

Given Hobbes' account of human nature in the state of nature, can one ever leave it?

Written by Morgane Griveaud

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Given Hobbes' account of human nature in the state of nature, can one ever leave it?

<https://www.e-ir.info/2011/06/08/given-hobbes%E2%80%99account-of-human-nature-in-the-state-of-nature-can-one-ever-leave-it/>

MORGANE GRIVEAUD, JUN 8 2011

It is difficult to perceive how Hobbes thinks men, as unsociable and selfish as they are, can come together to live in a society. Throughout his work it is quite clear that the English philosopher believes that men are not born to be sociable and that it is not in their nature to seek a life together. Yet, he firmly believes that they will eventually create an absolute sovereign entity to govern all men. How is it possible then, that men choose to give up their rights and live under a sovereign that implements laws and punishments, rather than stay in their state of nature where they are free to do and get whatever they want? It is one of the many arguments that one finds very contradictory in the *Leviathan*. Nonetheless, through a deeper analysis of this work, it is possible to understand how this shift happens. Indeed, even if human nature is bad and egocentric, according to Hobbes, it still drives men towards society for the sake of survival. If men's first instinct, need, and right is self-preservation, no matter how it is attained, it would be natural that men would eventually recognise the best thing they can do for their life is to cooperate. It would be unfair to Hobbes's theory to characterise his natural man as deprived of sensibility. In the *Leviathan*, men in the state of nature are quite rational beings and know exactly what they want, and they will seek the best way to stay alive and prolong their survival. This essay will focus first on how it would be impossible for men to leave Hobbes's state of war because of their nature. Then we will see how this very same nature is exactly what enables them to leave this environment.

Men naturally tend to get what they want, do whatever they want, and live however they want. Their principal obsession is self-preservation and their first aim is to stay alive. To be successful in that mission they use any means they can, because the right of self-preservation is universal, (Tuck, 1993: 326) and hence they are free to do as they please. It is a man's right of nature to be free to do what he considers good for him, and do that which will enable him to stay alive. This right "is the liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature," and so he is in a state of total liberty to do "any thing, which in his own judgement, and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto" (Hobbes, 1946: XIV, 84). In the state of nature, we have the right to use our own power for the ends we consider good because it is our natural right to do so (Pettit, 2008: 105). It "is never described as obligatory," (Barry in Lively and Reeve, 1989: 131) but it is human nature to act in one's own interest. Men prefer to be free from any "external impediments," (Hobbes, 1946: XIV, 84) and if they are given the right to be their own "independent judges" on how to lead their life (Tuck, 1993: 306) they will not refuse the opportunity, and will take advantage of having such a right to increase their power and to assure their survival.

Thus, men are completely free, as there are no rules that can set any limits on their actions and no higher authority to punish and judge them. Hobbes states in the *Leviathan* that certain laws of nature must be obeyed, "but they cannot be relied on in the state of nature" (Gough, 1957: 106). The "fundamental law of nature" is "that every man, ought to endeavour peace, as far as he hope of obtaining it," (Hobbes, 1946: XIV, 85) but for this law to be enforced there needs to be agreements or "covenants," and men have to "perform their covenants made," otherwise "we are still in a condition of war" (ibid: XV, 93). However, it has been shown that in a case where the state of nature is compared to a prisoner's dilemma, if one makes a covenant with others then defecting is always the best choice (Pettit, 2008: 112; Hampton, 1986). Therefore, men will never keep to their promises in the state of nature because it is more advantageous not to.

Given Hobbes' account of human nature in the state of nature, can one ever leave it?

Written by Morgane Griveaud

Human beings will always seek to increase their power, and as long as they live they will want more power, wealth, and glory. It is a mistake to think that men in the state of nature act like animals. Indeed, men are not bad because although they react to their instincts, like animals do, they are driven by their passions, which are mainly glory and honour (Pettit, 2008: 99-100). It is true that self preservation is an instinct that every living creature has, but men differ because their love for material things is what motivates them to continue on in life. Moreover, there is no order in the state of nature, not because there are animalistic behaviours amongst men, but because there is no common standard, no objective value or principle, and no objective morality. Thus, "the only way" men perceive, know, feel, or judge anything" there is in the world around them "is according to how it strikes" them (Baumgold in Boucher and Kelly, 2003: 171). Good and evil, and other moral categories, are all based on personal desire and aversion. Also, there is no justice or injustice, in fact, whatever one considers just is just, and if one thinks the contrary then he is right as well (Hobbes, 1946: VI, 31, 33; *ibid*: XIII, 83).

