

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN NATURE IN THE STATE OF NATURE

DR. ASHOKA KUMAR TARAI
School of Philosophy
GangadharMeher University
Odisha, India
Email: ashoktarai@gmail.com

RAJASHREE NAYAK
Department of Philosophy
Ravenshaw University
Odisha, India

Abstract

'State of Nature' is a well-known and provocative embellishing idea about both situating social contract theory and idealizing human nature. There have been serious attempts by many contract theorists to analyze the exact nature of the idea. The very fundamental question that worries regarding the idea of the state of nature is the historicity of the idea. Rousseau thinks that the civil state itself has emerged out of the primitive condition or what we say the state of nature. Hence, he feels it is necessary to go back and dig down to the root. This paper discusses contract philosophers' interpretations on the idea of the state of nature which comprises various differing views. The debate has been very significant because of the belief that the state of nature has made the way to establish a political society. However, the abstractness of the idea formulates it as the subject of disagreements. The disagreements consolidate around the assumptions of contractual thinkers about the state of nature as well as the later attempts to interrogate those very ideas in terms of their empirical reality and ideological presuppositions. Thus, the paper is an attempt to show a brief analysis of the idea of the state of nature and the very basis of the disagreements.

Keywords: Human Nature, Social Contract, Amorality, Immorality and Morality

Reference to this paper
should be made as follows:

Received:
Approved:

DR. ASHOKA KUMAR TARAI
RAJASHREE NAYAK

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OF NATURE

RJPSSs 2021, Vol. XLVII,
No. 1, pp. 085-097
Article No.12

Online available at:

<http://rjpss.anubooks.com>
<https://doi.org/10.31995/rjpss.2020147i01.12>

Introduction

Defining the state of nature in simple terms, a hypothetical condition of humanity before the foundation of the state, which means, to imagine the human society as it was before the political state. The question is what is life like in such conditions and then how and why there would have been a transition from that state. There can be at least two senses referring to the meaning of the idea of the state of nature, which may be termed as hypothetical and historical, the earlier one carries a philosophical significance, whereas the latter one seeks for an empirical study. The major criticism against the idea of the state of nature has been that the contract philosophers have posited it hypothetically. Durkheim has pointed out, “the term might indeed suggest a historical period at the beginning of human development”. (Durkheim 1960: 66) But the social contract theorists never bother about the historical accuracy and the anthropological investigation of the same. Rousseau in particular says it is a state which exists no longer, which perhaps never existed, which probably never will exist. (Betts 1994) While disregarding factual legitimacy, contract philosophers have viewed it hypothetically. Thus, Durkheim claims, all investigation of the matter should be taken not as historical truths but as hypothetical or conditional speculation. The point here is not to locate the state of nature as such but to find out a conceptual clarity about the same. However, within the domain of theoretical expression of the idea of the state of nature, there are many divergences among the contract philosophers about the concept itself and the relation to human nature. We shall discuss Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Rawls which may throw light on the above-mentioned controversies and the distinctness of Rousseau’s understanding of the state of nature.

Hobbes

Hobbes’s idea on the state of nature is otherwise known as “the war of all against all” and in such a state man’s condition is most unfortunate and deplorable. Human beings in the state of nature would behave ghastly towards one another. Hobbes’s idea of the state of nature, according to Geodesky is indebted to Judaic Christian mythology of the ‘fall of man’ e.g. root of all evil and the inherent sinfulness of humanity. His stand on the idea of the state of nature takes a religious turn. It is also admitted that the “doctrine of war of all against all was only an application of the current theological doctrine of the religious ‘state of nature’ to political philosophy. By mere nature men were irreligious; so, by mere nature, Hobbes regarded them as apolitical”. (Merriam 1906: 153) Thus, Hobbes’s idea of the state of nature was apolitical as well as irreligious according to Merriam. The state of war has primarily appeared in the field of theology and Merriam believes Hobbes has taken it up into

political philosophy. The point here is very much clear that taking Godeskey's claim as well as Merriam that Hobbesian idea of the state of nature has certain religious influence, no matter whether Hobbes's idea is primary or secondary.

