On the Origin and Poverty of State-of-Nature Theorizing

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Ever since Hobbes' Leviathan, the notion of a state of nature has been intimately tied in popular philosophy and the popular imagination with modern, Enlightenment liberalism and social contract theory. Such prominent modern political philosophers as Thomas Hobbes, Benedict Spinoza, John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Montesquieu were social contract theorists and associated with liberalism – Hobbes arguably, despite his theoretical absolutism, as its founder and perhaps a proto-liberal; Rousseau as a critic of modernity and liberalism. Montesquieu and particularly Spinoza are perhaps less widely read. Montesquieu, a contemporary of Rousseau, was an early liberal who favored commercial republicanism on the British model. Some might be surprised that Spinoza too qualifies as a liberal, but this contemporary of Hobbes was also a liberal and something of a democrat. None of course were as radically and consistently liberal as John Locke. All of these social contract theorists were concerned in a uniquely modern way with the origin and purpose of civil society and government, and consequently with their justification. To this end they looked to the so-called state of nature, either as a thought experiment or an historical event or both. This essay will argue that state-of-nature theorizing did not begin with modernity and Hobbes. For the purposes of examining the history of the notion of a state of nature in Western political philosophy, the notion of the state of nature can be traced back at least to ancient Greek myth and Judeo-Christian political theology. This may not be news to everyone but it is not universally recognized in political philosophy and in any case the argument by way of contrast serves the primary purpose of this essay, which is to critique state-of-nature theorizing in general and the modern variety in particular. It will be argued that the state of nature is at best, in the form of myth and fiction a useful pedagogical tool for the

education of children and at worst, in its modern (scientistic) variety, a perniciously false foundation for political philosophy. Even at best state-of-nature theorizing is neither sufficiently rigorous nor rationally well-founded enough to play a significant role in ethical and political philosophy. This essay is a small part of a larger on-going project critiquing Enlightenment liberalism from the perspective of an Aristotelian liberalism. Also, due to space constraints, I will have to limit the seminar/conference version of this paper to examining in detail just one illustrative example from each period: Plato, Juan de Mariana, and Hobbes.

Greek Myth and Philosophy

It is not the purpose of this essay to locate the very first instance of the state of nature in writing much less to speculate about its first instance in thought. The two greatest formative influences on Western philosophy are Greek philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition. I begin with Greek myth and philosophy because of the great influence of the latter on the development of Christian theology, first through Plato via Augustine and then through Aristotle via Aquinas. Plato and Socrates were transitional figures on the cusp between mythic poetry and philosophy. Plato, despite his criticism's of and antipathy toward poets, frequently attempts to lead his interlocutors, through a turning or reorientation (*periagoge*), to philosophical truth by the illustrative means of myth; and his philosophical writings are in dialogue form rather than philosophical prose. Already in Plato's student Aristotle we see a break with the mytho-poetic in philosophy. Due to space constraints, I will discuss in detail only the Promethean myth found in Plato's *Protagoras* as an illustrative example.

In Plato's *Protagoras*, the sophist of the same name explains how virtue is teachable by telling the story of Prometheus and how man became a rational, social, and political being (320c-323a). “There once was a time when the gods existed but the mortal races did not” (320d). The gods molded the mortal races inside the earth out of the basic elements and then charged Prometheus and Epimetheus with assigning each their various characteristics: abilities, strengths, weaknesses, and so forth. Epimetheus begged Prometheus for the exclusive privilege of carrying out this task. Prometheus accepted and agreed to be the final inspector. Epimetheus went about assigning traits so that each species would have its special place in the world's ecosystem – some he made large; others small, and compensated them with swiftness, flight, an underground habitat, or the like. He gave each means of protection from the weather of its locale, sources of nourishment for each, and the natural tools necessary to acquire food. To the prey of the carnivores he gave the ability for faster and multiple births so that they would not become extinct. Epimetheus made one grievous mistake, however, in that he unwisely ran out of favorable traits to distribute before he got to the human race. When Prometheus came to inspect Epimetheus' work, he saw that “the human race was naked, unshod, unbedded, and unarmed, and it was already the day on which all of them, human beings included, were destined to emerge from the earth into the light” (321c). In desperation, Prometheus stole wisdom in the practical arts from Athena and knowledge of fire from Hephaestus, and gave them to man, so that the race would have tools it could use for survival. Prometheus could not give man the political wisdom necessary for living together in civil society, however, for that was the province of Zeus. Prometheus' fate is a familiar one; he was charged with theft and chained to a boulder.

