

On the Relevance of State-of-Nature Speculations to Political Philosophy

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In this paper I respond to the argument that Hobbes's and Rousseau's views on government are rendered irrelevant by the apparent historical nonexistence of their hypothesized states of nature. I offer a counterargument that the relevance of their views was not negated even in their own time by contemporary ignorance regarding human origins. I follow this with observations on the potential applicability of modern paleoanthropological discoveries to political philosophy.

The particular differences in the state of nature hypothesized by Hobbes and Rousseau will not be relevant to my analysis. It will be sufficient to note what is common to their arguments, which is that governments exercise their powers legitimately only insofar as the exercise alleviates problems that obtain in a state of nature. That is, Hobbes and Rousseau argue as follows: In a state of nature, some situation Q will obtain. But, we agree that Q is unacceptable, and only governments can abate Q. Governments may therefore legitimately exercise at least such power as is necessary for the abatement of Q. We can schematize their arguments. Let N be a specified state of nature, Q an unacceptable characteristic thereof, G a specified form of government, and L_G be *G* is legitimate. Then both Hobbes and Rousseau argue:

$$(N \rightarrow Q) \rightarrow [(G \rightarrow \sim Q) \rightarrow L_G].$$

The objection is that as far as we know, N never obtained. Thus, $N \rightarrow Q$ is only vacuously true because it has a false antecedent, and so the entire argument proves nothing and we should ignore it.

Hobbes and Rousseau each disputed the claim that the state of nature has never been instantiated. Hobbes may have seen a reversion to the state of nature in the English Civil War, and both saw at least vestiges of it in certain primitive societies such as the aboriginal peoples of the New World (Hobbes, ch. XIII; Rousseau, First Part). Both claims can be disputed. A civil war may represent the de facto nonexistence of a single government over the territory in dispute, but each of the belligerents

acknowledges some government to which its own side, at least, is subject. And, few if any aboriginal tribes were without government.

At the same time, neither Hobbes nor Rousseau insists that a state of nature actually ever obtained as a universal of human life. Hobbes notes, “It may peradventure be thought there was never such a time nor condition of war as this; and I believe it was never generally so, over all the world . . .” (Hobbes, ch. XIII). Rousseau, too, acknowledges that his speculations might have no basis in historical fact: “We must not take the investigations which one could enter into concerning this subject for historical truths, but only for hypothetical and conditional reasons, more suitable for illuminating the nature of things than for showing the true origin, similar to those made everyday by our physicists concerning the formation of the earth” (Rousseau, Preface).

I propose that it makes no difference to an analysis of government whether we ever got along without any. To demonstrate this, we begin by supposing we have as little knowledge of human origins as Hobbes and Rousseau had. Then to the question, “Was there ever a time when humans lived without any government?” it is not clear that any definite answer, either affirmative or negative, could be justified. We are left with only speculation—as informed as we can make it, but speculation nonetheless. But speculation is not useless. Thought experiments are just speculation, and some of them have been very productive. Even the supposition, should we wish to make it, that there has been government for as long as there has been humanity does not end the discussion. It remains pertinent to ask, “What would human life be like without government?” and the states of nature proposed by Hobbes and Rousseau can be viewed as thought experiments that suggest possible answers to that question.

In that case, it is beside the point to note a lack of evidence that a state of nature so described ever obtained. To be cogent, an argument for the irrelevance of such a speculation needs to demonstrate that, in actual or probable fact, the state never obtained, and it seems unlikely that anyone could have had such an argument before the 20th century. Thus, whatever else might have been deficient about Hobbes’s and Rousseau’s speculations, they were not irrelevant.

Since their days, we have learned enough about our origins that we can probably disregard any speculation that posits a time when human life was solitary. We now know

that our nearest evolutionary relatives are social species, and so our common ancestor with them was probably a social species. The nearest taxonomic group that is not social, the orangutan, seems to be from a lineage that arose prior to the hominin-chimpanzee split and thereafter evolved independently from our own ancestors (Conroy, p. 85).

Collective living entails collective decisions of some kind. Some mechanism must be in place to get some subset of the group's members to act in concert, acting so as to achieve a common purpose that will result in the survival of the group, even if that common purpose is inconsistent with the interests of certain individuals. This seems to be effected in some species, such as social insects, by neurological hard-wiring. There is probably a physiological sense in which bees, for instance, have no choice but to cooperate with one another even when cooperation is individually suicidal.

Primates exhibit more behavioral flexibility, and humans seem to have the most flexibility, a characteristic we commonly label as "free will." For a large and important class of specific situations, there is no known algorithm for predicting, with a probability significantly greater than pure guesswork, what a randomly chosen human will do. However, given that the survival of individuals is contingent on the survival of the groups with which they identify, there is an observable tendency of people to act as if the group's interests were presumptively coincident with their personal interests. This observation is predictable on the supposition that human brains are in some sense hardwired to make decisions in favor of cooperation (Pinker 2002, pp. 53, 242-43).