The argument that Hobbes gives for assuming the state of nature is merely a state of war, has a valid ground too. It should be clear that the war of all against all, does not necessarily illustrate that everyone keeps fighting with everyone but there is so little security of life and they all live in a state of constant fear. Therefore, Hall describes Hobbes's argument for saying the state of nature as a state of war, how man would behave in the absence of political authority, together with the material consequence of this behavior, such that the life of a man would be solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short. (Hall 1973: 24) Thus, human life in the state of nature was in a mechanistic model, that is, everyone wanted to fulfill his/her physical needs through brutality. Everyone was self-centered with animal-like behavior; however, that selfishness was natural to them. What he perhaps means is that it was the desire of human life like physical needs, either for food or sex, that caused all the war, though these desires were very limited in number.

The details of Hobbes's assumption, that the state of nature is a state of war constructs a debate in political philosophy. The argument which makes his stand tough is put forth by Gregory S. Kavka. According to him, the conflict is due to the human desires which again are natural to them and that desire becomes multiple in the sense the desiring object is limited but those who desire it are many that are because the same object is being desired by many people. Thus, those desires are unable to be satisfied. The particular desiring object can have different people's attention. Therefore, the objectives are sometimes bound to clash with those of the people who have the same objectives. Thus, the fighting gets started among the people. Those who think of the future with a minimal sense of rationality can conflict with their particular aspirations. The assumptions made by Hobbes are quite reasonable and realistic and his construction looks very elegant and shrewd for the idea of the state of nature as being named as the state of war. (Kavka 1983)

Hobbes's impression of human nature is that the state of nature is often being taken as very pessimistic. Unlike other contract philosophers, he is the one who maintains that the state of nature is a war of every man against every man. In other words, human being by nature is solitary, poor, nasty and brutish which leads to an inequality state. Thus, human life is unsocial and pugnacious. Hobbes's view is different from Aristotle's. Aristotle considers natural human life as completely social and political which contradicts Hobbes. There have been critics like AndrzejRapaczynski who claim Hobbes's idea on human nature is no less different

from animals. The point here is to notice that human beings because of their wild nature were close to animals. Rapaczynski says,

“It is time for us to consider those aspects of Hobbes theory of man in which he presents his substantive views of human nature (as distinct from the nature of animals and physical bodies) and, by characterizing the pre-social condition of man, sets the stage for his properly political theory. Several important characteristics that have traditionally been used to distinguish humans from animals Hobbes specifically discounts as either common to many kinds of organisms (sometimes even to all things in existence) or empty and meaningless. In particular, he discounts all those features that were supposed to capture the uniqueness of human nature by ascribing to man and man alone, the ability to act freely and escape the necessity of mechanical determination”. (Rapaczynski 1987: 41-2)

The self-conscious nature of human beings makes them different from animals. However, this is the minimum difference between human nature and animal nature that has not been emphasized in Hobbes’s account. The moral condition of humans in the state of nature, for Hobbes, is less clear though it seems fair to say that they have no moral rights and obligations at all. They are, thus, considered to be immoral than amoral.

Hobbes’s emphasis on the animality of human nature, by his very connotation ‘war of all against all’, discounts the moral consciousness of individuals in their action. It disregards an internalized order of action in the state of nature for which Hobbes is very much pessimistic. When Hobbes attributes responsibility to the sovereign power for the protection of the vulnerable, it is only because of the absence of rights in a wild atmosphere. One must look forward to Locke, another contractual philosopher, to find out the progress he makes in his understanding of the state of nature and the causality (within his understanding of the state of nature itself) he brings for the existence of government.

Locke

At the outset, there is not much difference between Hobbes and Locke on the idea of the state of nature. The idea of the state of nature as understood by Locke is an apolitical situation where no one is entitled to settle controversies between two persons and also there is no authorized umpire to judge between them. (Simmons 1989) Unlike Hobbes, Locke believes that the state of nature is a state of goodwill and man in the state of nature is a rational and social creature and as such capable of recognizing and living in a moral order, but lacks effective enforcement of justice. Like other political thinkers, Locke emphasized the political meaning of the

state of nature. He claims that the concept of the state of nature can't be regarded as having any significant connection with or dependency upon any empirical references, hence it is ahistorical.

