

Matt Crane
PHI 305
Dr. Muenzberg
May 7, 2015

Hobbes' State of Nature As a Flawed Interpretation of Humanity

Thomas Hobbes' landmark book *Leviathan* is often hailed as the progenitor of the social contract theory. In it he asks readers to consider man without a governing body to keep him in check through the rule of law and concludes that man without law would, man in the state of nature, would exist in a state of war wherein it would essentially be every man for himself. In order to prevent such a state of nature, man enters into a social contract with his peers and forms a governmental body to keep people in check through fear of retribution. Although Hobbes does a fine job of describing why man goes to war against others, Hobbes' description of the formation of the social contract is flawed by virtue of it being based on a flawed interpretation of man himself and reasons why man would form a social contract in the first place. Human beings do form social contracts with one another, but Hobbes' reasoning as to why these social contracts are formed is based on a highly pessimistic view of humanity which neglects the social and caring aspects of man's nature.

Hobbes begins his exploration into the concept of the state of nature, and man in the state of nature, by declaring that, although some people are stronger and/or smarter than others, differences between them are not big enough to give the stronger or smarter any great advantage against the other¹. All people are essentially equal in

¹ Forrest E. Baird, ed., *Modern Philosophy*, 6th Ed., Vol. 3, (New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2011), 75

capability to harm one another because of this which means that in the state of nature, people are on a level playing field with one another from the outset. However, the individual man does not like to consider himself the equal of his peers instead preferring to consider himself to be more wise than all the other men he knows². Hobbes claims that this fact is even greater proof of man's equality to man because if "every man is contented with his share" of wisdom then it indicates that they are equal in it³.

Man is essentially equal in terms of physicality and mental ability; it is only when these equals enter into competition with one another that problems and strife begin to arise. Men are equal to one another in the hope of achieving their ends in life⁴, or the means of survival. When two men both desire the same thing, whether it is a banal possession or a biological need, they compete with one another and become enemies who "endeavor to destroy one another"⁵. This places all individual human beings in a position to be in constant fear of one another because they could, at any time, enter into competition with one another leading to one of the party's eventual injury.

Hobbes claims that there are three reasons why people fight one another. The first is because of competition. A man invades another man's property to take his possessions from him. The second reason is diffidence, which causes man to defend his own property or to invade another man's property preemptively out of fear that the second man will eventually invade out of competition. The third reason is for glory. Man will harm his fellow man because he feels that he will gain some sort of boon to his

² Ibid, 76

³ Ibid, 76

⁴ Ibid, 76

⁵ Ibid, 76

reputation by destroying another person and taking from him. This is the state of man without some greater “power to keep them quiet”.⁶

Man in this state “are in that condition which is called war” which is continual and causes fighting of “every man against every man”⁷. This state of war is not just violence and fighting itself, it is also the general mood of people in this time as they are, in this state, disposed to and constantly ready to fight one another for any of the three reasons Hobbes illustrated earlier⁸.

The life of man in this state of war is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” because in this time there is no room for “industry... no culture of the earth... no knowledge of the face of the earth...” and so forth⁹. This statement indicates that the state of nature and its constituent state of war is a hypothetical standpoint as, throughout the history of the world, there has been significant growth in these areas. Hobbes even says that he does not believe that the state of war has not been general all of the world, although there are places in the world, such as North America during his time, where the state of nature is in evidence¹⁰.

After describing the state of nature, Hobbes goes on to describe the Right of Nature and the Laws of Nature which lead man to the formation of a social contract. The Right of Nature is the freedom of man to do anything in his power to defend himself and preserve his own life and property. The First Law of Nature is “to seek peace and follow it” and “by all means we can, to defend ourselves”. The Second Law of Nature is that

⁶ Ibid, 76

⁷ Ibid, 76

⁸ Ibid, 76-77

⁹ Ibid, 77

¹⁰ Ibid, 77

man should set aside his Right of Nature as long as other men are willing to do so in order to keep the peace.¹¹ What this means, according to Hobbes, is that the best way for man to preserve his own life is to lay aside his “right” to harm his fellow man and defer this right to a governmental power which will keep them all in check¹².

Hobbes’ idea of man as nothing more than a savage animal neglects entirely facts of man’s condition which are counter to his claim. Man is more than just an animal scavenging for food, shelter, and self-preservation. Yes, man makes war and commits atrocities against his peers but man is also a creative force which makes art, forges relationships, and, most of all, is capable of unconditionally caring for others. Man does more than simply defend himself as an individual from harm. Human beings form bonds, families, and friendships even before coming to the conclusion that a complex social contract is necessary. Human beings are willing to lay down their lives in defense of those they have never met in their before in their lives without a shred of self-interest being considered in the equation.

The state of war is not the natural state of man. In fact, considering the history of the world, the total war as hypothesized by Hobbes is the exception rather than the rule. A time in which there is no industry, no growth in scientific knowledge, has never occurred, even in the “total warfare” of the early 20th Century. If we were to operate by Aristotle’s maxim that “man is by nature a political animal”¹³ (which is by far a much more positive outlook on man than Hobbes, and probably more correct), we would see

¹¹ Ibid, 78

¹² Ibid, 79

¹³ Mckeon, Richard, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, (New York, New York: Modern Library, 1941),

that the natural state of man is the formation of societies. These are the very same societies which Hobbes discounts as being based only on “natural lust”¹⁴

Hobbes’ state of nature is flawed even as a hypothetical situation of man prior to the formation of government because it is based on a half-true account of man’s nature. The kinship groups in North America, which Hobbes puts down as little more than savages, are proof enough. Human beings are capable of living in harmony with one another just as they are capable of killing one another. Hobbes only looks at one half of man’s nature, his violent and self-interested side, when, in fact, there is more to man than just survival instincts. Man is capable of both jealousy and compassion, healing and harming. This is what Hobbes leaves out in his hypothetical state of nature. Man does not form a social contract out of fear that if he does not he will exist in an anarchic state of fear of his fellow man. Man enters into a social contract because he is, by nature, compelled to be social and seeks to defend not only himself, but his circle of friends and family as well.

¹⁴ Baird, *Modern Philosophy*, 6th Ed., Vol. 3, 77

Work Cited

Baird, Forrestt E., Ed. *Modern Philosophy*. 6th Ed. Vol. 3. New Jersey: Pearson Education Inc., 2011

Mckeeon, Richard, ed. *The Basic Works of Aristotle*. New York, New York: Modern Library, 1941