



## Review

# Repositioning Thomas Hobbes's State of Nature as Grounded in Leviathan (1968)

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Abstract

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This paper centers on the contributions and legacies of Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* to political philosophy and contemporary discourses. It addresses issues concerning the pre-social and/or political situations experienced by mankind in the state of nature. Hobbes's version of a pre-socio political life is considered as short-lived, since it is characterized by pride, brutality, and anti-sociality, which contribute in disconnecting man from nature and affecting other fellow humans adversely. Persuasions and facts portrayed by proponents of the state of nature such as Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, among others, constitute tenable features of political philosophy. Using a Hobbesian approach, it thoroughly scrutinizes man's nature in the natural state, coupled with an exposure of the existential conditions prior to the establishment of a commonwealth or political society based on a social contract.

**Keywords:** History, Hobbes, Political Philosophy, Social Contract, State of Nature.

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## INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, many thinkers have been expressing diverse and opposing grounds and interpretations about the guarantee and possibility of a smooth covenant deriving its source from the state of nature (Oakeshott *et al.*, 1947). Worth noting here is the necessity to take into account the real understanding of the term "state of nature", before revisiting certain specific and more relevant Hobbesian conceptions of the term. The pre-social situation, otherwise, referred to as state of nature could be considered as being synonymous to "raw materials" required for the construction and completion of a political community through the appeal for a social contract or agreement among people. Revisiting the state of nature is necessary, given that, it is regarded as the bedrock of facts and catalyst of political principles and theories of the seventeenth century, not leaving out the twenty first century.

In this paper, I emphatically admit that, addressing the existing proofs and facts as they appear could possibly guarantee the belief in the view that such a state might have actually existed and could still exist, especially based on the principle of "*ex nihilo, nihil fit*" (out of

nothing, nothing comes). Therefore, a proper clue for understanding Hobbes's state of nature requires both descriptive and prescriptive techniques. For instance, on one hand, if man deems it necessary to combine nature with goodness, then, his goal will be focused on the formation of a particular system which prioritizes the preservation and improvement of man's natural situation. On the other hand, if man notices that nature influences him negatively, it follows that, and artificial reality is incumbent in avoiding the possibility of re-experiencing the state of nature. The evocation of a state of nature by political thinkers such as Hobbes and Locke reveals the relations between things and humans as they existed before, as well as providing more tenable grounds of how things ought to be in a political society. Political society here refers to an artificial human invention which can either upgrade or subdue natural entities. Hobbes presents a negative experience of mankind in a state of nature hereby, indirectly appeals for vital informative guidelines to the acquisition of human needs using artificial methods. Consequently, the importance of sociability is well emphasized.

### **Clarifying and Reclassifying Hobbes's State of Nature**

A state of nature is not merely limited to the description of a particular situation, given that it equally uncovers certain prescriptions to ensure coherence and aspire to attain a political society. For instance, it can be illustrated that, based on conditions determined by A, B, and C, the particular form of government to be adopted should be X, Y, and Z. This normative technique which should be borne in mind is justifiable within this context involving human nature experience in a state of nature, coupled with meeting up with the conditions for a political society. Worth pointing out is that, the desire and determination to either X, Y, or Z does not dominate the intention to provide a clear interpretation and picture of A, B, and C. However, Hobbes's intention of propagating a state of nature was meant to approve of and boost his political ideas, as well as to enhance his governmental aspirations, though he was unable to scientifically justify his propositions through factual basis (Macpherson et al., 1962). So, advocating for a state of nature, at least, was mainly to establish a connection between his political ambitious and intensify his proposals. In other words, due to a prior commitment to political choices involving X, Y, and Z, man's natural situation is instead presented based on A, B, and C.

Contrastingly, Hobbes's appeal to the state of nature is significant in easing the identification and demonstration of the origins of the idea of a political society (State), as well as revealing the causes of the downfall of political societies. From this perspective, the status of his scientific and political concerns signals a reflection of the ever-present ongoing characteristics of well-organized political communities, since it's a catalyst to the day by day running of state affairs. It is necessary to underscore that, the *Leviathan*, being a typically political tract, was written with the intentional objective of convincing readers through the use of some aspects of the scientific method like the demonstration of certain truths. Regrettably, the major threat presented centers on the temptation to "persuade" others which might discriminate upon the justification and choice of specific truths. Therefore, in order to ease understanding of the state of nature and render political proposals justifiable, it is firmly advisable to dig out all the facts, including their logical implications beyond the version of *Leviathan*.

That notwithstanding, Hobbes's text also manifests evidences of both normative and persuasive impressions with emphasis on the opposition of forms of government like anarchy, though he strongly approves undivided rule of the monarchical system. Moreover, his rationale for voluntarily leaving out clarity and chronology of what was intended, directed his political thought towards a more valuable ground being the burning desire to show the logical importance of a social contract, added to the unavoidable significance of its evolution.

