CHAPTER: III

The State of Nature

Like the investigation of nature, the investigation of society begins with its imaginary dissolution. So the constitutive causes of human order must be derived from a study of the way human beings would conduct themselves in a situation in which no order existed. This situation is what Hobbes calls the "natural condition of mankind" or the "state of nature".

The situation in which men by nature find themselves is one in which they are all equal, or at least, they must consider themselves as equal. For, although there are differences among them in strength and intelligence, "the difference between man, and man, is not so

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1 Leviathan; op.cit., Ch.XIII, p.63.

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considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he".  

Men are to be considered equal for three reasons:

(1) They are relatively equal in strength.

(2) They are relatively equal in wisdom; prudence is equally bestowed by equal time.

(3) Furthermore, if any man should claim superiority on the basis of wisdom (or any other quality) and should anyone else deny this superiority or claim equality, the only way to decide the question would be by battle, since there is neither an agreed standard of value nor an agreed judge.

Hobbes, thus, begins with the essential equality of all men—an equality which rests on the unpleasant fact that "as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength enough to kill the strongest".  The ability of

2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
one man to kill another is the ultimate measure of man's equality. The consequence of natural equality is an equal hope in each man to attain his desires; and the fundamental desire is the desire for self-preservation. Further, as already elaborated, the desire for self-preservation gives rise to a desire for pleasure, since pleasure is the appearance in consciousness of what conduces to life. Conversely, there is an aversion from pain, pain being the mental appearance of what conduces to death.

According to Hobbes, man's desire for continued preservation leads him to desire a store of pleasure for the future as well. This is possible only by the acquisition of power. Hobbes defines the power of a man, in universal terms, as "his present means, to obtain some future apparent good". Further, power may be either natural or instrumental. Natural power "is the eminence

\[ \text{Ibid., Ch.X, p.43.} \]
of the Faculties of Body, or Mind: as extraordinary Strength, Forme, Prudence, Arts, Eloquence, Liberality, Nobility". Instrumental Powers are those which are "acquired by these, or by fortune, and are means and instruments to acquire more: as Riches, Reputation, Friends, and the secret working of God, which men call Good Luck".\(^5\) According to Hobbes, the nature of this second form of power is such that it has a momentum of its own, so much so that it increases as it proceeds, "Like the motion of heavy bodies, which the further they go, make still the more haste".\(^6\) Power is the means to satisfy man's desires. A man whose desires are at an end can no more be alive than a man whose senses and imaginations are at a standstill. To Hobbes, "Felicity"\(^7\) is a continuous progress of desire, from one object to another, the attainment of the former opening the gateway

\(^5\) Ibid.

\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid., Ch.XI, p.49.
to the latter. Thus, the voluntary actions of man tend not only to obtain, but also to assure a contented life, and in this respect, differ only according to the diversity of passions in diverse men and partly according to their differences of opinion regarding cause and effect.

Further, "nature hath made men so equal, in the faculties of body and mind", that it is possible to think of a situation where all men equally desire power at the same point of time. Therefore, every man naturally desires power and more power, "a perpetual and restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in death". Among men in a natural state, however, none has the ability to attain for himself powers so great that he can have dominion over all. Roughly speaking, all men are equal in their capacity to acquire power. One man may be physically stronger than another, but the second may be

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8 Ibid. Ch.XIII, p.63.
9 Ibid. Ch.XI, p.49.
more cunning and so able to outwit the first by strategy. No man has enough power to compel all to obey his will. Therefore, all men are roughly equal in power, and all can exercise their unlimited natural right.

The right of nature is introduced at the beginning of the fourteenth chapter of *Leviathan*. No prior explanation of the concept is given; it is simply defined as follows:

"The Right of Nature, which writers commonly call 'Jus Naturale' is the liberty each man hath, to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life; and consequently, of doing anything, which in his own judgement and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto."\(^{10}\)

Now the natural tendency of any organism is to preserve its own life. Since no man has any special

\(^{10}\) Ibid., Ch.XIV, p.66.
privileges over other men in the state of nature, each man may do anything that he actually believes to be the best means to his own preservation. Since each is the judge of the necessity of the means, and since there is, in principle, no limit to what may be desired as necessary means of preserving life and to securing the means of preserving life, it follows that ".....in such a condition, every man has a right to everything...."11

A man's right is limited only by what he believes he needs. Each man's natural right expands to encompass whatever he thinks he needs for his own preservation. If, as Hobbes sometimes suggests, mere desire indicates a belief that the thing desired is necessary to preservation, then every man has a right to whatever he desires.