The difference between Hobbes and Locke is that Hobbes's idea was influenced by theology as was claimed earlier by Merriam that it is also called a borrowed idea from the field of theology. In this context, John Dunn reads,

“The state of nature, then, that ‘state men are naturally in’, is not asocial nor is it psychologically or logically before society. It is neither a piece of Philosophical anthropology nor a piece of conjectural history. Indeed, it has no transitive empirical content whatsoever. For empirical specification, in Locke's conception, was in itself contamination of history and the analytical function of the concept lay precisely in its historicity. In itself, it is simply an axiom of theology. It sets human beings in the theology of divine purposes”. (Dunn 1969: 103) The reason why Locke takes it as an aspect of theology is much clear and convincing. The state of nature, then, is a jural condition and the law which covers it is the theologically based law of nature. It is a state of equality and freedom since it is a natural law. (Dunn 1969)

So, the natural law which is given to human beings in the state of nature maintains the order which was lacking in Hobbes's model of state of nature among individuals and this order does not lead them to the state of war rather it leads to having moral status. Thus, Locke has postulated that there is a law of nature and that individuals are naturally capable of obeying it. But just as the concept of law without a lawmaker is impossible which refers that Locke holds the lawmaker as to be God. By looking into Locke's idea of the state of nature, one can profoundly say that it has certain theological significance. However, his argument goes against Hobbes that the state of nature can't be a state of war is only because of his firm belief that there is a natural law that does not allow human beings to fight with each other. Moreover, Locke's belief seems problematic. It is problematic because there is no rational justification for establishing so-called natural law in the state of nature. The above issue on natural law theory has been discussed by Richard Ashcraft who assumes that Locke's imposition of natural law is quite rhetorical than philosophical. So, he claims,

“Here Locke's argument moves on to the rougher ground, for he must designate some definite means whereby natural law is- not merely hypothetically, but enforced in the state of nature. If he does not do so, then the existential link between God and man is broken, and the entire government becomes merely an analytical construct in Locke's mind. But if as Locke believes, he is describing the natural condition of man as created by

God and in terms of His purposes, then the reality of that description requires that human beings realize those purposes in the state of nature". (Ashcraft 1987: 105)

The natural law which had to be acted upon by individuals can't be like their choices. It is because if it becomes their choice then it remains no more natural. And if the position of natural law is something hypothetical then there would be a big problem regarding the existence of God. Because natural law is something as Locke considers the created by God. However, taking Locke's argument forward, the presupposition of natural law presupposes the existence of God. But if the natural law system is either an alternative or becomes a choice for individuals then there is no relation between man and God. Thus, Locke confronts the problem as Ashcraft has viewed boldly by placing the power of enforcement of natural law in the hands of the individual. The problem of natural law theory which can't be either choice for human beings or hypothetical is somehow moved away. However, Locke did not mention for what reason he believes in the enforcement of natural law.

About the meaning of the state of nature, Locke is a bit stretchy than Hobbes. The latter does not concede the presence of morality in the state of nature. Since he thinks, individuals in the state of nature are nasty, brutish and poor. However, Locke claims that the state of nature has certain moral standards which are articulated by natural law. Locke's explanation of the state of nature theory has a higher standard of moral basis. His presupposition on human nature certainly contradicts his predecessor. He also claims that individuals are assumed to have perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit. Since it is a natural law that is perfectly set by God in the state of nature takes care of everything, Locke assumes that man in the state of nature enjoyed perfect freedom. It seems both Hobbes and Locke have taken the thread of religiosity on the idea of the state of nature. However, Hobbes perhaps was influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition which shows the negative aspect of human nature but Locke was very positive in viewing human nature in the state of nature.