Without political wisdom, the human race was nevertheless able to worship the gods, develop speech, and invent

> houses, clothes, shoes, and blankets, and were nourished by food from the earth. Thus equipped, human beings at first lived in scattered isolation; there were no cities. They were being destroyed by wild beasts because they were weaker in every way, and although their technology was adequate to obtain food, it was deficient when it came to fighting animals. This was because they did not yet possess the art of politics, of which the art of war is a part. They did indeed try to band together and survive by founding cities. (322a-b)

The inevitable result was that they came into conflict, wronging with each other, continually banding and disbanding. Zeus, afraid the human race would be wiped out, sent Hermes to instill a share of justice and sense of shame in every member of the human race, "so that there would be order in the cities and bonds of friendship to unite them" (322c). Although previously rational merely in a calculative sense and primitively social, from this point on human beings had a fully rational and therefore also fully social, because political, nature. Contrast this with Hobbes, for whom human beings in a state of nature are not by nature social and possess reason only in this calculative sense.

There are several other prototypical instances of the state of nature and social contract in the thought of Plato and Aristotle. In the Book II of the *Republic*, Thrasymachus the sophist's argument, as reformulated by Glaucon, holds that justice and therefore political society is an artificial construct. Plato and Aristotle, of course, explicitly reject any notion that political society is not natural and man not naturally social. Later in Book II, Plato has Socrates formulate the anthropological principle, that the polis is man writ large, in order to gain a better understanding of justice. Plato then proceeds to examine why a city would come about in the first place and to gradually add to it as he considers each of the needs of man in turn from the lowest to the highest; it

becomes evident that man's nature is such that he needs the polis and is naturally drawn to it. In the *Crito*, Plato presents a mythical dialogue between Socrates and the Laws that is strikingly prototypical of later social contract reasoning. In the first two sections of the *Politics*, Aristotle explicitly argues that the polis exists by nature and, though he discusses the formation of the polis in terms of being built up from the male and female and master and slave relationships to household, then village, then polis, the argument is intended as a logical and imaginative reconstruction rather than an actual historical account. A man without a polis is either a beast or a god (*Politics* 1253a). At one point Aristotle does speculate that human beings might enter social life for instrumental reasons at first but this is not their natural end, only a possible primitive motivation. Even pre-political society for Plato and Aristotle is not lacking in ethical norms, institutions, and sources of authority. Thus, a careful and impartial examination of these instances and the whole of Plato's and Aristotle's thought reveals that the state of nature and social contract do not play the same fundamental, justificatory role in the thought of Plato and Aristotle that they do in the moderns. The natural for Plato and Aristotle, it must be emphasized, is not a thing's first but its final condition.

Judeo-Christian/Scholastic Political Theology and Philosophy

As Douglas Den Uyl notes: "Leo Strauss points out that prior to Hobbes the state of nature was a feature of Christian theology rather than of political philosophy. Hobbes, therefore, was the first to give the 'state of nature' an essentially secular and political significance" (1983:21). While some elements of Strauss' interpretation of Hobbes in the

following passage are debatable, the passage is particularly illuminating of the function of the state of nature in Christian political theology:

> The state of nature was distinguished especially from the state of grace, and it was subdivided into the state of pure nature and the state of fallen nature. Hobbes dropped the subdivision and replaced the state of grace by the state of civil society. He thus denied, if not the fact, at any rate the importance of the Fall and accordingly asserted that that which is needed for remedying the deficiencies or the 'inconveniences' of the state of nature is not divine grace, but the right kind of human government. (Strauss 1965:15)

We have already seen the state of nature was also a feature of Greek myth and philosophy, although there it played far less central a role than in Christianity and modern social contract theory. The state of pure nature pertains, as told in the parable in *Genesis*, to the condition of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden before the Fall, after which man has a fallen nature. Man can only attain to a state of grace through God, and never completely or finally in this worldly life but only in the next. Hence, Augustine's two 'cities' (of God and Man) and Gelasius' related two 'swords' of spiritual and temporal authority, the temporal authority justifiably concerned only with maintaining peace and order so that the spiritual authority can conduct *its* business of leading men's souls to salvation. Augustine's this-worldly pessimism and relegation of the purpose of government to merely maintaining peace and order is echoed centuries later by Hobbes.