What is in accordance with the right of nature, then, is what one may do, what it is all right for one to

11 Ibid, p.67.
do. It is not, however, what one has a right or claim to; the right of nature entails no correlative duties on the part of others. Hobbes claims that man simply has the right to do whatever he conceives to be necessary for his own preservation. But no one has the duty to allow him to do what he considers necessary to his preservation.

Furthermore, in a state of nature, no man can acquire an exclusive right to anything. One may claim what another currently has, for, in the state of nature, though there may be possession and enjoyment of goods, there is "no Propriety, no Dominion, no 'Mine' and 'Thine' distinct; but onely that to be every man's, that he can get; and for so long, as he can keep it".  

To complete the analysis of the formal meaning of the "right of nature", we must turn to a discussion which appears in Hobbes's De Cive, but not in Leviathan. Here, the right of nature is introduced in connection with

12 Ibid., Ch.XIII, p.66.
reason—a connection which is implicit in the argument of 
*Leviathan*, although not directly stated. The key passages 
are these:

"......it is not against reason, that a man doth 
all he can to preserve his own body and limbs both from 
death and pain. And that which is not against reason, men 
call 'right' or 'jus' or 'blameless liberty' of using our 
own natural power and ability. It is therefore a right of 
nature, that every man may preserve his own life and 
limbs with all the power he hath."\(^\text{13}\)

What is not against reason is called right. This 
connection is reinforced in *De Cive* by using the 
intermediate concept of right reason: "For every man is 
desirous of what is good for him, and shuns what is evil, 
but chiefly the chiefest of natural evils, which is 
death; and this he doth by a certain impulsion of nature, 
no less than that whereby a stone moves downward. It is,

\(^{13}\) *De Cive* ; op.cit., Ch.II, p.52.
therefore, neither absurd nor reprehensible, neither against the dictates of true reason, for a man to use all his endeavours to preserve and defend his body and the members thereof from death and sorrows. But that which is not contrary to right reason, that all men account to be done justly and with right. Neither by the word right is anything else signified, than that liberty which every man hath to make use of his natural faculties according to right reason.

Against right reason, Hobbes admits no appeal. Whatever a man does in accordance with reason, he does permissibly and blamelessly. Since a man can no more help trying to avoid death than a stone can help falling, it is not against reason to avoid death, and so every man has a natural right or the right of nature of doing whatever he judges necessary for his self-preservation.

Nothing in the arguments present in the Leviathan is

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14 Ibid. Ch.I, p.47.

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incompatible with the supposition that the right of nature is based on reason, and so, a perusal of the earlier works serve to complete the definition of the concept.

Thus, men must necessarily engage in struggle and competition. Their foremost desire is that of self-preservation and they are equal in their capacity to acquire powers for this purpose. Hence, it is to be expected that they would work at cross purposes. Men, therefore, become enemies because they desire the same commodities as needful to their preservation. This is the logic of all human conflict. After all, the state of nature is not a state of plenty, but one of limited resources where a man, in order to survive, may need some object which is also needed by his fellows.

Enmity arising out of competition leads to enmity arising out of diffidence. In the 17th century, this word signified not, as now, mere shyness or timidity, but quite literally, a lack of trust. Diffidence arises from
the fact that men are equal in their vulnerability, fundamentally ignorant of the purposes of their fellows, and in competition with one another. Since, in the state of nature, a man who possesses anything may expect that someone will come and desire what he possesses, and that this invader may have as much right to the good as the occupier, no man can enjoy anything in security. So anyone who possesses anything of value must fear that he will be attacked by someone else who wants this thing. Clearly, his best course of action is "...Anticipation; that is, by force, or wiles, to master the persons of all men he can, so long, till he see no other power great enough to endanger him: And this is no more than his own conservation requireth and is generally allowed".\(^{15}\)