Locke considers man in the state of nature has a communitarian life which is in contrast to Hobbes's view that man in the state of nature is solitary. Though this community is natural or a community of nature, in the sense it is not social. Hence nobody rules the whole community; it is all individuals who enjoy their freedom and common equity which is perfectly set by god. Keeping all these things in mind that everything is well set by god, it does not necessarily mean that Locke claims that the state of nature is a condition of peace and safety. Both the state of war and the legitimate polity are the product of human actions; one is the outcome of human

wickedness and another is the intelligence of social human beings. However, Locke's position of the state of nature does not allow both of them.

While talking about a human relationship in the state of nature, Locke had in mind the idea of moral purposes. As we know the natural sense of community has already existed and that community is designed by God for mankind as Locke considers. However, this natural society is distinguishable from political society, in the sense, the former is lacking civil established law and there is no common man's authority in the state of nature. The most important social unit happens to be the state of nature is because of the force of sexual desire which is a voluntary action.

Locke explains the state of nature as a state of equality and freedom. But he disagrees with it as a state of license but neither amoral nor immoral. The license can only be entertained in an organized political society but not in the state of nature. Locke claims that men are equal in the state of nature because they share a normative order, the order of creation which is divine.

Dunn explains it as any relationship between any men which is not modified by particular acts of direct aggression or by the particular explicit reciprocal normative understandings which institute a shared political society. Moreover, the ahistoricity of the state of nature gives a peculiar combination of creativity and abstraction. Therefore, he says, "to understand the state of nature correctly it is necessary to think history away; but to apply it in discussing any concrete human issue, it is necessary to allow the return of history in the simple delineation of the issue to be discussed". (Dunn 1969: 112)

Comparing to Hobbes, Locke's idea of the state of nature is neither the state of war nor a properly political condition. The agreement between Hobbes and Locke about the idea of the state of nature is that things would be bad in the state of nature. However, the difference lies when they both talk about natural right, for Hobbes there is no such right in the state of nature, but Locke argues for natural right as it was there. Moreover, to secure means to re-find it in the name of the political right, governments are instituted among men. The rights which were enjoyed in the state of nature are considered to be invalid. It is invalid because there is no such political foundation for it. Hobbes talks about human life the way they do or would behave in the absence of political authority and by instituting a legal political society, there would be an end of that war. He here poses a new political institution. However, Locke on the other hand talks about the rights of individuals which have to be reformed in political society.

What one can infer here is that though both Hobbes and Locke agree about the vulnerabilities in the state of nature, however, Locke looks at it differently. He is

optimistic about the existence of right and wrong although he says justice is not well enforced. To him, the purpose of a government is to more effectively institute justice. Rousseau differs with both Hobbes and Locke about the state of nature in his concept of 'noble savage'.

Rousseau

Rousseau later challenged the idea of Hobbes by viewing man in the state of nature as good and noble. He claims that Hobbes fails to recognize natural human mercy and compassion. The conflicting views of Rousseau and Hobbes have a certain significance on political philosophy. However, Rousseau seems to be the champion amongst contractualists by giving much importance to the concept of freedom and equality. His argument for considering man in the state of nature as they are good and noble savage is convincing. This is clear from Durkheim's statement,

"Our natural man can desire only the things to be found in his immediate physical environment, for he can't imagine any other. Hence, his desires will be purely physical and extremely simple. His desires do not go beyond his physical needs; in all the universe the only desirable things he knows are food, a female, and rest. He does not even worry about ensuring the satisfaction of his future appetites. His purely sensory knowledge does not enable him to anticipate the future; he thinks of nothing beyond the present. His plans extend barely to the end of the day. But such needs are easily satisfied. Nature has provided for them. It is very unusual for the things he needs to be lacking. Harmony is achieved spontaneously. Man has all he desires because he desires only what he has. Since he desires only what it is in his process...his soul is perfectly tranquil and his mind is extremely limited". (Durkheim 1960: 70-71)

This challenges Hobbes's theory of the state of nature; there is no reason to blame human life as being brutish and nasty. Rousseau argues life in the state of nature cannot be a state of war, because human life does not feel the scarcity of anything. Therefore, for him, Hobbes' pessimism is neither desirable nor logical. He believes that human life enjoys natural rights in the state of nature and all these rights are given up in exchange for gaining civil order. It is not nature but social reality, which takes away freedom from human beings. Moreover, this freedom is considered natural freedom by Rousseau.