It turns out that Strauss was wrong about Hobbes being the first to give the 'state of nature' secular and political significance. The state of nature was given an explicit and important, if not entirely secular, place in the political philosophy of one of the last Spanish scholastics, Juan de Mariana (1536-1624) in his 1599 book, *De Rege*. Mariana was a Jesuit and a contemporary of Luís de Molina (1535-1601) and Francisco Suarez (1548-16-17), but not a member of School of Salamanca founded by Francisco Vitoria

(c.1485-1546). Mariana, a monarchist but fervent opponent of absolutism, defended not only the people's but the *individual's* right to tyrannicide while basing a greatly expanded definition of tyranny on his decidedly pre-Lockean theory of popular sovereignty. Murray Rothbard notes that "Mariana also anticipated Locke in holding that men leave the state of nature to form governments in order to preserve their rights of private property" (1995:118). It is to Mariana's account of the state of nature that we now turn.

From the outset in Mariana's *De Rege*, it is clear that he is following in the Thomist and scholastic (and therefore Aristotelian) tradition, for his first chapter is entitled: "Man by Nature is a Social Being" (1948:111). Mariana's description of the state of nature is reminiscent of the Promethean myth prior to Zeus' intervention. There is strangely no mention of Adam and Eve or the Fall, so it seems most reasonable to assume Mariana's account of the state of nature is meant to be an account of life after the Fall. It begins rather idyllically but as the human race multiplies greed and lack of a strong central authority become problematic. Man outside of civil society is vulnerable to beasts of prey and ekes out a precarious existence.

Mariana argues that God purposefully designed the world and all species, distributing resources and abilities unequally, so that human beings would of necessity need each other. He concludes the short first chapter thus: "Now, all this reasoning about man depends very essentially on this, that naked and frail he is born, that he needs the aid of others, and that he must be helped by the resources of others" (114). On this basis, and by virtue of our God-given reason, related power of speech, and natural inclinations, we are inclined to associate with one another for mutual assistance. From these foundations develop mutual respect, trust, friendship, and love:

> Therefore, since every man's life was threatened by injury from without, and even blood relatives and intimate friends did not restrain themselves from killing each other, those who were pressed by the more powerful began to draw themselves together with others in a mutual compact of society and to look for someone outstanding in justice and trustworthiness. By his aid they hoped to ward off domestic and foreign injuries, and by establishing justice to restrain and bind down all classes, high, middle and low, by a fair system of law. Thus it was that at this time there first arose town assemblies and the regal dignity. The latter was attained not by riches nor electioneering, but by temperance, probity and acknowledged manliness.
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> In this manner, from the need of many things, from fear and the realization of frailty, the consideration for each other (which distinguish us as men) and civil society, by which we live well and happily, were born. (113)

It might be tempting to see in the above passage foreshadowings of Hobbes but, while I think it likely that Hobbes had read Mariana, there are important differences to bear in mind: namely, man's social nature for Mariana as well as the natural role of the virtues in the state of nature and the end of living well evidenced in the passage. What the state of nature lacks for Mariana, as for Locke after him, is a central authority to establish a known system of law, provide security, and resolve disputes.

Modern Scientism and Philosophy

In the "Introduction" to *Leviathan*, Hobbes neatly summarizes the great themes of the work. In the very first paragraph he "sets a tone of power and optimism" characteristic of the Enlightenment and never before seen in political philosophy (Hallowell 1997:298):

> Nature (the art whereby God hath made and governs the world) is by the *art* of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an artificial animal. For seeing life is but the motion of limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principal part within, why may we not say that all *automata* (engines that move themselves by springs and wheels as doth a watch) have an artificial life? For what is the *heart*, but a *spring*;

> and the *nerves*, but so many *strings*; and the *joints*, but so many *wheels*, giving motion to the whole body, such as was intended by the artificer? *Art* goes yet further, imitating that rational and most excellent work of nature*, man*. For by art is created that great LEVIATHAN called a COMMONWEALTH, or STATE (in Latin CIVITAS), which is but an artificial man, though of greater stature and strength than the natural, for whose protection and defence it was intended; and in which the *sovereignty* is an artificial soul, as giving life and motion to the whole body; the *magistrates* and other *officers* of judicature and execution, artificial *joints*; *reward* and *punishment* (by which fastened to the seat of the sovereignty every joint and member is moved to perform his duty) are the *nerves*, that do the same in the body natural; the *wealth* and *riches* of all the particular members are the *strength*; *salus populi* (the people's safety) its *business*; *counsellors*, by whom all things needful for it to know are suggested unto it, are the *memory*; *equity* and *laws*, an artificial *reason* and *will*; *concord*, *health*; *sedition*, *sickness*; and *civil war*, *death*. Lastly, the *pacts* and *covenants* by which the parts of this body politic were at first made, set together, and united, resemble that *fiat*, or the *let us make man*, pronounced by God in the creation. (Hobbes 1994:3-4; italics in original)