This is the crucial passage in Hobbes's account of conflict, for it explains the conversion of limited enmity into unlimited enmity. Hobbes does not suppose

\(^{15}\) *Leviathan*; op.cit., Ch.XIII, p.64.
that all men are natural aggressors, exulting in conquest just because it affords them a display of their own power. Indeed, his explanation of enmity is sufficiently grounded in the claim that men aggress to better their own security. Fearing danger from a neighbour, then, a man may anticipate by striking first; whilst his neighbour, himself fearing danger or perhaps a first strike, will himself seek to remove the danger by quick action, and so on. This kind of behaviour is, for the vulnerable inhabitant of the state of nature, a matter of constant fear of violent death.

In the state of nature, other men cannot be assumed to have a reasonable opinion of what sort of security their preservation actually requires. They must be assumed to have the unlimited desire that it is in principle possible for them to have and their desire is not only for things but for glory (the feeling of power over other men) and for honour (the recognition of their power, even when they are, in fact, equal or inferior).
This not only adds a third factor (glory) to the causes of conflict already mentioned (competition and diffidence) but it also must increase the amount of security that men, who won't otherwise be satisfied with moderate power, reasonably believe to be necessary for their preservation. "And by consequence, such augmentation of dominion over men, being necessary to a man's conservation, it ought to be allowed him." 

The causes of contention among men in the state of nature are thus organised into three distinct categories:

"Competition" (the desire of equals to enjoy the same thing), "diffidence" (the right of any man, fearing for his life, to secure himself by 'anticipation') and "glory" (the pleasure of some men 'in contemplating their own power in acts of conquest, which they pursue farther than their security requires').

Thus formulated, the causes of war acquire the

16 Leviathan; op.cit., Ch.XIII, p.64.
17 Ibid.
analytic clarity of parallelism and symmetry. "The first, maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation."\textsuperscript{18} Hobbes, thus, is led to his two famous metaphors: the comparison of life to a race, and the comparison of man's natural condition to a state of war. The race has "no other goal, nor other garland but being foremost, and in it: "...Continually to be outgone is misery. Continually to out-go the next before, is felicity. And to forsake the course, is to die".\textsuperscript{19}

This metaphor is suggestive of the view that man's basic aim is to out-do his fellows, that he is innately and originally competitive. But, competition is derivative; the innate and original concern with self-maintenance manifests itself as competition, but only because one man's power may always oppose another man's.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.

Hobbes's metaphor is grossly misunderstood if it is thought to show man's natural malevolence and evil.

It is with the state of nature as with Hobbes's account of human psychology: many readers have dismissed it as an overwritten melodrama designed to frighten men into submission to an absolute sovereign.

In Hobbes, the state of nature is not merely a conventional property of political argument, but also a thought-experiment in the Paduan tradition. The value of the method depends upon the assumptions made about men's desires and preferences. The model is much simpler than the reality; the model is not an image of reality, but only a device for the better understanding of it. The student of society can seldom make experiments in the manner of the natural scientist and this other method is indispensable to him. Hobbes's political theory is one of the earliest and most impressive examples of this method.

The state of nature is directly deduced from the account of human nature already elaborated and derives...
from the fact that each human being is to himself an independent entity, living under circumstances of radical uncertainty, particularly uncertainty about the attitudes and intentions of other human beings. The way such an entity comprehends itself is by taking note of contrasts. In general, comparative understandings will result from what Hobbes discovers to be the most pleasurable emotion men can experience—that of feeling superior to other men. ... men are constantly measuring how few others can help or hinder them in

Social life, then, is a matter of proud men jostling each other. On this score, Hobbes thinks himself to be describing the inescapable human condition, [rather than just the state of nature.] Hobbes has shown that the cause of such anarchy lies in the predominantly egoistic human nature. The state of nature dramatizes what Hobbes takes to be the fundamental dilemma of human existence: that men both need each other and "grieve" each other.

