

Philsoc Student Essay Prize, Trinity term, 2020 – 3rd Equal Prize

Would life in the state of nature, without government, be ‘a state of war’?

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ἦ τοι μὲν πρώτιστα Χάος γένετο
Verily at the first Chaos came to be
Hesiod, *Theogony*, 116

Political philosophy tries to justify the existence of coercive institutions¹, chief amongst them being the state. To justify the existence of the state, philosophers asked themselves a question: what would the human community look like without it? Or, in other words, how can we imagine a life without any state, the so called state of nature? Would it be peaceful, or would it be, on the contrary, a violent place, as Thomas Hobbes famously described it, ‘a condition of war of everyone against everyone’, where human life is ‘nasty, brutish and short’². I believe it would be the latter, and I will explain why.

First, Hobbes’s description of human nature, on which his concept of the state of nature is based, seems, even today, more accurate than any other. He does not argue, as some of his opponents believed he did³, that people are naturally wicked or violent. On the contrary, he claims that all humans are equally fragile, in terms of both physical strength and intellectual skill, and therefore cannot trust each other⁴. ‘The weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination or by confederacy with others’⁵. Therefore, for Hobbes, ‘human equality is at the root of incessant insecurity’⁶, which seems to be entirely acceptable, even in the context of modern society⁷. Moreover, Hobbes thinks that people are naturally suspicious. As David Runciman describes it, in a Hobbesian state of nature ‘even if you know you are better off living in peace, and even if you know that everyone else knows this, you can’t be sure that other people will not see you as a threat’⁸. Finally, according to Hobbes, ‘in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrel. First, competition; secondly diffidence; thirdly, glory. The first maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation’⁹.

Hobbes believed that human nature would lead people to the war of all against all if there were no power to control them. That power, for Hobbes, would be the Leviathan, ‘the commonwealth (...), that Mortal God (...) to which we owe our peace and defence’¹⁰, or, to put it simply, a state. German sociologist, Max Weber, gave a modern definition of the very same concept. In his 1919 lecture, *Politics as a vocation*, he describes the state as ‘a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate force within a given territory’¹¹. The state guarantees peace among citizens.

However, what if Hobbes’ definition of human nature is wrong, and therefore also his concept of the state of nature? Jean-Jacques Rousseau, one of the prominent opponents of Hobbesian theory,

¹ Audi, R. (ed.), *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (3rd ed.), Cambridge University Press, 2015.

² Hobbes, T., *Leviathan*, as in: Rosen, M. and Wolff, J. (eds.), *Political Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 13.

³ In that matter, the most emblematic of Hobbes opponents was probably Jean-Jacques Rousseau.

⁴ See, Hobbes, T., *Leviathan*, as in: Rosen, M. and Wolff, J. (eds.), *Political Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 11-12.

⁵ Hobbes, T., *Leviathan*, as in: Wolff, J., (revised 2nd ed.) *An Introduction to Political Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 10.

⁶ Shklar, J., *Ordinary Vices*, Harvard University Press, 1984, p.217.

⁷ For a purely literary and, to some extent, philosophical account of such insecurity, see *No exit*, a 1944 play by Jean Paul Sartre, where he famously says that ‘hell is other people’.

⁸ Runciman, D. *Politics*, Profile Books, 2014, p. 18.

⁹ Hobbes, T., *Leviathan*, as in: Rosen, M. and Wolff, J. (eds.), *Political Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.12.

¹⁰ *Idem*, p.58.

¹¹ Weber M., *Politics as a vocation*, as in: Rosen, M. and Wolff, J. (eds.), *Political Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 55.

attacked Hobbes for overlooking an important factor in human nature – compassion¹². One has to agree that Rousseau's point, with some limitations, is acceptable from the perspective of modern biology, according to which the 'reciprocal altruism, (...) in addition to kin selection is the second major biological source of social behaviour found in many species of animals'¹³. Nonetheless, Rousseau's argument is acceptable only if we examine a relationship between individuals within a group and not between the groups. As Francis Fukuyama puts it, 'Everything that modern biology and anthropology tell us about the state of nature suggests (...) [that] there was never a period in human evolution when human beings existed as isolated individuals, the primate precursors of the human species had already developed extensive social and indeed, political skills (...). [However,] the state of nature might be characterised as a state of war since violence was endemic, but the violence was not perpetrated so much by the individuals as by tightly bonded social groups'¹⁴. From this modern account, we learn that indeed, on an individual level (within the groups), people tend to develop reciprocal altruism. However, Rousseau got it wrong, because he thought the savage man lived wholly isolated from his kin, which is simply untrue.

