

## RESEARCH

# A Critique of Hobbes's State of Nature

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In this essay, I analyze Hobbes's formulation of what a state of nature would be like and assess whether or not that formulation is compelling. In doing this, I review his three principal reasons for conflict within the state of nature. I argue that his mechanistic reduction of human behavior and motivation is over-generalized and focus on the emphasis he places on instrumental power. I then review his description of zero-sum mentality in relation to trust between individuals and attempt to articulate a phenomenology of trust that appreciates the complexity of human interactions. Finally, I assess the validity of Hobbes's claim that moral consensus would cease to exist in a state of nature in the absence of a state apparatus. I attempt to refute his reasoning by making an appeal to human empathy and its moral dimensions in relation to glory-seeking behavior that Hobbes stipulates.

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## 1. Introduction

Life in a state of nature, according to Hobbes, would be nothing less than a war of all against all where the life of an individual is "...solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (Hobbes, 1651; 2004, p. 77). In every way, this is a situation remedied by the establishment of civil society. At least, this is Hobbes's initiative, a justification for the marriage of security and political existence ruled by an all-powerful figurehead, a sovereign. This is Hobbes's notorious Leviathan. His philosophical project requires a psychological description of human beings that is conducive to a humanity that is sufficiently rational and capable of obeying the sovereign for the sake of peace (Piiirima, 2006, pp. 4). This conceptualization of humanity is neither fundamentally egoistic nor altruistic. It is effectively pluralistic in a way that reflects the heterogeneous environment of a state of nature whose atmosphere is saturated in adverse experiences and based on a principle uncertainty. It is a world necessarily inhabited by Hobbesian man whose moral existence, in the contractarian sense, is predicated on the authority of the state apparatus that is effectively illustrated by substantial penalties for violations of the social contract, of hierarchically imposed consensus, and intended harmony. Without this authority, individuals gravitate toward a state of perpetual conflict and depravity, endlessly fighting over resources whose scarcity is assured by diametric opposition between individuals. This is the presumed war of all born out of self-preservation.

In this essay, I will argue that Hobbes's state of nature is contingent on an over-generalized and mechanistic reduction of human behavior and motivation. I will consider the material and temporal constraints of our behaviors and the motivations behind them in light of their circumstantial quality. In particular, I will focus on the emphasis Hobbes places on instrumental power concerning competition within the state of nature. I will argue that he operates off a homogenous definition of instrumental power as it relates to his concept of felicity. In light of the complexity within the state of nature, a categorically heterogeneous conception of instrumental power is more suitable and better appreciates the depths of human agency. A phenomenology of trust will also be explored that appreciates the complexity of this agency in relation to diffidence. I will argue that Hobbes's concept of diffidence is contingent on a zero-sum mentality and fundamental reciprocity failure. I will attempt to refute these by demonstrating that they are ad hoc hypotheses arrived at by a mathematized methodology that Hobbes implements. I will then visit Hobbes's argument concerning the impossibility of moral consensus within the state of nature with regards to the phenomena of glory-seeking. I will demonstrate how the notion that moral consensus cannot happen in a state of nature, according to Hobbes, does not follow when one considers human sentiment and the innate empathetic capacity that informs human interactions. Now I will begin by considering Hobbes's first principal cause of conflict: competition.

## 2. Competition in Hobbes's State of Nature

Critics of Hobbes often accuse him of grossly oversimplifying the human psyche. This is, an appeal, no less, to a venerate description of the human mind that celebrates its irreducible complexity and indeterminate depth and potential. There is no room in this picture for beings wholly and reliably preoccupied with a continual struggle for existence in an egotistical fashion. However, Hobbes never intended to prove a presumption of human nature, but to provide a counterfactual justification for the state apparatus and a stable existence within political society (Piirimae, 2006, p. 4). The rhetorical emphasis he placed on the calamitous social and political dimensions of human behavior, often contingent on his materialism, usually dissuades readers from careful analysis of his constructive arguments (Browning, 2015, p. 17). His materialist description of human beings, which is described early on in his *Leviathan*, where he compares human organs to basic mechanical components, is a literary device that does just that (Wolff, 2016, p. 10).