In this environment men are all equal, have access to the same things, and they are all able to decide what is right or wrong without exception. They are equally free, and so equally able to use any means they wish that will help them get what they desire. Hence, every man's desire is accessible, and they will want the same things because men are naturally competitive. Since they will try to get what others want, they will distrust each other and will thereby be in permanent conflict. This is why the Hobbesian state of nature is characterised as a state of war, a "war of every man, against every man" (*ibid*: XIII, 82).

For Hobbes, men are "equal in their faculties of body and mind," and consequently "the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest" (Gough, 1957: 105; Hobbes, 1946: XIII, 83). From this arises diffidence, or distrust. Thus, in their natural habitat men are not sociable, and they prefer to stay alone. They cannot agree with one another as they all believe they are superior to the men around them, but they are blind to the equality that reigns between each man, as "many people are likely to be moved by vainglory" and "think that they can achieve the superiority for which they yearn" (Pettit, 2008: 102). It is in human nature to crave superiority, power, glory, and honour. In the state of war, power is highly significant because it is the principal means of attaining what you want. Hence, every man will strive for power and they will attempt to have, increase, and stabilise it. In chapter X of the *Leviathan*, it says that "reputation of power is power" (Hobbes, 1946: X, 56). Not only will people seek power but they will want others to "recognize and acknowledge their power...because this makes that power more effective" (Pettit, 2008: 101). However, even if one tries to impose his power, it will not last long because of the equality amongst men, and because others will always find a way to free themselves from that power.

Therefore, human beings in their natural state are very much inclined to use their right to survive, and to fight each other so that they can get power, glory, and honour. In such a situation, men do not live peacefully and cooperation is not conceivable. They are "so naturally anti-social" that it is difficult to imagine how they could enter a society. Nevertheless, authors like Gough think that Hobbes "did not mean his state of nature...to be taken literally" (1957: 113). Hobbes's ideas should be understood through a deeper analysis of what human nature makes men desire most.

Human beings "are satisfied only with the long-term appropriation" of material goods, and some of their desires are similar, so they will "inevitably" clash with each other to get what they want. Therefore, there is a "conflictual right of nature" (Pettit, 2008: 101, 105). Men have the right to do anything as long as they are capable of doing it, but at the same time by doing so they interfere with other's right of nature, and hence, the liberty each man has cannot be called as such anymore because it is limited by other men's actions. Moreover, it is because of the "pursuit of their individual rights" that men enter into conflict (*ibid*: 105) which jeopardises their self-preservation. So it is their natural right, which helps them to survive, that actually puts them in a situation of "continual fear" and where they are in "danger of violent death" (Hobbes, 1946: XIII, 82).

Psychologically, survival is not an option. Rather, it is a "necessity of every human being's nature" (Barry in Lively and Reeve, 1989: 130). No one should have to choose between life and death. Hobbes considers the laws of nature obligations, and says that every man should respect them, as they are of great help in trying to stay alive. In the state of nature men might not act upon these laws, but not to do so would be "a defect of reasoning" (*ibid*). Indeed, the laws of nature are "theorems concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defence" of men (Hobbes, 1946:

Given Hobbes' account of human nature in the state of nature, can one ever leave it?

Written by Morgane Griveaud

XV, 104). If men do not respect them then they act against their needs, but men want to live, so it becomes evident that these laws should be obligations for every man, as "they oblige only to a desire and endeavour" (ibid). As Wernham says, they are voluntarily adopted because they are necessary for survival, and he will "create a binding obligation upon himself to perform a certain act" according to the laws of nature. Anything that "genuinely" aims towards self-preservation is to some extent obligatory (Barry in Lively and Reeve, 1989: 123, 130).

