

# Hobbes: Reason Leads to Peace

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Hobbes tells us that reason leads to conflict, and, ultimately, to a ubiquitous state of war. Paradoxically, reason also leads us to seek peace. Reason dictates that there are conditions under which it would be rational for us to renounce a certain sort of liberty that we have in the state of nature, that the prospect of our felicity might be improved.

## 1 The Right of Nature

Hobbes writes at XIV.1 that in the state of nature, each person may ‘use his own power... for the preservation of... his own life, and consequently of doing anything which, in his own judgment..., he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto.’ In other words, we have the right to self-preservation, and in particular, whatever we judge to be apt means to self-preservation.

This makes sense, intuitively —if there is something we desire enough to pursue, and nothing holding us back, then we will not pursue it?

## 2 Waiving the Right of Nature

As we saw, indulging the Right of Nature leads to a permanent state of war. Other things being equal, every person has two options in the state of nature:

1. Indulge in the Right of Nature.
2. Risk being plundered by those who choose option #1.

As option #2 is obviously not preferable to #1, people are rationally compelled to indulge in the Right of Nature and take what they need when they need it, without regard to consequences for others.

However, what if foregoing option #1 didn’t entail accepting option #2? If there was a way to bring about that state of affairs, we could avoid the state of war that otherwise inevitably results from each individual’s rationally justifiable pursuit of self-preservation.

The alternative possibility the Hobbes has in mind is that each person, of their own accord, *waive the Right of Nature*. So, either, it is rational for everyone to accept the Right of Nature, or for everyone to waive the Right of Nature. This collective choice is encapsulated in Hobbes's *Laws of Nature*. The first recognizes that we must choose between a collective state of peace, or of war:

Every man ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it, and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek and use all helps and advantages of war.

And the means to achieving the aforementioned peace are given by the second Law, which ascribes that

a man be willing, when other are so too, as far-forth as for peace and defence of himself he think it necessary, to lay down his right tall things, and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself.

The second Law proposes, in essence, that each person waive the Right of Nature as long as it is clear that other are willing to do the same for the sake of mutual benefit. This waiving of the Right of Nature is, for Hobbes, the seed of peaceful coexistence between people. Maintaining peace, however, will require a coercive power, the next step in Hobbes's social philosophy.