The idea of human life in the state of nature is either unsocial or non-social is a debate today. From an ethical point of view, Hobbes would say it is non-social because of his pessimist stand on human nature. However, Rousseau would find it as social. Even the idea of morality cannot be imposed on them since they don't

know what is good and bad, but we, the outsider, can evaluate man in the state of nature as good. So, Durkheim has rightly pointed out a man in Rousseau's understanding of the state of nature is neither moral nor immoral. It is only an amoral state. The distinction of morality and immorality can be traced to society.

Rousseau's understanding of the state of nature is incomplete if one does not trace out the reasons that he has provided to leave the state of nature. Another way of posing this question is that how society came into existence. There might be some external and internal reasons for leaving the state of nature and proceeding towards society. One of the external reasons could be a physical environment for which the balance of human life in the state of nature might have disturbed. In addition, once it gets disturbing, the new needs came out. For this matter, Durkheim has given a beautiful example that; cold in the winter season gave human life the idea of wearing the skins of animals they had killed. This imbalanced situation made the state of nature go forward a group of life. Thus, a man in the state of nature was not just static that is always good. By nature, no doubt as Rousseau claims, he is good but gradually he becomes more dependent either on the physical environment or on his co-being which leads to another life that is communitarian or group life.

The solitary life of the state of nature was initially developing towards a communitarian life, increasing population and feeling of parental love might be the internal cause for leaving the state of nature. It happened gradually. The social instinct of man compelled him to give up solitary life. However, the instinct of self-love began to take the shape of pride and the idea of private property emerged. It is quite true that human beings were not like animals, they had thinking capacity. The ideas of civil order, which can take care of their private property, came into existence.

Rousseau says the disturbed natural laws itself produce a new kind of phenomena, which we can say is society. Thus, Durkheim says, "The first violation of the law of nature led to a second. When men became unequal, they became dependent upon each other. Consequently, society is composed of masters and slaves. The masters themselves, in a sense, are the slaves of those they dominate". (Durkheim 1960: 86-87) So, there is a transformation from the state of nature to society and this transformation shows the difference between good life to worse. It is worse because there is neither equality nor freedom obtainable in this stage. The root cause for this unequal status of society is perhaps the dependency among the individuals. This stage is neither natural nor political, thus those who think that they are clever; consider themselves as cleverer than others. However, it is unknown to them that the domination itself is a prejudice that makes them a part of that they dominate. Unlike

Hobbes and Locke, Rousseau emphasizes the material condition of humans in the state of nature that makes them vulnerable.

John Rawls

John Rawls has a unique term for the idea of the state of nature, which he calls ‘the original position or in other words, the veil of ignorance. The reason why the concept of original position has been introduced in his philosophy as he says is to work out the traditional conception of justice. It is perhaps the primacy of ‘Justice’ that made him dig down the original position. All predecessors of Rawls e.g. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau described the idea of the state of nature that how people could leave it by a hypothetical social contract. However, Rawls thinks the original position is just an idea to help the discussion of the contract to move forward.

Rawls considers the original position as a mediating idea by which all our considered convictions can be brought to bear on one another. And he believes that this idea of original position enables us to establish greater coherence among all our judgments and finally we can attain wider agreement that is a well-ordered society. Like other contract philosophers, Rawls too takes an original position as hypothetical and the significance lies at the device of representation from which a well-ordered society can be thought up. Though the idea of the original position is hypothetical and not affected by social reality, in the sense it does not lose its temperament. About original position, Rawls says,

“The original position, with the features I have called ‘the veil of ignorance, is this point of view. The reason the original position must abstract from and not be affected by the contingencies of the social world is that the conditions for a fair agreement on the principles of political justice between free and equal persons must eliminate the bargaining advantages that inevitably arise within the background institutions of any society from cumulative social, historical, and natural tendencies”.