This permanent conflict that pits men against men will eventually come to a point where the only solution to self-preservation is cooperation and agreement. If men want to live, and if the only possible means to stay alive is to live in a community, then they will band together "because otherwise their approximate equality of strength results in their all getting hurt." In the state of nature, human reason would not directly tell one to adopt the laws of nature, but it would tend to say that when every one else is prepared to respect them then one should be as well (ibid: 120, 130). It is these "dictates of self-concern" (Pettit, 2008: 105) that drive men to cooperate for the good of everyone, and "to seek peace, and follow it" (Hobbes, 1946: XIV, 85). Hampton argued that a situation would arise "in which self-interest inclines individuals to cooperate" (Baumgold in Boucher and Kelly, 2003: 166).

Society becomes like a refuge for men because none "is strong enough to secure his own safety," (Gough, 1957: 117) hence "men must somehow co-ordinate their judgments" and put their differences aside so that agreements on common survival can arise from negotiations (Tuck, 1993: 307). Each man gives up his independence and right to everything in order to cooperate with others because he feels the necessity of political obligation. This creates the absolute sovereign who is fundamental in the formation of this new society because he is the only one who has the power to punish men who do not obey, as "the union could not subsist without the rule of the sovereign" because otherwise some men would defect (Gough, 1957: 109). Men create the sovereign out of fear of dying, they are "to be protected by him against all the others," (Hobbes, 1946: XVII, 113) and it is only because of fear that men obey and do not rebel. Reasonable men would not dare go against the sovereign's will because "submission is the best way to get security" (Gough, 1957: 111).

Everything in this social contract is done purely out of self-interest. Human nature drives men to act according to their needs, the most important being self-preservation, thus the sovereign's principal objective is the security of his subjects and to create an environment where "people may live in peace and indeed prosperity" (Pettit, 2008: 109). It is clear that men's "ruling motive is desire for protection" because if the sovereign cannot guarantee the security of each man then disobedience would ensue (Gough, 1957: 111). Besides survival, the reason that men are inclined to cooperate is "the desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living" and these goods can only be obtained if industry is productive, and this cannot happen in a state of war (Hobbes, 1946: XIII, 84). Therefore, it is quite apparent that self-preservation and a desire for material goods and wealth are what drive men to leave the state of nature, and create a society wherein they are completely secure.

In conclusion, men are naturally unsociable and do not count on anyone else but themselves to survive. Self-preservation is their most important objective. Men have a right of nature to do whatever they want in order to survive, so they compete against each other all the time, and this creates conflict. Their natural state is a state of war, in which they distrust one another and try to increase their power so that they can attain superiority over others. Nonetheless, men will eventually overcome these flaws because they are so self-concerned that they will do anything to survive, even if it means cooperating with the people around them. Hobbesian human nature is good to the extent that when one wants something he will hold on to his wish and do all he can to satisfy it. Hence, if a man wants to survive he will voluntarily respect the laws, give up his rights, and obey any higher authority that can protect him. It must be very hard for a man to decide to leave his state of nature, but his natural fear of death overrides any passions that would compel him to stay. The social contract may be an artificial one, as it is men who create their sovereign, but it can be considered natural, as it is human nature which has caused the transition between the state of nature and Hobbes's commonwealth.

Given Hobbes' account of human nature in the state of nature, can one ever leave it?

Written by Morgane Griveaud

Bibliography:

Baumgold, D. (2003) 'Hobbes', in Boucher, D. and Kelly, P. (eds.) *Political Thinkers: from Socrates to the Present*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barry, B. (1989) 'Warrender and his Critics', in Lively, J. and Reeve, A. (eds.) *Modern Political Theory from Hobbes to Marx*, London: Routledge.

Gough, J.W. (1957) *The Social Contract: a Critical Study of its Development* (2nd ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Hampton, J. (1986) *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hobbes, T. (1946) *Leviathan*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Tuck, R. (1993) *Philosophy and Government 1572-1651*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Pettit, P. (2008) *Made with Words: Hobbes on Language, Mind, and Politics*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

—

Written by: Morgane Griveaud
Written at: Royal Holloway, University of London
Written for: Michael Bacon
Date written: December 2010