Apart from his mechanistic materialism, however, his reduction of the felicitous motivations of human beings can be seen as problematic. He describes human behavior as a series of motions toward objects of desire at the risk of underestimating the remarkably complex and often unpredictable aspects of agentic capacities. Nevertheless, this reduction is a philosophical underpinning that informs the composition of conflict within his stipulated state of nature, particularly concerning competition and resource scarcity. He provides three principal reasons for conflict:

“So that in the nature of man, we find three principal causes of quarrell. First, Competition; Secondly, Diffidence; Thirdly, Glory. The first, maketh men invade for Gain; the second, for safety; and the Third, for Reputation” [*sic*] (Hobbes, 1651; 1991, p. 88).

While his critics often accuse him of oversimplification with his concept of felicity, the complexity and unpredictable quality of agency inform his stipulation of competition in the state of nature. Competition for scarce resources invariably occurs as a result of a willingness to “motion” toward desirable objects (Hobbes, 1651; 1991, pp. 37–38). Despite variable physicality, our innate and inescapable mortality has a remarkably equalizing effect. However, we rarely observe this equality and often make fictitious downward comparisons. We assume that we are better than most. The idea that we are vulnerable, can pale in comparison to our inflated sense of invincibility. This causes us to view objects of desire as obtainable, but when “... two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy, they become enemies,” and to obtain desired objects, they aim to “destroy, or subdue one another” [*sic*] (Hobbes, 1651; 2004, p. 76). As a result, conflict ensues because of this competition for limited resources. Malnes (1993), however, rightly asserts that general scarcity is not the only cause of competition according to Hobbes. For instance, he does not imply that resources would be insufficient if properly distributed, however, equalized distribution would be insufficient “for the satisfaction of everyone’s unceasing drive to increase one’s instrumental power” (Piirimae, 2006, p. 6). The instrumentality of power, as it relates to personal security and insatiable desires, is a coercive force in its own right.

The net result of principle scarcity and instrumental power is a description that Hobbes believes is emblematic of all human interactions in a state of nature. However, this is a continuation of his mechanistic reduction of human behavior in a generalized form, and his conception of instrumental power is categorically homogenous as it relates to objectified desire and felicity. He recognizes that people pursue both immediate and future gratification, but he does not navigate the full complexity of these two extremities concerning a categorically heterogeneous conception of instrumental power as it relates to variable object scarcity. For instance, consider water in a desert; it can serve to quench an immediate thirst and satisfy one later if it is stored. There is a temporality inextricably linked to the desired object observed by an agent on some conscious level. What if, however, the rainy season comes early and there are plentiful quantities of water? The decision to store water could be altered by this event. This decision concerning the object of desire, water, is circumstantial and related to the relevant material conditions. Two very clear constraints to objects becoming desirable are their temporality and materiality. The word “constraint” is not meant to suggest a limited capacity for decision making, but rather, to appreciate the multiplicity of the temporal and material dimensions agents are cognizant of. To treat competition over an object of desire as a given is misplaced. This is because the competition is circumstantially bound, and the instrumentality of agentic power (i.e., the ability to obtain desired objects) is not necessarily conducive to competition as it relates to changeable environments, which, for Hobbesian man, are necessarily social ones. After all, Hobbes demonstrates how political society emerging out of a state of nature is contingent on a “construction arising out of the problems inherent in social interaction” (Browning, 2015, p. 14). Although Hobbes would argue that variation exists between periods of moderate and absolute scarcity, this does not falsify the aforementioned points considering the existence of the variable, non-static quality of interactions between agents. We can see how Hobbes’s formulation of desire-driven behavior as inevitably leading to competition is not convincing because of the circumstantially determined basis for decision-making. The generalizability of his classification of human behavior is constrained by his homogenous conception of instrumental power. Furthermore, the varying levels of complexity of object scarcity and human behavior are better encapsulated by a categorically heterogeneous conception of instrumental power.

