

Trust and the State of Nature

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Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679), perhaps the greatest English political philosopher, argued that life in the state of nature would be, 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short'. But what is the state of nature? Need it be so miserable? And why does this matter, anyway? In exploring these questions we come to see some important considerations - - both unsettling and comforting - - about the place of trust in human life.

Reflection upon the state of nature first took place in the context of a much broader debate, although one that may be lost to us now: what is the ultimate source of the authority of the state? For much of human history our rulers have claimed to have divine authority, and thus a god-given right to rule. The opposing view, of course, is that the source of authority is the people, and that political power rests not on the nature of things but on human convention. Accordingly, there may be more than one way in which we may devise such conventions, and, in principle, we have the freedom to determine the best form of rule for us. How are we to do this? The methodology adopted by Hobbes, and those influenced by him, was to imagine what life would be like with no political systems or rulers. This is the state of nature: no laws, no government. Within this thought experiment - - and there need be no suggestion that human beings ever were in this situation - - what forms of government, if any, would we establish? The answer to this question is the answer to the question: what is the ideal form of government for us?

Hobbes wanted to defend the absolute sovereign, a ruler who would have unlimited powers of rule and of punishment. Essentially Hobbes' argument is that the miseries of life in the state of nature could only be remedied by a sovereign with such strength.

Famously, Hobbes identified three reasons why the state of nature would be a state of war of every person against every other person, by which he means not constant fighting but a constant readiness to fight. First, without government there would be little or no industry and so resources would be very scarce. People must attack for gain in order to take whatever possessions other had managed to acquire. Second, individuals would try to pre-empt these attacks, and get their defence in first. This Hobbes calls 'diffidence'. Third, people would realize the advantages of a reputation for strength and attack others simply for glory. In total this would lead to mutual hostility based on the deepest mistrust.

Are we really so untrustworthy that, left to our own devices, we would attack each other? Can this really be believed? ? But consider, says Hobbes, how we live even under the authority of the state. What opinion of your neighbours do you express when you lock your doors against them? And of other members of your household when you lock your chests and drawers? If we are so suspicious when we live with the protection of law, just think how afraid we would be in the state of nature, with no law to protect us.

Has Hobbes assumed that we are all grasping egoists with no sense of morality and restraint, and so the only thing that can keep us from attacking each other is a sovereign with draconian powers of punishment? Admittedly some of us are like this, which is why we lock our doors. But most of us can co-operate very well on our own, thank you very much. However Hobbes's does not rely on such a pessimistic assumption about human nature. Rather he presents our situation as far more tragic than this. In the state of nature many of us will have fellow feeling for others. We do want to respect others and their property. But because we cannot trust everyone, and do not know whom to trust and whom not to trust, we must, if rational, trust no-one. Any other course of action will be far too risky. Our fear of death requires us even to attack other people. Consequently we need a sovereign not so much to threaten us with punishment if we do wrong but to create safe conditions where we can trust each other and safely act as morality requires. Once the sovereign is in place to enforce rules of conduct, acting morally is no longer such a risk. Conditions have been created which allow us to do the right thing without exposing ourselves to exploitation by others.

Hobbes' arguments have been contested by many. John Locke (1632-1704), for example, worried that an absolute sovereign, with absolute power, would be even more of a danger to us than life in the state of nature. After all, how could we trust the sovereign to act in the citizen's interests rather than his or her own? So Locke argued that although we do need a sovereign to settle disputes and administer justice, we must also set constitutional limits to the sovereign's rule. We have a right to rebel if the sovereign abuses our trust.

If we were all completely trustworthy in all our dealings with each other, then perhaps we would not need a government, and could remain forever in the state of nature. But this is asking too much of each other. The authority of the government introduces a framework in which we can deal with this. There is, of course, plenty of room in which we can develop mutual relationships based on trust and understanding in our day-to-day lives. But the full force of the law is there, lurking in the wings, just in case our trust is misplaced or wears too thin.

Further Reading.

Thomas Hobbes's arguments are presented in his masterpiece *Leviathan* and John Locke's in his *Second Treatise on Civil Government*. Short extracts from these works are reprinted in Michael Rosen and Jonathan Wolff, ed., *Political Thought* (OUP 1999) For further discussion of the idea of the state of nature see Jonathan Wolff, *An Introduction to Political Philosophy* (OUP 1996).