how they viewed human nature. For Hobbes, the SoN was, *ab initio*, a state of war. Co-operation between “stand-offish” (Tuck, 2002, p. 65) individuals who possessed nothing was impossible and required an absolutist state to compel individuals to keep their promises and ensure their safety. Locke’s SoN was more settled than Hobbes: it was “much like an idealised version of the contract-based, commercial society of Locke’s own day but with government absent” (Parry, 1978, p. 57). Who has the more persuasive argument is the subject of this essay.

Hobbes’ wrote *Leviathan* for a specific purpose. His state had to ensure that its citizens would live in a peaceful and safe society. The “business of the commonwealth was purely *salus populi suprema lex*” (the safety of the people should be the supreme law) (Peters, 1956, p. 224). Hobbes saw that political dissension was the primary cause of the English Civil Wars and its anarchic chaos (Hobbes, 1968, pp. 236-7). As Bagby tells us, it was Hobbes’ “experience of the English Civil War and his reaction to it that set the stage for the writing of *Leviathan*” (Bagby, 2007, p. 7). The absence of government was, for Hobbes, synonymous not only with a SoN, but also with a state of war. Hobbes, therefore, had to ensure that his SoN was intolerable and completely insecure. The absence of a legitimate political authority made it a state of war. Hobbes thought that in the SoN there was no notion of right and wrong (Hobbes, 1968, p. 188). Individuals were “equal in the faculties of body and mind”. This equality meant that “each is equally a threat to every other” (Bagby, 2007, p. 29). They also had unrestrained liberty (*ibid.*, 1968, pp. 183, 189) which meant that nothing was impermissible. The SoN was characterised by limited resources and “if any two men desire the same thing, which they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies” (*ibid.*, 1968, p. 184). If an individual engaged in agriculture/horticulture, others would “steal [his produce] from him”. If he resisted, they would kill him (*ibid.*, p. 184). In the SoN individuals had a right to everything including what others have: “no mine and thine” (*ibid.*, p. 188). This insecurity created endemic enmity. All had to see others as impediments to their needs and wants. If an individual felt endangered, this suspicion dictated that a hostile individual be incapacitated: “a man’s obligations to others under natural law does not restrict his liberty to attack and kill them if in his view they constitute a danger to his own life” (Macfarlane, 1970, p. 144). It also follows that, in the SoN, everyone had to use their power in whatever way they chose for self-preservation (Hobbes, 1968, p. 189). There is pervasive mistrust in the SoN. Without an indivisible, absolutist state to overawe them no one would make or keep promises because of the certainty that they would be dishonoured (*ibid.*, 1968, p. 202). Hobbes concluded that because all had to be mutual enemies with a known disposition to fight (*ibid.*, p. 186) the benefits and advantages of civilisation would not be realised whilst individuals were in a SoN. Our societies would be “few, fierce, short-lived, poor, nasty, and destroyed of all that pleasure, and beauty of life, which peace and society are wont to bring with them” (quoted in Hobbes, 1998, p. xxxi). Hobbes’s state had the purpose of ending “the calamity of a war with every other man, (which is the greatest evil that can happen in this life;” (Hobbes, 1968, p. 376). Only then could individuals live peacefully with one another and learn mutual trust in a well-ordered society. Locke also wanted a peaceful society, but the state he devised reflected the society with which he was content.

Locke insisted on the fundamental equality and liberty of individuals in a SoN (Locke, 2016, p. 4). These individuals were possessive by nature. However, unlike Hobbes, liberty was not licence (*ibid.*, p. 5) because in his SoN there was “a law of nature to govern it” which stipulated that “no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty or possession” (*ibid.*, p. 6). God had given individuals reason by which they can discern this law of nature (*ibid.*, p. 5). Within this law of nature there is the positive injunction to “preserve the rest of mankind” and that “all men may be restrained ... from

doing hurt to one another” (ibid., pp. 5-6). As Parry points out “the preservation of God-given life is, therefore, the first duty of man” (Parry, 1978, p. 41). God had also given the earth to individuals in common. In the beginning all had an equal claim to what it produced. Individuals could appropriate this produce. Since man had “a property in his own person” this appropriation, because he “has mixed his labour” with it became his exclusive property (ibid., p 16). Whereas Hobbes contended that there was no mine and thine in the SoN, Locke had instituted private property in his. If Locke’s individual dug a plot of land, it became his and all that was grown on it. However, the law of nature forbade individuals to grow more than they could consume, leaving the surplus to despoil (ibid., p. 21). They must leave enough land “that the yet unprovided could use” (ibid., p. 18). However, there would come a point when all land had been appropriated. Most would be without property. Locke now introduces money into the SoN which was imperishable (ibid., p. 20). An individual’s surplus produce could be exchanged for money. Thus, there was no infraction of the law of nature. The problem for Locke, now that he had introduced property into the SoN, was its protection. In his SoN there was the “executive power of the law of nature” (ibid., pp. 6, 8) which permitted individuals to punish others if they damaged/harmed his life, health, liberty or property. This introduced the issue of condign punishment and who would enforce this. In the SoN there was “no judge to be found ... who may fairly and indifferently [impartially] adjudicate” (ibid., p. 45). This “want of a common judge with authority, puts all men in a state of nature: force without right, upon a man’s person, makes a state of war (ibid., p. 12). However, “when the actual force is over, the state of war ceases” (my italics) (ibid., p. 12). It is because of this regular insecurity that the SoN is an “ill condition” which drove individuals into civil society (ibid., p. 64). Here, Locke makes two statements about civil society which are unambiguous. Civil society exists for the “preservation of property” (ibid., p. 43) and “government has no other end but the preservation of property” (Locke, 2016, p. 48). As was said at the beginning of this essay, this resembles Locke’s own society. As Parry points out: “a capitalist market economy is undoubtedly that which is most congruent with Lockean civil society” (Parry, 1978, p. 123).

### **Conclusion**

For Hobbes, the SoN was, ab initio, a state of war, because it lacked a legitimate political authority. In his SoN, individuals were forced to fight for everything, not because they were inherently belligerent (Tuck, 2002, p. 67), but because they had to kill or be killed. Hobbes’ state of war was not continuous, unremitting fighting, but completely unstable because, without warning, fighting could occur. We can only imagine the fear this would engender. Hobbes thought this would cause individuals to seek peace, having both recognised their common humanity and that the constant fear of death ought to cease, by consenting to passive obedience to a sovereign with absolute power. This sovereign would ensure a safe, well-ordered society, within which there would be mutual trust, peace and safety. Locke’s SoN was more settled than Hobbes’. He characterised it as regular altercations, between individuals, which are transitory. This was an “ill condition” which required conflict resolution by civil society, whose purpose was to preserve and protect property rights. For Locke, in the SoN, property rights exist and the state’s *raison d’être* is to protect the property rights of the minority. Locke’s political philosophy has a major inconsistency. He tried to make his SoN “a state of war” whilst also maintaining that men should not hurt one another in their life, health, liberty or possession, and seems not to have realised this inconsistency. His SoN is therefore implausible. He has not shown that the state of nature, without government, is “a state of war” whereas Hobbes does so emphatically. Hobbes shows us that the state of nature, without government, is “a state of war” is plausible and therefore convinces.

### **References**

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