

# *Hobbes: the State-of-Nature and the Nature of Man*

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## ***Legitimate Authority***

Here are two questions:

1. Which political system (Aristocracy? Democracy? Oligarchy? ...), if any, is best?
2. In virtue of what, if anything, is the authority of a political system *legitimate*?

We are autonomous. And we have a natural right to self-governance. Any effective political system will involve constraining some of these rights. Is this justifiable?

***Hobbes and the Social Contract.*** In the State-of-Nature, there are no impediments to our self-governance. But our lives in the State-of-Nature are "nasty, brutish, and short." So, we should prefer giving up some of our natural rights (in particular, our right to self-governance) to the sovereign, on the condition that everyone else gives up these rights too. The power of the sovereign, then, is legitimate in virtue of this *Hypothetical Social Contract*.

## ***The Nature of Man in the State-of-Nature***

Hobbes' justification of the legitimate authority of the sovereign turns on the claim that life in the State-of-Nature is (for most people, at least) dispreferable to life under the sovereign. Is this true?

### HOBBS' STATE-OF-NATURE ARGUMENT

- P1** *Self-Regarding Motivation.* If you believe that X will be better for you than Y, then (all else being equal) you will aim to get X. (And this holds for everyone).
- P2** *Human Equality.* If you believe that X will be good for you, it is likely that I will believe that X will be good for me too; and you have no reason to believe that you will be more effective at getting X than anyone else will be.
- P3** *Scarcity of Goods.* It is not possible for everyone to get what they want.
- P4** *Distrust (Diffidence).* It is rational to not completely trust everybody.
- P5** *Unsociability.* There are some people who set out to make themselves the master of others.

A governing body has *legitimate authority* over its subjects if it has the power to generate obligations — like the obligation to follow its laws — in its subjects that they wouldn't have otherwise.

### HYPOTHETICAL SOCIAL CONTRACT:

The sovereign has legitimate authority over us if we would all agree to give up our right to self-governance to the sovereign, under the relevant conditions, were we offered the choice to do so.

**Hobbes Claim:** In the State-of-Nature, we would all agree to trade some of our rights to the sovereign in exchange for the comfort and security of living under the sovereign's rule.

These conditions, together, suggest that the State-of-Nature will be war of all against all.

Is that right? What is Hobbes' idea?

### The Prisoners Dilemma

We can better understand Hobbes' point about the State-of-Nature using some game theory — consider, for example, *the prisoners dilemma*:

PRISONERS DILEMMA

|           | Cooperate | Defect |
|-----------|-----------|--------|
| Cooperate | 2 \ 2     | 0 \ 5  |
| Defect    | 5 \ 0     | 1 \ 1  |

In Game Theory, we say that the strategy set  $\langle \mathbf{Defect}, \mathbf{Defect} \rangle$  is a *Nash Equilibrium*: no one can gain from unilaterally defecting from this strategy.

If each player is rational (and self-interested), they will prefer **Defect** to **Cooperate**. That being said, both players prefer the outcome that would come about were they to *both* choose **Cooperate**.

- **Hobbesian Hypothesis:** In the State-of-Nature, we will all confront many, many situations of this form.

Individual Rationality compels us to **Defect**, but, collectively, we will do better if we all **Cooperate**. The role of the sovereign is to resolve this tension: organize society so that what is collectively best will also be what is Individually Rational.

SOVEREIGN'S INTERVENTION

|           | Cooperate          | Defect                          |
|-----------|--------------------|---------------------------------|
| Cooperate | 2 \ 2              | 0 \ 5 - $\epsilon$              |
| Defect    | 5 - $\epsilon$ \ 0 | 1 - $\epsilon$ \ 1 - $\epsilon$ |

Suppose that the sovereign institutes a policy of issuing a *penalty*  $\epsilon$  to anyone who choose **Defect**. The Prisoners Dilemma evaporates (so long as  $\epsilon$  is large enough).