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THE STATE OF NATURE

Philosophical discussions of the state of nature; how the contemporary life sciences shed light on human nature and hence on the biological foundations of politics; politics among chimpanzees and other primates; what aspects of human nature undergird politics; when different parts of the world were first settled

In the Western philosophical tradition, discussions of the “state of nature” have been central to the understanding of justice and political order that underlies modern liberal democracy. Classical political philosophy distinguished between nature and

convention or law; Plato and Aristotle argued that a just city had to exist in conformity with man's permanent nature and not what was ephemeral and changing. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau developed this distinction and wrote treatises on the question of the state of nature, seeking to ground political rights in it. Describing the state of nature was a means and a metaphor for discussing human nature, an exercise that would establish a hierarchy of human goods that political society was meant to foster.

Aristotle differed from Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau in one critical respect. He argued that human beings are political by nature, and that their natural capacities incline them to flourish in society. The three early modern philosophers, by contrast, argued that human beings are not naturally social, but that society is a kind of artifice that allows people to achieve what they cannot get on their own.

Hobbes's *Leviathan* begins with an extended catalog of natural human passions and argues that the deepest and most abiding one is the fear of violent death. From this he derives the fundamental right of nature, which is the liberty each man has to preserve his own life. Human nature also provides

three causes of quarrel: competition, diffidence (fear), and glory; “The first, maketh men invade for Gain; the second, for Safety; and the third, for Reputation.” The state of nature is thus characterized by “Warre ... of every man against every man.” To escape from this perilous situation, human beings agree to give up their natural liberty to do as they please in return for other people respecting their right to life. The state, or Leviathan, enforces these reciprocal commitments in the form of a social contract by which human beings protect those rights which they have by nature but are not able to enjoy in the state of nature due to the war of every man against every man. The government, or Leviathan, secures the right to life by securing peace.¹

John Locke, in his *Second Treatise on Government*, has a softer view of the state of nature than Hobbes; human beings are less occupied fighting one another than mixing their labor with the common things of nature to produce private property. Locke’s fundamental law of nature, in contrast to that of Hobbes, gives human beings the right not just to life, but to “life, health, liberty, or possessions.”² Unregulated liberty in the state of nature leads to the state of war, necessitating, as for Hobbes, a social contract for the preservation of

natural liberty and property. Although the state, in Locke's view, is necessary, it can itself become the denier of natural rights, and so he posits a right to revolt against unjust authority. The right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness posited by Thomas Jefferson in the American Declaration of Independence traces its ancestry directly back to Hobbes's right of nature, via Locke's amendment concerning the danger of tyranny.

Hobbes's violent state of nature, wherein the life of man is famously "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short," is traditionally contrasted with Rousseau's more peaceful version, given in his *Discourse on the Origin and the Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind*. Indeed, Rousseau explicitly criticizes Hobbes at several points: "But above all things let us beware concluding with Hobbes, that man, as having no idea of goodness, must be naturally bad; that he is vicious because he does not know what virtue is; that he always refuses to do any service to those of his own species, because he believes that none is due to them; that, in virtue of that right which he justly claims to everything he wants, he foolishly looks upon himself as proprietor of the whole universe."³ Rousseau argues that Hobbes has not in fact uncovered natural man; the violent

creature described in *Leviathan* is actually the product of the contaminating effects of centuries of social development. Natural human beings for Rousseau are indeed solitary, but they are also timid, fearful, and more likely to flee one another than to fight. Savage man's "desires never extend beyond his physical wants; he knows no goods but food, a female, and rest"; he fears pain and hunger but not the abstraction of death. Thus the rise of political society does not represent salvation from the "warre of every man against every man" but a bondage to other human beings through ties of mutual dependence.

Rousseau says at the beginning of the *Discourse on Inequality* that "the researches, in which we may engage on this occasion, are not to be taken for historical truths, but merely as hypothetical and conditional reasonings, fitter to illustrate the nature of things, than to show their true origin." For Rousseau and Hobbes, the state of nature was less a historical account than a heuristic device for uncovering human nature—that is, the deepest and most abiding characteristics of human beings, when shorn of behaviors brought about by civilization and history.

Yet the intention of Rousseau's *Discourse* is clearly to provide a developmental account of human behavior. He talks about man's perfectibility, and speculates on how human thoughts, passions, and behavior have evolved over time. He adduces considerable evidence about the Caribs and other indigenous peoples of the New World, as well as arguments based on observations of animal behavior, to try to understand what is human by nature and what is human by social convention. It is always risky to think one understands the true intentions of great thinkers. But given the foundational importance of the accounts of the state of nature offered by Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau to Western political self-understanding, it is not unfair to contrast them with what we actually know today about human origins as a result of recent advances in a range of life sciences.

This knowledge exists in several distinct domains, including primatology, population genetics, archaeology, social anthropology, and, of course, the overarching framework of evolutionary biology. We can rerun Rousseau's thought experiment using much better empirical data, and what we find confirms certain of his insights while throwing others into question. The recovery of human nature

by modern biology, in any case, is extremely important as a foundation for any theory of political development, because it provides us with the basic building blocks by which we can understand the later evolution of human institutions.

Rousseau was brilliantly correct in certain of his observations, such as his view that human inequality had its origins in the development of metallurgy, agriculture, and, above all, private property. But he, Hobbes, and Locke were wrong on one very important point. All three thinkers saw human beings in the state of nature as isolated individuals, for whom society was not natural. According to Hobbes, early human beings relate to one another primarily through fear, envy, and conflict. Rousseau's primitive human is even more isolated: while sex is natural, the family is not. Mutual human dependence comes about almost accidentally, as a result of technological innovations like agriculture that require greater cooperation. For both, human society emerges only with the passage of historical time, and involves compromises of natural liberty.

This is not the way things actually happened. In his 1861 book *Ancient Law*, the English legal

scholar Henry Maine criticizes the state-of-nature theorists in the following terms:

Yet these two theories [of Hobbes and Locke], which long divided the reflecting politicians of England into hostile camps, resemble each other strictly in their fundamental assumption of a non-historic, unverifiable condition of the race. Their authors differed as to the characteristics of the prae-social state, and as to the nature of the abnormal action by which men lifted themselves out of it into that social organization with which alone we are acquainted, but they agreed in thinking that a great chasm separated man in his primitive condition from man in society.⁴

We might label this the Hobbesean fallacy: the idea that human beings were primordially individualistic and that they entered into society at a later stage in their development only as a result of a

rational calculation that social cooperation was the best way for them to achieve their individual ends. This premise of primordial individualism underpins the understanding of rights contained in the American Declaration of Independence and thus of the democratic political community that springs from it. This premise also underlies contemporary neoclassical economics, which builds its models on the assumption that human beings are rational beings who want to maximize their individual utility or incomes. But it is in fact individualism and not sociability that developed over the course of human history. That individualism seems today like a solid core of our economic and political behavior is only because we have developed institutions that override our more naturally communal instincts. Aristotle was more correct than these early modern liberal theorists when he said that human beings were political by nature. So while an individualistic understanding of human motivation may help to explain the activities of commodity traders and libertarian activists in present-day America, it is not the most helpful way to understand the early evolution of human politics.

Everything that modern biology and anthropology tell us about the state of nature suggests