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Philosophy 303

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Hobbes’ State of Nature

Thomas Hobbes, in his “*Leviathan”,* makes the case for his idea of how a social contract may come about. He bases his argument on a concept he calls the “fundamental obligation”, that is what every rational person should worry about most. Further he expands this to how a reasonable person should be willing to give everything to keep a sovereign power in charge to avoid the decaying of society into a state of nature. Hobbes presents his idea of the state of nature, and outlines the ways that violence is exacerbated in that state of nature. In addition to the state of nature Hobbes also introduces the idea of a state of war. A state of war being a time in which a rational person has a legitimate fear of harm at any time. He expresses that all instances of a state of nature were also a start of war. In what follows, I will be explicating Hobbes’ defense of the claim that rational people should be willing to give anything to keep a sovereign power in power to avoid a state of nature. In addition I will explore a claim that he makes and show how it is not true.

Hobbes’ fundamental premise is what I will refer to as the fundamental obligation. This obligation is best summarized saying that every rational individual should be willing to do anything it takes to protect their life and property so they may continue their life. Hobbes also goes on to describe what he calls the state of nature and the state of war. The state of nature is what Hobbes calls the natural state of an area when there is no sovereign power in that area. Hobbes’ defines the state of war as any time in which an individual fears harm to their person or property at any given time.

To understand Hobbes' idea on how a social contract may be formed you must first understand his concept of the state of nature. Hobbes’ view on the state of nature is that it is a state all men are equal in the sense that even the weakest is capable of killing the strongest. This fact is important to the state of nature because later we will explore how Hobbes claims that the state of nature is necessarily a state of war as well. As a consequence of the fundamental obligation, in this state of nature, Hobbes’ claims that there are three was in which violence can come about.

The first reason is due to the competition between individuals over the finite amount of resources in any given area. The fundamental obligation of every individual would lead to people trying to obtain and control as many resources as possible. The more they have the better off it would seem they would be. When everyone has this mind set it will lead to tension and violence between them to secure their claim on resources.

The second reason stems from the diffidence between individuals, being that there is no way to tell what someone else is going to do the best course of action may be to act first. Like the first reason the fundamental obligation suggests that everyone would have this mind set thus causing this diffidence to lead to violence, deceit, trickery, and lying to protect peoples own lives.

The third reason is that people may do things to obtain glory and honor. Hobbes’ suggests that some people may choose to gain glory as a deterrent for others who may consider taking action against them. When glory and honor are involved and a person believes they may be able to gain more of it, it could lead them to act against others for this sake.

Hobbes’ states that in a state of nature theses causes of violence are unavoidable because there is no way to guarantee people that others will not take action against them. Hobbes continues by saying that in this state of nature and because of these causes of violence, individuals have a legitimate fear of harm to their life or property at any given time. Therefore, the state of nature is necessarily a state of war by definition. This conclusion is what Hobbes called “The Second Law of Nature”. He continues stating that every instance of a state of nature that has occurred was a state of war, giving example he calls into question the American Indians.

Hobbes takes all the above into consideration and forms this argument; because the fundamental obligation requires people to protect their lives combined with the equal vulnerability implies you cannot do this in a state of war, you should seek peace. Hobbes calls this conclusion   
“The First Law of Nature”.

With these two “Laws of Nature” in place and defended Hobbes takes to his final claim. Hobbes’ claims that if there is a sovereign power that is ruling, a rational individual should be willing to give everything (except for their own life) to keep the sovereign power in place. He claims that submitting to the rule of a sovereign power no matter the cost is preferable to decaying into a state of nature and consequently a state of war. Hobbes’ view has many implications on the ideas of property, fair governance, and moral authority.

Hobbes’ argument is very well structured and explored, but it is not flaw free. As part of his claim that all states of nature have also been states of war he cites the American Indians claiming that other than the local family there is no law (Cite Needed). While evidence will show that this claim is false it is also the responsible thing to do to mention that Hobbes may have not done this intentionally. He would have had little reliable information of the matter. It does not change the mistake but would be taken into consideration when analyzing his argument.

While there are multiple hundreds of tribes that existed t