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Philosophy 303

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Hobbes’ State of Nature

In “*Leviathan”* Thomas Hobbes explains his idea of how a society may form and the extent of a sovereign’s power as a result. Hobbes takes this topic on by first outlining some of the concepts that he uses to facilitate his arguments (e.g. the State of Nature, State of War, Right of Nature, etc.). He then presents a set of arguments that allow him to derive a pair of laws that explain what a rational person living in State of Nature should be willing to do to escape that state. Hobbes’ “laws” lead to the conclusion that a State of Nature is necessarily a State of War and as a result you ought to submit to a sovereign power who has absolute power over their domain. In what follows I will explicate Hobbes arguments and conclusions and give a criticism to those as well.

Before Hobbes takes to his arguments he takes the time to explain many of the concepts that are core to his arguments. The first concept goes to explain the basis upon which Hobbes builds his arguments; The State of Nature as it is called is what Hobbes claims is the natural state of an area that is outside the control of a sovereign power would be like. He describes this state as being such that all men are equal in that no one man can claim to have an advantage over the other both physically and mentally (*Leviathan*, 82). Hobbes also introduces the “Right of Nature” which I will refer to as the “fundamental obligation” which is described as men having an obligation to protect themselves and their property (by consequence) over anything else (*Leviathan*, 86)”. As a result of the fundamental obligation and the State of Nature Hobbes suggests that there are three principal causes of violence in the State of Nature (*Leviathan*, 83). The last concept that Hobbes presents is referred to as the State of War, being a state where one has a legitimate fear of harm coming upon their person or property at any time. Hobbes takes these concepts and presents his arguments from them.

Moving on past the framing of concepts, Hobbes takes to explaining his first argument, that in a State of Nature there are three principle causes of violence. 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 control the better their odds of survival. Since all men are equal and have the same obligation to themselves this will lead to violence of contested 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 one’s 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 (*Leviathan*, 84). Because of these reasons Hobbes make the conclusion that in a State of Nature violence is unavoidable because there is not power great enough to deter individuals acting against one another for their own gain, and by definition, this State of Nature is necessarily a State of War (*Leviathan*, 84).

Hobbes’ second argument is supposed to present evidence to support the claim that all instances of a State of Nature have also been instances of a State of War. Hobbes states that that people may that there was never a time in which the State of Nature or State of War existed for a range of several reasons. Hobbes concedes that while these states likely never took place worldwide, but states that they have and do indeed exist, giving the example of the “… savage people in many places of America… (*Leviathan*, 84)”. This is a point of contention and will be the subject of a criticism later. Hobbes’ continues the example claiming that except for the government of the family, there is no government at all (*Leviathan, 84*). Hobbes’ believes that this example shows that a State of Nature can exist between men and that it is indeed a State of War as well.

With the two arguments Hobbes presents he derives two “laws” of nature that explain how a sovereign power may obtain its power and the extent of them. The first of the two laws is presented by Hobbes with two premises; all men have their fundamental obligation to protect their own lives, and that in a State of Nature all men are equal in both vulnerability. Hobbes concludes that the best way to ensure one’s safety is to seek peace and follow it (*Leviathan*, 87). The second law follows from the fundamental obligation and the first law, stating that a man ought to seek and maintain peace, if others are willing, to the extent to relinquish his claim to “all things” and be content with the peace and safety from others (*Leviathan*, 87). From these two laws Hobbes expands his conclusion to all men ought to submit to a sovereign power who has absolute power over their domain. Hobbes does state that there is a single reason to resist the power of the sovereign is if they are directly attempting to take the life of that individual(*Leviathan*, 87).

With this conclusion Hobbes feels justified in stating that a sovereign has absolute power over all people within its control. All men are obligate by their fundamental obligation to submit to the command of that sovereign. By failing to comply with the commands given to them it could risk the society decaying into a State of Nature and consequently a State of War which would be an irrational thing to do if your primary obligation is to protect your own life.

As was noted about the claims made by Hobbes with respect to the American Indian tribes are far from the truth. Hobbes claimed that the “savages [Hobbes’ word]” lack any government outside of the family (*Leviathan*, 84). While there are multiple hundreds of different tribes of American Indians, we can show Hobbes generalized claim is false. Nearly every tribe had some form of government ranging from democratic process lead by groups of leaders to chiefdoms where individuals made all the choices for the group (DiNome). Taking the Mississippian peoples for example, they had a formal system of government with a single chief at the helm of the group. This style came to dominate the American Indian culture in the Southeast (of the present United States) (DiNome). In addition to this, there are examples of larger government systems; the Iroquois are a confederacy of multiple smaller tribes that came to function as a single nation when needed. The individual tribes who contributed to the confederacy would discuss decisions at the Grand Council of the Five (Later Six) Nations, which was ran with strict rules for voting depending on what was being discussed (Wagner, 242). The government was effectively a *de facto* consensus government (Morden).

While the above examples do not show that ever single tribe had some form of government it shows that plenty of the land in the Americas was controlled by these tribes that did have proper governments. While the invalidity of Hobbes claim cannot be denied I do not believe that it is sufficient to claim that his arguments are unsound. It should show that when making examples you must be sure to have enough information to base them on.

To recount, Hobbes outlined some concepts that be holds as true and applies them to his two arguments. That a State of Nature has unavoidable violence ergo it is a State of War, and that all instances of a State of Nature are necessarily a State of War. He then derives the first two laws of nature and concludes that men should seek peace and maintain it by submitting to the absolute power of a sovereign ruler.

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