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## “Nasty, Brutish, and Short”: Thomas Hobbes on Life in the State of Nature

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What would life be like without any government? Would it be a utopia, or would it be miserable?

The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) famously leaned in the latter direction. He argued in his book *Leviathan*<sup>[1]</sup> that, without government, life would be “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>[2]</sup>

This essay explains why he thinks this, and it presents his solution, which is to create a government with absolute power.

### 1. The State of Nature

Hobbes imagines what life would be like in the “state of nature,” a hypothetical world without governments.

Hobbes thinks all humans are equal when it comes to matters of survival. Nobody is powerful enough to be immune to attack. Even the weakest person can kill the strongest if there’s nobody around to stop them.<sup>[3]</sup>

In the state of nature, this equal ability to kill each other leads to mistrust. All of your belongings, and your life itself, might be taken at any moment, because there is no greater power to stop anyone from attacking you.

Some people would attack you because they need your resources to survive. Others would attack you because they want to be more powerful than everyone else. Even those who don’t need or want to attack you are a danger, because they can’t trust that you will leave them alone, so to be safe, they must attack you first.<sup>[4]</sup>

The end result is that the state of nature consists of a war of all against all.<sup>[5]</sup> You must constantly be ready to fight, even if you’d prefer not to, because the only way to ensure your safety is to go after others before they go after you.<sup>[6]</sup>

In this state of nature, projects like farming, manufacturing, science, and the arts are a waste of time, because there’s no guarantee you’ll enjoy the fruits of your labor. Someone can take it from you at any moment. Everyone lives in “continual fear and danger of violent death.”<sup>[7]</sup> It’s awful!

Hobbes says that if you doubt it would be so bad, think about how you act under your existing government. Even with the police just a phone call away, don’t you lock your doors when you sleep at night?

According to Hobbes, if you can’t trust your neighbors to leave you alone even when there are laws against theft and assault, imagine how much worse it would be if people were free to do *anything* they thought was necessary to survive in the state of nature.<sup>[8]</sup>

### 2. Hobbes’s Solution

If life in the state of nature would be intolerable, then what is the solution? To escape the state of nature, Hobbes proposes that it would be rational to establish a government.<sup>[9]</sup>

Hobbes thinks that humans are rational creatures, and we can all see that it would be better if we agreed not to rob from and murder each other.<sup>[10]</sup> But without a government, these agreements will fall apart, because there’s nobody to ensure that all parties stick to the deal. In the state of nature, agreements “are but words.”<sup>[11]</sup>

To secure peace, we will need to form a government that is strong enough to enforce these agreements, says Hobbes. We do this by forming a special sort of contract or agreement with each other.

The contract Hobbes imagines goes like this: if everyone else agrees to obey some sovereign ruler, you too will obey that sovereign.<sup>[12]</sup>

This creates a government ruled by a sovereign that we have all agreed to obey. The sovereign will make and enforce laws. Chaos will be replaced with order.<sup>[13]</sup>

According to Hobbes, the state of nature is so terrible that any sovereign will do, as long as it can protect you.<sup>[14]</sup> You must obey the sovereign whether it is a

king, an aristocracy, or a democracy, even if the sovereign passes oppressive laws that you dislike.<sup>[15]</sup> Even under an oppressive sovereign there can be trade, and art, and industry, and you won't have to worry that your neighbor will murder you.

In order to keep the peace, Hobbes thinks the sovereign must have power over *everything*: the army, the treasury, the judiciary, what's taught in schools, and anything else that it needs to prevent the state of nature.<sup>[16]</sup>

Hobbes thinks that these powers are all linked together: if the sovereign doesn't control the army, it's no use to control the judiciary, because they can't enforce the laws. If they don't control the money, they can't pay the army. If they don't control the schools, people will be taught false things that will cause them to rebel.<sup>[17]</sup>

### 3. Hobbes's Legacy

Hobbes's theory defends the right of rulers to do anything, and leaves little space for citizens to object. Unless the sovereign is not powerful enough to protect us from the state of nature, we have a duty to obey completely.

This means that Hobbes's views are very deferential to government authority. Indeed, Hobbes wanted to defend the English government of his time against rebellion. For this reason, most contemporary philosophers disagree with Hobbes's overall theory.

But Hobbes also planted the seeds of what was, at the time, a very revolutionary approach to government. Indeed, one of Hobbes's contemporaries accused the *Leviathan* of being a "rebel's catechism"—a book that would teach people to rebel.<sup>[18]</sup>

Hobbes's views were revolutionary because he sees the sovereign as created by equal individuals, each acting freely and rationally in their own self-interest. Sovereigns, according to Hobbes, are not appointed by god, nor is anyone naturally suited to rule over the rest.

Hobbes argues that sovereigns are created by the people for their sake, and the only reason the people should obey is that the sovereign keeps them safe. If the sovereign doesn't defend your life, you are justified in rebelling.<sup>[19]</sup>

The ideas that the government must justify its power over its citizens in terms that are good for them, and that only consent of the governed justifies governmental authority, were revolutionary at

Hobbes's time, and many still find them compelling today.

### Notes

[1] The title of the book comes from the name of a powerful sea creature mentioned in parts of the Hebrew Bible (e.g., Isaiah 27:1; Job 41:1). Hobbes picked the title because it is a provocative, irreverent way to describe the government: like the leviathan, the government is very powerful. See Hobbes, *Leviathan* XVII.13.

[2] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIII.9

[3] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIII.1-2

[4] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIII.3; XIII.5-7. See [The Prisoner's Dilemma](#) by Jason Wyckoff for another example of how rational people might end up in conflict even when cooperation would be better for everyone.

[5] Hobbes, *Leviathan* pg. 77

[6] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIII.4; XIII.8

[7] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIII.9

[8] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIII.10

[9] For discussion of the idea that it is rational to establish governments to escape the state of nature, see [Social Contract Theory](#) by David Antonini.

[10] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIII.14; XIV-V

[11] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XVII.2

[12] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XVII.13

[13] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XVII

[14] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XVIII.20

[15] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XIX.1-2

[16] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XVIII

[17] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XVIII.16

[18] Bramhall, *Castigations of Mr. Hobbes his last animadversions in the case concerning liberty and universal necessity wherein all his exceptions about that controversie are fully satisfied* 515

[19] Hobbes, *Leviathan* XXI.2

### References

John Bramhall, *Castigations of Mr. Hobbes his last animadversions in the case concerning liberty and universal necessity wherein all his exceptions about*

*that controversie are fully satisfied* (London: Printed by E.T. for J. Crook, 1657)

Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan with selected variants from the Latin edition of 1668*, ed. Edwin Curley (Hackett, 1994)

### **Related Essays**

[Social Contract Theory](#) by David Antonini

[The Prisoner's Dilemma](#) by Jason Wyckoff

[Ethical Egoism](#) by Nathan Nobis

[Reparations for Historic Injustice](#) by Joseph Frigault

[Plato's Crito: When should we break the law?](#) by Spencer Case

[How to Establish Social Order? Three Early Chinese Answers](#) by Henrique Schneider

### **For Further Reading and Viewing**

Lloyd, Sharon A. and Susanne Sreedhar, "Hobbes's Moral and Political Philosophy", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2020 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2020/entries/hobbes-moral/>.

12. The Sovereign State: Hobbes' Leviathan by Steven B. Smith (Youtube)

13. The Sovereign State: Hobbes' Leviathan by Steven B. Smith (Youtube)

14. The Sovereign State: Hobbes' Leviathan by Steven B. Smith (Youtube)

### **About the Author**

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