Still, one could turn that argument against Hobbes, too. In fact, Fukuyama does it, saying that also Hobbes's mistake was to think that humans were above all individualistic. This seems to be true - Hobbes did think that people pursue mostly individualistic goals. But it also seems that Hobbes was perfectly comfortable with admitting that people in the state of nature can organise themselves and cooperate in groups to increase the chances of survival. *Leviathan's* chapter XVII suggests that Hobbes accepted a longer-term organised group cooperation. He just thought that without *Leviathan* even a bigger group of people would not build a proper Commonwealth¹⁵

Here both Fukuyama and modern biology would agree – cooperation on group level cannot prevent the 'state of war' between the groups. As the biological anthropologist, Richard Wrangham, described it: 'very few animals live in patrilineal, male-bonded communities (...). And only two animal species are known to do so with a system of intense, male-initiated territorial aggression, including lethal raiding into neighbouring communities in search of vulnerable enemies to attack and kill'¹⁶. These two species are chimpanzees and human beings¹⁷.

Overall, therefore, it seems that Hobbes was right – the state of nature can be considered as a 'state of war'. We are violent creatures and only *Leviathan*, the state, claiming the legitimate use of power, can improve those conditions, significantly diminishing the fear of death. It is not only a philosophical supposition. Steven Pinker, in *The Better Angels of our Nature*, brilliantly shows the *Leviathan's* efficiency. 'Living in a civilization [i.e. with some form of the state]' – Pinker notices – 'reduces one's chances of being a victim of violence fivefold'¹⁸.

As Leo Strauss once wrote, Hobbes believed that 'violent death is the first, and greatest, and supreme evil. (...). This presupposition does not seem to him to require criticism, debate, or

¹² Rousseau, J., *A Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, as in: Rosen, M. and Wolff, J. (eds.), *Political Thought*, Oxford University Press, 1999, p.22.

¹³ Fukuyama, F., *The Origins of Political Order*, Profile Books, 2012, p.30.

¹⁴ *Idem*, p.30.

¹⁵ 'Nor is it the joining together of a small number of men that gives them this security; because in small numbers, small additions on the one side or the other make the advantage of strength so great as is sufficient to carry the victory, and therefore gives encouragement to an invasion. The multitude sufficient to confide in for our security is not determined by any certain number, but by comparison with the enemy we fear; and is then sufficient when the odds of the enemy is not so visible and conspicuous moment to determine the event of war, as to move him to attempt. And be there never so great a multitude; yet if their actions be directed according to their particular judgements, and particular appetites, they can expect thereby no defence, nor protection, neither against a common enemy, nor against the injuries of one another.' As in Hobbes, T., *Leviathan*, ed. Macpherson, C.B., Penguin Classics, 1985, p. 579-580, smartphone eBook version.

¹⁶ Wrangham R., *Demonic Males*, as in: Fukuyama, F., *The Origins of Political Order*, Profile Books, 2012, p.32.

¹⁷ See Fukuyama, F., *The Origins of Political Order*, Profile Books, 2012, p.32.

¹⁸ Pinker, S., *The Better Angels of our Nature. A History of Violence and Humanity*, Penguin Books, 2011, p. 277 and, cf. *idem*, Figure 2.2, Percentage of death in warfare in nonstate and state societies, p. 268, smartphone eBook version.

discussion¹⁹. It is from this presupposition that Hobbes conjures an idea of modern state. And I think it is one of the most powerful ideas in political philosophy.

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¹⁹ Strauss, L., *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, The University of Chicago Press, 1952, p. 437, smartphone eBook version.