### 3. Zero-sum Mentality, Trust, and Diffidence

Hobbes reasoned that from within a state of nature, diffidence, or lack of mutual trust between agents, would be the second principal cause of conflict. According to Piirimae (2006), agents are cognizant of two mutually exclusive conditional aspects of their existence. They have an innate tendency to compete for power, and natural superiority is non-existent in this competition. This refers to the equalizing effect of mortality salience that we can recall from earlier. In Hobbes's words:

“the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himselfe” [*sic*] (Hobbes, 1651; 1991, p. 87).

An environment of mutual insecurity “drives people to attack one another by the logic of the situation” regardless of the discrepancy between actual and perceived motives (Ryan, 1996, p. 220). This situational logic, a rationale of insecurity stemming from fear, can be described as a zero-sum mentality, which refers to a persistent, and salient notion of one's gains equaling another's losses (Read, 1991, p. 506). The rationale operates off a behavioral profile of other agents—that they will attempt to compete for resources, and if need be, achieve this through violent means. How is it the case that from a zero-sum mentality we arrive at necessitated conflict? Hobbes reasoned that the reality of mutual distrust between agents within a state of nature suffices to justify anticipatory striking because it is mutually advantageous. We cannot be sure that another agent will be willing to partake in a peaceful affair if that agent feels that its life is in jeopardy. The uncertainty of events becomes a coercive conceptualization. Through anticipation of the actions of others, force is the most reasonable solution for obtaining resources (Hobbes, 1651; 2004, p. 76).

According to Kavka (1983), however, despite the appeal of anticipatory striking, Hobbes seems to ignore three consequential dangers. First, anticipatory striking leaves one open to a defensive attack. Second, one also risks identifying oneself to other potentially hostile agents. Third, even if one is successful and becomes considerably more powerful, one may become a more enticing target for glory seekers. The implications of these three dangers toward Hobbes's argument may seem damaging; however, contrary to Kavka's point, I would argue that Hobbes did not completely ignore these dangers. Instead, his postulation of death being among the worst evils and our innate extreme aversion to it deductively resulted in its own seemingly logical conclusion (i.e., an extreme fear of death can coerce us into taking extreme measures to avoid it). Hobbes did see, however, an intuitive method for avoiding this dilemma, which is the establishment of defensive coalitions (Kavka, 1983, p. 298). In effect, we are limited in our influence individually and matters “of control enter the discussion...for practical reasons: typically, the attainment of apparent goods depends on others” when our individual influence becomes incapable (Read, 1991, p. 508). There is a utility in the relationships we develop with other people when we find ourselves in a precarious position. The effectiveness of these coalitions, however, is significantly reduced by a fundamental problem of reciprocity failure. Even if a coalition develops out of mutual trust directed toward achieving a particular goal, there is no guarantee that group members will reciprocate. Hobbes argues that the possibility of an act of dissension from an agreement would be enough to destabilize and dissolve any contractual arrangement. From this, a war of all against all would ensue. For Hobbes, the only legitimate means of developing a stable, long-lasting contractual arrangement that prevents this is the implementation of a sovereign and subsequent state apparatus.