In the last sentence of the passage Hobbes analogizes the creation of that artificial man, the State, with God's creation of the human race. It is not incidental that Hobbes' Leviathan is best understood as an attack on his Christian and Aristotelian contemporaries.

Truly, the creation of a form of association that can get man out of the state of nature – in which the life of man is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (76) – by bringing about peace and order is a miracle worthy of the Almighty. This becomes all the more evident when Hobbes' conceptions of man and the state of nature are examined more closely. In the beginning of the paragraph above we see the essence of Hobbes' mechanistic view of the world and man: "seeing life is but the motion of limbs." He then proceeds to describe man *and* the State in the language of automata. Human consciousness is for Hobbes dominated by the passions and a merely calculative reason. Reason, for Hobbes, is "nothing but *reckoning* (that is, adding and subtracting) of the

consequences of general names agreed upon for the *marking* and *signifying* of our thoughts; I say *marking* them when we reckon by ourselves, and *signifying*, when we demonstrate or approve our reckonings to other men" (22-23). But even reason is reduced to the motion of our passions and knowledge reduced to recording and reasoning about the causal effects of external stimuli on our senses, all "matter in motion obeying mechanical laws" (Hallowell, 304).

Hobbes' state of nature is a state of anarchy, meaning that there is lacking an overarching common authority with absolute power to awe men into obedience and thereby guaranteeing peace and order by establishing and enforcing law and providing security. Without such an authority there can be no such guarantee, and without such a guarantee there is a war of all against all. When pressed, Hobbes admits in at least two places the inspiration for his conception of the state of nature. In the first, he remarks that: "Whatsoever therefore is consequent to a time of war, where every man is enemy to every man, the same is consequent to the time wherein men live without other security than what their own strength and their own invention shall furnish them withal" (76). Such a state he describes as one in which

> there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently, no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, *no society*, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death[.] (76; emphasis mine)

In the second passage, Hobbes admits that his state of nature is not an historical event or condition.

> But though there had never been any time wherein particular men were in a condition of war one against another, yet in all times kings and person of

> sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies and in the state and posture of gladiators, having their weapons pointing and their eyes fixed on one another, that is, their forts, garrisons, and guns upon the frontiers of their kingdoms, and continual spies upon their neighbors, which is a posture of war. (78)

This is the anarchy of the international system widely recognized by international relations. Hobbes' state of nature, then, is derived from conditions of man far outside of human society, indeed from conditions in which society can be said to have broken down, been broken, or never existed. One might also call these sources unnatural in the primary Aristotelian sense. The lack of a sovereign authority is purported to result in a state of nature and war. And not just any sovereign but a modern state with absolute and unlimited power. Hobbes' necessary condition for society does not stand up to the standards of theory and historical evidence, however. Not only is the state not necessary for the maintenance of social order, but as the state grows into Leviathan it is actually destructive of social order. Hobbes' conception of man, the state of nature, and his justification for the absolute and unlimited state should thus be viewed as reductionist, false, and pernicious.

None of the state of nature conceptions discussed in this paper are actually necessary for or essential to an understanding or explanation of human nature, society, or the state. Although not absolutely central to philosophical inquiry, myth, like the Promethean myth or something like it, could be a useful pedagogical tool in the education of children. Such myths do convey some philosophical truth if told, and read or listened to, carefully. Modern fiction can also serve such a function for both children and adults. Indeed, one might well argue that to dramatize philosophical truths and values is a good way to convey lived experience and avoid the hypostatizations so common to modern

philosophical thought. Mariana's state of nature theory, however, while also unnecessary and inessential, does not have the character of myth or a fictional tale but rather that of philosophical argument or historical account. It fails as both, for the premises are false and there never was such a state of nature lacking some form of societal norms and sources of authority. Hobbes' conception adds the pernicious element of being founded upon an a-historical and a-contextual, reductionist, materialist, mechanistic, and atomistic conception of man and the world.

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