### **Aspirations and Recommendations for a more Successful Social Contract**

The realization of a more effective social contract mostly depends on the presentation of a rigorous, descriptive, and demonstrative analysis of man's state of nature as portrayed in the pre-social context. This approach is very vital in rendering the birth and growth of the social morally valuable and easily applicable. Here, taking into account the foundations of a pre-social and moral setting enables the formation of various human obligations, rights, and duties, considered to be morally grounded, comprehensible, and salutary in acquiring a smooth and effective socio-political contract. To add, in order to render *Leviathan*, an exemplary political tract in terms of its merits and successes, the state of nature examined in the text ought to serve as a warning signal to all those who disbelieve Hobbes's vision of political philosophy.

Nevertheless, since it is stated that the state of nature comprises of at least two dimensions, that is, scientific and political, it is therefore firmly recommended to either exclude one of these aspects, or pinpoint other aspects of interests in the text prioritizing scientific tenets similar to those revealed in Hobbes's *Elements of Philosophy* (1656). Emphatically, the varied relevance of Hobbes's *Leviathan* cannot be underrated as a source of peace exhortation and reflection of the realities of its era characterized by revolutions, strife, wars, persecutions, just to cite these few, as Taylor (1938) confirms in the following lines: "The *Leviathan* is far the most readable and amusing of his works, and it was written in a time of revolution and unsettlement as a persuasive to cessation from fruitless civil strife. For its immediate purpose, as an exhortation to peace, it was right and proper that the author should develop the contention that peace is the real interest of his fellow countrymen as persuasively as he could; its not surprising, therefore, that he attains dimensions in his book as to give the impression that it is all or really all, that he has to say" (p. 406).

### **The Rationale for Contextualizing Hobbes's *Leviathan*: Discussion**

Following analyses above, the importance of interweaving a text with its historical contexts or realities cannot be overemphasized. Although Hobbes, like some other social contract theorists did not openly portray concern by linking his text to the historical atmosphere of his time, the *Leviathan* unavoidably depicts the realities of seventeenth century England in which he lived and was part of. Therefore, based on the dictum "for every text, there is a context", just as in this case, no text can be profitable or considered to be better read without appealing to its historical setting into which it was conceived and written. Moreover, the context of a text is not only limited to the historical or the era during which it

originated, but equally includes the traditions, customs, and debates of the past, present, and subsequent influences and relevance, thanks to the illuminating legacies of specific texts. For instance, if the author of a particular text is specialized in both philosophy (philosopher) and Pamphlets (pamphleteer), then the reader ought to be a “historical and a philosophical commentator” (Cranston, 1986).

Furthermore, another insistence on the value of historical considerations of texts is strongly supported by Skinner (1966) who believes that, “...where such a framework is lacking the classical text itself may be understood by philosophers in ways that are historically absurd, the aim has been to show that the historian’s task of understanding climates of opinion is not disconnected from the philosophers attempt to interpret texts. It is still for the historian to point out that even the philosophers most plausible interpretations must still be tested, and might even have to be abandoned, in the light of historical evidence” (pp. 286, 387). Consequently, denying the value derived from historical framework is foolhardy and tantamount to advocating for timelessness which Hobbes tries to achieve in this case (Farsides, 1988, p.233-239). Lastly, it is worth adding that, the contextual evidences guarantee and justify judgments, merits, as well as transmits an author’s intention to a greater extent as advanced by Pocock (1970) and Dunn (1980). Moreover, *Leviathan* as apolitical philosophy text, reflects more than the tracts of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This immense contribution of Hobbes justifies its context, thereby impacting subsequent eras remarkably, thanks to the illuminating ideas which are still relevant to contemporary societies as Warrender (1979) admits: “Hobbes, more than most has preserved his relevance and justified his own claim to be regarded as writing for all times” (p. 939).

## CONCLUSION

Based on evidences in this paper, Hobbes’s *Leviathan* is dualistic in nature since it comprises aspects of both political philosophy and the scientific methods of inquiry especially demonstration. Irrespective of its philosophical, political, and scientific framework, the content or subject matter could be still being considered good or bad from any angle. Generally, the success of a text at all times and for all eras, depends on the merging of all aspects (holistic) especially by focusing more on its inherent coherence and philosophical judgment. This signals the painstaking intention of Hobbes to adopt a scientific method in politics through the use of proofs and persuasion. Nonetheless, it is worth advising that, Hobbes’s state of nature should not be opened to historical assessment and exactness as supported by Nozick (1974) who holds that, a state of nature should simply be understood as “a fundamental potential

explanation” (p. 8), and concluding that, “A theory of a state of nature that begins with fundamental general descriptions of morally permissible and impermissible actions, and of deeply based reasons why some people violate these moral constraints, and goes on to describe how a state would arise from that state of nature will serve our explanatory purposes, even if no actual state ever arose that way” (p. 7).

Nonetheless, the domination of a persuasive influence when addressing the state of nature presents a huge risk over the descriptive termed as fragile, subdued and illusory. A typical example of evocative, emotive, and persuasive picture of political philosophy as painted by Hobbes, is evident as he portrays the natural human state as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes, 1968, Chapter 3, p. 186), leaving the reader with much emotive impressions which might prevent him from questioning the basis and rules from which such a version derives. Finally, Hobbes is more focused on causes, though he paints a terrifying picture of man in a state of nature, indirectly reminding us to trace the causes as believed by Green (1941), Hampton (1986) and Hart (1958).

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