It is difficult to contest Hobbes's argument in this regard (i.e., the necessary existence of a sovereign and state apparatus) considering his aforementioned points concerning the fundamental problem of reciprocity failure. However, reciprocity failure is an ad hoc hypothesis considering that, without it, his claim that distrust makes the existence of a sovereign and state apparatus a necessity becomes somewhat doubtful. This is because he is making epistemological assumptions about human behavior that seem to be factual, not because they are, but because they need to be. Furthermore, a phenomenological perspective of trust with regards to the formation of defensive coalitions in a state of nature is more tenable with regards to sociality. Hobbes stipulates that individuals align with the state out of an awareness of its instrumentality, whereas Hegel, for instance, views the state as being “constitutive of individual identity” which includes social recognition as an individual develops a self-conscious identity (Browning, 2015, p. 5). Hegel's social constructionist perspective on the rational state is not entirely dissimilar from Hobbes's justification of the state but is considerably more flexible. This is not to suggest that theoretical flexibility is conducive to a necessarily correct argument, but that it is potentially symptomatic of one that lacks the rigidity that is seen in conclusions grounded on ad hoc premises. To clarify, consider that Hegel's dialectical perspective of human activity allows differentiated interpretations of reality, whereas Hobbes's materialism seems to deal with most social phenomena in an unchanging fashion (Browning, 2015, p. 5). Although Hobbes did not ignore the social dimensions of individuals, he reduces complex interactions in a way that resembles a mathematized methodology in his justification of political society (McNeilly, 1968, pp. 89–91). In effect, logical deductions stemming from axioms he generated, like the problem of reciprocity failure, for instance, led him to the necessary conclusions (McNeilly, 1968, pp. 180–191).

A phenomenological perspective of trust, as it relates to inter-subjectivity, is not going to view the development of defensive coalitional arrangements of any kind as contingent on zero-sum mentality in the Hobbesian sense. This is because of the centrality of a social context that it employs. Sociality, as it pertains to individuals immersed in the state of nature, is

a complex interaction, a multiplicity not subject to the certainty of a zero-sum mentality or the continuity in outcomes that Hobbes associates with it. Trust, in the Hobbesian sense, is homogeneous insofar as it reliably falters under the same stipulated conditions. Trust, in a phenomenological sense, is heterogeneous as it relates to the dynamic quality of an intersubjective process that is manifest as a social context specific to particular moments in time. In other words, trust between individuals is not a universal constant and is susceptible to change and often appropriated on a contextual basis. If trust were a universal constant then it would follow that a few dissenters could lead to the dissolution of trust between everyone, causing a war of all against all to ensue. One example of a social arrangement that requires trust is moral behavior, which is to say behavior grounded on moral principles. Hobbes argues, however, it is required that consensus as to what is considered moral behavior is achieved. If there is no consensus, a social contract cannot develop, and a war of all against all will ensue.

#### 4. Morality in a State of Nature and Glory Seeking

The third principal cause of conflict within the state of nature, according to Hobbes, is glory. In particular, the pursuit of reputation (Hobbes, 1651; 1991, p. 88). Glory-seeking, according to Hobbes, is "joy, arising from imagination of a man's own power and ability" (Hobbes, 1651; 1991, p. 42). Piirimae (2006), argues that while typical interpretations of Hobbesian glory-seeking illustrate agents that are characteristically natural aggressors, this is not correct. Hobbes states clearly, that while some individuals do enjoy acts of conquest, glory-seeking behavior more generally pertains to everyone as it relates to its instrumentality. Therefore, glory-seeking is not a behavior emanating from an insatiable desire for conflict or a natural proclivity for violence, but an understanding of its practicality. In part, this is a consequence of the precarious environment that is Hobbes's state of nature. That said, Hobbes also identifies defensive glory-seeking (i.e., glory for the sake of self-defense) as an equalizing force, much like mortality salience, within the state of nature because it prevents natural aggressors from becoming too numerous and powerful (Piirimae, 2006, p. 8). However, glory-seeking, insofar as it is a cause of conflict within Hobbes's state of nature, is a destabilizing force that impedes security both individually and in groups, like defensive coalitions. Glory-seeking for individually relevant reasons, like defense, at the expense of others can also generally be considered unethical behavior; however, within the specific context of Hobbes's state of nature, justice becomes nil. According to Hobbes, justice and injustice do not exist in a state of nature because the state apparatus is non-existent (Wolff, 2016, p. 14). Further, since there is no justice or injustice, we cannot arrive at morals because they would have no functional purpose (Wolff, 2016, p. 14). Morals, in this sense, refer to a consensus as to what qualifies as moral conduct. Instead, Hobbes believes prudential Laws of Nature would exist—the second one being, for instance, a negative formulation of the golden rule articulated in the Bible (Wolff, 2016, p. 14). It reads: "...be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself" [sic] (Hobbes, 1651; 2004, p. 80). How can one arrive at this negative formulation of the golden rule without a moral consensus? It seems tenable that a moral system is needed before being able to establish such a law. For instance, a liberty granted within a small group in a state of nature might be not having to worry about being harmed by a fellow group member. There must be agreement among group members that not respecting this liberty would be wrong. Otherwise, why forbid the practice? Oxley (2011), argues that empathy is often involved in moral deliberation. Dual perspective-taking empathy, for instance, is where one imagines oneself in another's situation and then considers what the other person must feel in that situation. Through this process, we arrive at considerations that inform our moral deliberations (Oxley, 2011, p. 24). Hobbes's suggestion that we can arrive at the Second Law of Nature in the absence of moral consensus seems unreasonable when we consider the empathetic process that would have to occur in its implementation. The Second Law of Nature necessarily involves dual perspective-taking because it involves considering another's position as well as our own and is a process of conscious moral deliberation.