This does not amount to an argument for any theory that could usefully be called biological determinism, but it does presuppose some variety of reductionism. At this point in scientific history, most of the details elude us, but evolution produced our brains for the same reason it produced all our other organs: They help us survive (Churchland, pp. 548-49). Any organism capable of locomotion needs to make decisions. If nothing else, it needs to decide at any given moment whether to move or not move. For the simplest animals such as protozoa, subcellular chemistry suffices. But one of the earliest divisions of cellular labor dedicated some cells to data processing. Certain data about the environment were input—food this way, danger that way—and the output was movement in this direction or that direction. Primitive organisms would have had no concepts of food, danger, or anything else, any more than a thermostat has

a concept of heat or cold, much less of human comfort. None of that mattered. Only results mattered. Nervous systems, and the DNA sequences causing those systems, survived if the organisms hosting them survived. Evolution continued, and in due course we humans came along, and at some point certain of our ancestors' brains got complicated enough to produce the sensation we call self-awareness. We are not even close to figuring out how computational complexity alone could have been sufficient to produce sentience as we know it, but reductionism as I understand it is just the claim that it was indeed sufficient (Dennett, pp. 80-83).

Coincident with these developments in our lineage was the evolution of language, in which data are transferred from one brain to another by means of an auditory code (Pinker 1994, p. 19; d'Errico et al.). This facilitated cooperative behavior in groups in which any individual's data were otherwise limited to those that one could acquire only by himself or herself. Behavioral decisions need data. To decide between actions A and B, it helps if I can infer the consequences of doing A or doing B, and I need some information from which to draw those inferences. All else being equal, more information is better, and so I'm better off—i.e. more likely to survive and reproduce—if I have access to information that others in my social group have gotten. Example: That other tribe outnumbers us by three to one, and so trying to invade their territory would be a really bad idea.

There are various ways that members of a group can make collective decisions necessary to their survival. One is behavioral hard-wiring analogous to that of social insects. If, for instance, incest taboos are nearly universal (Pinker 2002, p. 436), it could be because most of us are neurologically programmed to find our siblings, parents, and own children sexually unattractive. (The rare exceptions are explicable in terms of normal variation in the genes coding for sexual preferences.) Two other ways are consensus and compulsion. In the one case, a group needing to make a collective decision may simply come to a common belief, after discussing it for as long as seems necessary, that such-and-such a course of action is what they all should undertake. In the other case, some subset of the group having the means to compel others to comply with their own decisions may deploy those means to gain the group's cooperation.

Paradigmatically, the means of compulsion is the demonstrated ability to inflict death or severe physical discomfort in the event of noncompliance. This is government at its most basic level, at least empirically. The group collectively may or may not consent to be so dominated by only a few of their members, but whether their consent is even relevant is a distinct issue. That government so defined has existed for as long as humanity has existed is at least plausible though likely not provable. If it has so existed, then our state of nature includes government in some form, and to speculate about human society without government is to speculate about an alternate reality.

Even supposing there to be, or have been, genuinely anarchic societies ruled by consensus and nothing else, what is arguably implausible is the notion that anything like modern civilization, including its technological infrastructure, and the scientific advances on which that infrastructure depends, could have arisen without compulsive government. It looks like a fact that we could not have evolved socially beyond huntergatherers had not some people, with or without the consent of others, been empowered to make other people live according to their decisions regarding certain of the group's collective endeavors. And so, even if our state of nature were in some sense sans government, most of us would likely prefer not to return to it. It might not be the constant warfare envisaged by Hobbes, and it certainly would not be solitary, but pretechnological life is still in most cases poor, nasty, brutish, and short. What we learn from the apparent biological facts of our history, then, is that the state of nature, in the sense of a pre-governmental human condition, is either chimerical or undesirable.

Necessity suffices to answer the question whether there ought to be government of some kind, and practicality suffices to rule out direct democracy in all but a few cases not pertinent to most political debates. Given, as it seems to be, that government is desirable if not simply inevitable, there remain all the questions about which forms of government we should prefer—"we" in this context being the collective "people in general." Assuming our preferences are even relevant—and if they are not, then this discussion itself seems irrelevant—something like the consent of the governed must obtain in some way. From this a preference for some variation of democracy follows. (Some might argue that the community of philosophers, or authorities in some other discipline, could have some insights that would justify a disregard for what most people

want out of their government. The argument needs to be addressed, but the constraints of this assignment force deferral.)

Knowing the way we were tells us nothing necessarily about the way we are and nothing at all about the way we ought to be. We have learned much about our origins that was unknown to Hobbes and Rousseau, and having learned it, we can confirm their suspicion that government is necessary. That was hardly in dispute, though. From the facts of our natural history, we can infer little that would settle the more interesting questions about who should exercise power and how they should exercise it. We are well advised to beware of inferring *ought's* from *is's* (or from *always was's*), but a good government (so judged by any sensible criteria) needs to rule with an eye on the realities of human nature. If it is empirically predictable, for instance, that half the people of a nation will ignore a particular law, then that datum cannot be entirely irrelevant to a debate on whether the law should be enacted or how it should be enforced if enacted. Insofar as we can know anything about our ancestors' nature, we should suppose we have the same nature, absent compelling evidence of a change and sufficient time for natural selection to have effected it.

Insofar as modern research into human origins and its implications for modern human psychology contradict earlier speculations, those speculations are of course mooted, and insofar as they are consistent they are reinforced. The implications of empirical data on normative assessments require more analysis than can be undertaken here, but I conclude with an observation. It is strictly speaking the case that no statement about what ought to be can be deduced from a statement about what is, but we are rarely speaking strictly when we discuss politics. Useful political discourse inevitably occurs in a context with certain presuppositions about what ought to be. We do value personal freedom, for example. That much is a brute fact. We may engage in metaethical debates about whether we ought to value it or how we should rank it against other values such as security, but having made decisions of that sort, we cannot talk about how to achieve those values without considering facts of human nature that bear on the efficacy of various means proposed for their achievement.

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