

Thomas Hobbes and the State of Nature

To establish these conclusions, Hobbes invites us to consider what life would be like in a state of nature, that is, a condition without government. Perhaps we would imagine that people might fare best in such a state, where each decides for herself how to act, and is judge, jury and executioner in her own case whenever disputes arise—and that at any rate, this state is the appropriate baseline against which to judge the justifiability of political arrangements. Hobbes terms this situation “the condition of mere nature”, a state of perfectly private judgment, in which there is no agency with recognized authority to arbitrate disputes and effective power to enforce its decisions.

Hobbes's near descendant, John Locke, insisted in his *Second Treatise of Government* that the state of nature was indeed to be preferred to subjection to the arbitrary power of an absolute sovereign. But Hobbes famously argued that such a “dissolute condition of masterlesse men, without subjection to Lawes, and a coercive Power to tye their hands from rapine, and revenge” would make impossible all of the basic security upon which comfortable, sociable, civilized life depends. There would be “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; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.” If this is the state of nature, people have strong reasons to avoid it, which can be done only by submitting to some mutually recognized public authority, for “so long a man is in the condition of mere nature, (which is a condition of war,) as private appetite is the measure of good and evil.”

Although many readers have criticized Hobbes's state of nature as unduly pessimistic, he constructs it from a number of individually plausible empirical and normative assumptions. He assumes that people are sufficiently similar in their mental and physical attributes that no one is invulnerable nor can expect to be able to dominate the others. Hobbes assumes that people generally “shun death”, and that the desire to preserve their own lives is very strong in most people. While people have local affections, their benevolence is limited, and they have a tendency to partiality. Concerned that others should agree with their own high opinions of themselves, people are sensitive to slights. They make evaluative judgments, but often use seemingly impersonal terms like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to stand for their own personal preferences. They are curious about the causes of events, and anxious about their futures; according to Hobbes, these characteristics incline people to adopt religious beliefs, although the content of those beliefs will differ depending upon the sort of religious education one has happened to receive.

With respect to normative assumptions, Hobbes ascribes to each person in the state of nature a liberty right to preserve herself, which he terms “the right of nature”. This is the right to do whatever one sincerely judges needful for one's preservation; yet because it is at least possible that virtually anything might be judged necessary for one's preservation, this theoretically limited right of nature becomes in practice an unlimited right to potentially anything, or, as Hobbes puts it, a right “to all things”. Hobbes further assumes as a principle of practical rationality, that people should adopt what they see to be the necessary means to their most important ends.