One could argue, however, that empathy does not necessarily have to play a role in developing the second law because it is more of a pragmatic principle than it is a moral one. One may not have to partake in perspective-taking to conclude that one would rather not be harmed. Mortality salience is more of an intuition than it is a perspective for consideration and moral deliberation. The fact that the second law may be followed could be the result of an implicit agreement arrived at through mutual mortality salience, without deliberation. What this rebuttal points to is not the lack of a moral system, but rather, perhaps, explicit communication of moral principles. That said, moral behavior is reinforced by reciprocation and not always continual deliberation. Nonverbal communication in this instance is just as valid as verbal communication insofar as moral principles are implied by reciprocated behaviors among people within the group. Also, worth noting, it is not so much that one would have to engage in perspective-taking to develop an aversion for being harmed, but that sustaining group cohesion is significantly aided by the empathetic process when one considers the well-being of others. Returning to the Hobbesian phenomena of glory-seeking, it seems unlikely that prudential Natural Laws would develop in an environment that facilitates glory-seeking behavior in the absence of moral deliberation via empathetic considerations. Considering that the perspective-taking process is intertwined with the Second Natural Law, for instance, it becomes somewhat nonsensical to suggest the simultaneous existence of both glory-seeking and a negative derivation of the golden rule without moral consensus. Although, Hobbes would argue that they can exist at the same time since the ones doing the

glory-seeking are, in effect, dissenting from any contractual obligations that would prohibit this behavior. Nonetheless, it seems dubious to suggest that Natural Laws, like the second one, would ever develop in the first place.

## 5. Conclusion

In this essay, I have demonstrated how Hobbes's stipulation of what a state of nature would be like is contingent on an oversimplified and over-generalized mechanistic reduction of human behavior and motivation. I reviewed his concept of diffidence and how it relates to an expressed zero-sum mentality and fundamental reciprocity failure. Furthermore, I demonstrated how both zero-sum mentality and reciprocity failure are ad hoc hypotheses that lack substance beyond their deductive qualities which stem from Hobbes's mathematized methodology. I also visited his argument concerning the nonexistence of moral consensus in a state of nature and the simultaneous existence of glory-seeking behavior. I illustrated how moral consensus does play a role in the relationships between individuals in a state of nature. While I did not set out to disprove Hobbes's articulation of what a human state of nature would consist of entirely, it is clear that he paints a rather incomplete picture. Regarding the intended purpose of his arguments, which is a counterfactual justification for the state apparatus, I do believe it is fair to conclude that he did not successfully do this insofar as a substantial portion of his argument is derived from epistemological assumptions of human behavior that were not entirely warranted or were, at times, insufficiently supported.

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