

# Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*

Lecture II

What Would the World be Like Without  
Political Institutions?

Fabienne Peter

# Topics Today

- The State of Nature
- Hobbes on Human Nature
- Hobbes on the State of Nature
- Interpreting Hobbes' View

# The State of Nature

A world without political institutions

- The state of nature is one not ruled by political institutions
- What would such a world look like?

# The State of Nature

## A reference point

- State of nature typically plays a special role in social contract theories of political legitimacy and justice
- It serves as the reference point for the justification of political institutions

# The State of Nature

## A reference point

- For John Locke (1632 – 1704), for example, writing after Hobbes, the state of nature is a positive reference point
  - State of nature is a state where natural (moral) law reigns
  - The civil state is justified to the extent that it respects natural law
- Other social contract theorists: Rousseau, Kant

# The State of Nature

## A reference point

- An example from contemporary political philosophy is John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (1971)
- Social contract theory is basis of his theory of justice
  - Not: what justifies the state?
  - Instead: given there is a state, what would a just society look like?
- “Original position” is a hypothetical choice situation in which we choose principles of justice without knowing our position in society

# The State of Nature

What is the state of nature for Hobbes?

- In Hobbes' political philosophy, the state of nature is a negative reference point
- According to Hobbes, the state of nature is a state of war of all against all (Leviathan 13.8)
- What supports this pessimistic outlook?

# Hobbes on Human Nature

## The Passions

- For Hobbes, as for Hume, our actions are determined by the passions – cf. chapter 6 of the *Leviathan*
- Hobbes distinguishes between “appetites” or “desires” and “fears” or “aversions”
- Examples of the passions: benevolence, ambition, revengefulness, fear of God, superstitious fear

# Hobbes on Human Nature

## The Passions

- The main passion that Hobbes emphasizes in *Leviathan* is self-preservation
  - He is not saying that this is the main passion we have
  - But he takes the desire for self-preservation to be at the root of the difficulty we encounter in the state of nature as well as the basis for a justification of the civil state

# Hobbes on Human Nature

## Reason can support the passions

- There are “laws of nature” that describe causal connections between patterns of social interaction and the chances of self-preservation
- We can come to know these laws through reason
- Reason can thus help us secure our self-preservation

# Hobbes on Human Nature

## Reason can support the passions

“A LAW OF NATURE (lex naturalis) is a precept or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life or taketh away the means of preserving the same, and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved.” (*Leviathan* 14: 3)

# Hobbes on Human Nature

## Reason can support the passions

- First fundamental law of nature:
  - (Conditional) desire for peace
  - “It is a precept, or general rule, of reason that every man ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it, and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek and use all helps and advantages of war” (14:4)

# Hobbes on Human Nature

Reason can support the passions

- Second fundamental law of nature:
  - (Conditional) willingness to give up liberty rights and cooperate with others rather than fight for self-preservation
  - “that a man be willing, when others are so too, ... to lay down his right to all things, and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself” (14:5)

# Hobbes on Human Nature

## Reason can support the passions

- Rationality can show us that cooperation is desirable as a means to self-preservation
  - The precepts bind us “in foro interno”
  - “They bind to a desire they [the laws of nature] should take place” (15.36)
- Rationality alone cannot secure cooperation
  - The precepts do not bind “in foro externo”
  - In the state of nature, acting on those laws makes one more vulnerable to others than direct self-preservation

# Hobbes on the State of Nature

## Conditions in the state of nature

- Equality in physical and mental ability (13:1)
  - We're equal enough in bodily strength to represent a threat to one another
  - And we're equal enough in mental ability to distrust each other's judgment
- Moderate scarcity of resources
- The two conditions combined lead to competition and to conflict

# Hobbes on the State of Nature

## The state of nature

- The state of nature is a state of war of all against all (13:8)
  - Not an actual war, but lack of security is common knowledge
  - In the state of nature, the life of man is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (13:9)
- The civil state is justified because it allows us to escape from the state of nature

# Hobbes on the State of Nature

The state of nature: real or imagined?

1. A state in the past – from which political institutions evolved?
  2. A state in the present – e.g. Hobbes' own time, marked by civil war / conflicts between states?
  3. A state in the [hypothetical] future – a threat; what will emerge if political institutions are eroded?
- => Hobbes did not hold 1.

# Interpreting Hobbes' View

What is the nature of the conflict in the state of nature?

- How do the passions and rationality interact in the state of nature to produce a state of war?
- Three main interpretations of Hobbes' argument
  - Rationality interpretation
  - Passion interpretation
  - Short-sightedness interpretation

# Interpreting Hobbes' View

## Rationality interpretation

- The state of nature is the result of our rationality
- In the absence of a civil state, non-cooperation is rational to secure self-preservation
  - Competition leads to fear and diffidence
  - Undermines our confidence in being able to secure self-preservation
  - And this leads to pre-emptive invasions as a means to protect security

# Interpreting Hobbes' View

## Rationality interpretation

- Prisoner's dilemma illustrates this interpretation

PD	Player 2 Cooperate	Player 2 Defect
Player 1 Cooperate	<b>3,3</b> (desirable outcome that cannot be achieved in the state of nature)	<b>1,4</b>
Player 1 Defect	<b>4,1</b>	<b>2,2</b> (state of nature)

# Interpreting Hobbes' View

## Passion interpretation

- The state of nature is the result of our passions
- Human beings have, in addition to the desire for self-preservation, desires for praise, glory, respect from others, etc.
- These passions bring us into conflict with each other and undermine our ability to secure self-preservation
- Rationality shows us the way out

# Interpreting Hobbes' View

## Passion interpretation

- Assurance game illustrates this interpretation

<b>Assurance game</b>	<b>Player 2 Cooperate</b>	<b>Player 2 Defect</b>
<b>Player 1 Cooperate</b>	<b>4, 4</b> (desirable outcome enabled by civil state)	<b>1, 3</b>
<b>Player 1 Defect</b>	<b>3, 1</b>	<b>2, 2</b> (state of nature)

# Interpreting Hobbes' View

## Short-sightedness interpretation

- The state of nature is a result of our short-sightedness
- A modification of the rationality interpretation
- We find ourselves not in a one-shot PD, but in repeated PDs
- Cooperation is rational in (infinitively) repeated PDs, but people are too shortsighted to see that
- Civil state guards against short-sightedness

# Interpreting Hobbes' View

## Short-sightedness interpretation

- Repeated PD illustrates this interpretation

PD	Player 2 Cooperate	Player 2 Defect
Player 1 Cooperate	<b>3,3</b> (Nash equilibrium in repeated PD)	<b>1,4</b>
Player 1 Defect	<b>4,1</b>	<b>2,2</b> (state of nature)