(Rawls 1971: 23)

Thus, there is a need to overlook the abstraction of the original position. Rawls seems to be rigorous on the a-historicity of the idea of the state of nature. He abstracts it from any of the imagined historical conditions of the past, present, or future. According to him, an original position is a timeless place of bargaining with society and that is a state of ignorance that conceals all the possible circumstances of our social existence. The point here is that in the original position, a person does not know they are in the real world. They are unknown about their social status, natural talents or abilities, or intelligence. The most fundamental thing is that they are unknown about good and bad life.

Rawls claims that in a state of the contract, we maximize our freedom consistently with the most equality that can be achieved. And we get this because in the original position we don't even know of what moral, mental, or physical abilities, we will have. So, the bargain we would go for will give us the best situation regardless of what those abilities might be. Thus, the compromises in limitations on the freedom of others in an original position that was even unknown to them. Rawls considers it as a small loss since we are opting for a well-ordered society.

In the above analysis of the modern state of nature theories from Hobbes to John Rawls, it has been highlighted that there are differences yet similarities in understanding the state of nature within the contractarian school itself. They all agree on the individualistic behavior of the human being in the state of nature. All these assumptions about the state of nature have been questioned frequently because of their hypothetical character and lack of realism. By focusing on this lack of realism, scholars overlook the humanizing significance of the theory.

Conclusion

These contract philosophers have explicitly described the idea of the state of nature in their ways. However, this theory has been widely criticized as implausible. The critics' basis of attack is that the theory lacks realism. Many of them claim it as an ideological phenomenon.

The theory attempts to show that individuals placed in this situation would rationally choose to organize or at least accept political institutions of various kinds. The most important psychological advancement humans would like to respond to in the state of nature, given the fact that they are capable of functioning their rationality is that to be part of collective and political machinery. The fundamental normative purpose of hypothetically imagining such a theory is to realize the genealogy of modern forms of governments and politics. (Grafstein 1987)

The non-co-operation behavior of individuals causes immoral life in the state of nature, that Hobbes considers a war of all against all. Hobbes and Locke firmly believe that each individual prefers not to co-operate regardless of other people's decisions. On other hand, there is Rousseau who claims cooperation in the state of nature. So according to him, a man in the state of nature is good and noble. However, scholars of state of nature theory have argued that these above two stands hold a position of *prisoner's dilemma* as Robert Grafstein views.

"In recent years, state of nature theorists have become increasingly dissatisfied with the traditional explanation of how individuals in the state of nature dodge the 'prisoner's dilemma'. The traditional approach in their view fails to provide a truly

“fundamental explanation” of the political realm. Instead, they argue, it assumes politics is already present in the state of nature, albeit in nascent form. It lies within the minds of the participants, as political goals, ideas, plans or attitudes of obedience constituting the basis for political arrangements”. (Grafstein1987:535)

State of nature theorists holds this position because they think that each inhabitant of the state of nature implicitly recognized that the future behavior of others will be contingent on the past behavior of others. Thus, they make mistakes of no cooperation not just once but repeatedly. And that repeated behavior helps them to learn from the consequences of their uncooperative behavior. Hence this learning is nothing but a better settlement towards an organized society.

However, the empirical status of the state of nature theory does not offer a serious explanation of political phenomena. It is because the very idea of politics can never be landed in an empirical stand. Grafstein considers that the significance of the state of nature theory lies in explaining politics as such. He further maintains that there can be two phenomena about the nature of politics. If politics is an irreducible holistic phenomenon, then the state of nature theory could never explain it. But if politics on the other hand is an individualistic phenomenon, then there is no reason why the state of nature theory can't explain it. Thus, the overlooked significance of the modern state of nature theory is its very strong argument that politics is an individualistic phenomenon. The reason why the state of nature theory can't explain the holistic phenomenon of politics is that the theory itself is not ideal or holistic. And it is logically implausible that an individualistic theory can accommodate a holistic phenomenon. Thus, the state of nature theory paves the way for fundamental explanations of politics in terms of individualism.

Rousseau's explanation is unique to other contract theorists. There is a continuity of the idea from the apolitical state of nature to the political social contract. The distinctness of Rousseau lies in this very continuity from the state of nature to the civil state. The identification of the property, as the basis of disorder in pre-state condition, in Rousseau's analysis, approximates to the actual pre-social conditions.

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