But, in the state of nature, the pains of feeling inferior have the additional hazard of becoming direct
threats to life and liberty. For, in so primitive a condition of life, men find themselves competing for the scarce necessities of life, and because men are both proud and insecure, there is no point at which they can be confident of having adequate provision. Even those who might temperamentally be inclined to satisfaction at a modest level are forced to compete with the rest in order to retain what they already have.

Such is the state of nature which Hobbes deduced from his first premises. Hobbes's account of the condition of men in the state of nature constitutes the very basis of his theory. In such a state, human beings may co-operate only in the briefest and most precarious way and the sheer desperation of life prevents men from acquiring any of the advantages of an advanced culture, particularly those advantages which include instruments of industry, navigation, arts, letters, commodious
buildings\textsuperscript{20} and so on. This is where Hobbes thrusts home his point by describing the state of nature as a state of war and the life of man "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short".\textsuperscript{21}

One must remember, however, that it is the condition of men, not the men themselves, that Hobbes describes as such. Depicting the absolute solitude and stark barrenness of such a condition, Hobbes conveys a sense of life in which all activity, all motion has ceased. This overpoweringly grave and serious description has, as Hobbes intended, immortalized his vision of man in nature. It is familiar to many who know little about Hobbes's philosophy apart from this passage.

All go in mutual fear and suspicion, and from time to time, there will be battles in which any man is liable to lose his life. Hereby it is manifest that during the time that men live without a common power to keep them

\textsuperscript{20} Leviathan ; op.cit., Ch.XIII, pp.64-65.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid.
all in awe, they are in that condition which is called "war" and such a war, "as is of every man against every man". The natural state of mankind is a state of war "where every man is enemy to every man". There is "continual fear, and danger of violent death".

Human nature, as Hobbes describes it, is made up of appetites and aversions. It is this constant fear of violent death that constitutes the most powerful of human aversions. Now the real significance of the state of nature is that men engage in competition for the sake of their self-preservation, which, in turn, implies an aversion from death. Yet, they are in a situation where their basic objective of self-preservation is constantly threatened and they are more or less continuously faced with the fear of death. This war 'of every man, against every man' is based, not on innate hostility, but on hostility derived from the ever-possible conflict between

22 Ibid.
men's powers of self-maintenance. War is the consequence of natural insecurity, and the natural desire to preserve oneself. Yet, war—which arises out of the endeavour for self-preservation—is, of course, the greatest enemy of preservation. Thus, the natural condition of mankind is inherently unstable. The competitive search for increased security through increased power leads only to ever-increasing insecurity. Men, seeking to strengthen themselves to prevent being overcome, find themselves locked in a race which ensures that most are overcome.

Conscious as he is of the new concept of nature that he proposes and of its assertion that life without a common power to overawe us all differs widely from life in civil society, Hobbes argues that "the nature of war, consisteth not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto during all the time there is no assurance to the contrary". He now insists that "To

23 Ibid., Ch.XIII, p.64.
The predicament which underlies Hobbes's moral and political theory is that the actions which men naturally and reasonably perform in order to secure their ends prove to be self-defeating. We cannot suppose that men in Hobbes's state of nature are irrational. They do not engage in "the war of all against all" merely in order to satisfy immediate passion or even to secure short-term interests. In competing with their fellows, they are seeking their overall well-being. For the man who would opt out of the race would put himself at the mercy of his fellows. Thus men, acting on their own, however

24 Ibid, p.66.
reasonable they may be, are doomed to "the war of all against all".

Fortunately, the fundamental cause of the behaviour that leads to the state of war can also supply the cause of extrication from this predicament. For the fundamental cause is the desire for self-preservation, which implies an aversion from death. Yet, "the war of all against all" magnifies the fear of death which is the most urgent of the passions which incline men to peace. Men are rational creatures. This means that they are capable of realizing that it is war that makes them afraid and that, therefore, peace is an end for which they must strive if they can possibly achieve it. The fundamental basis of politics is the belief of all men when they are in a state of fear that peace, and the means to peace are good. Since men can reason and can acquire knowledge of consequences, they can discover the means to peace; they can imagine rules whose general observance would give them peace. And because they desire the end, which is
peace, they desire the means to that end; they desire that the rules should be generally observed. Hobbes calls these rules "convenient articles of peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement". He calls them the "laws of nature". These are elaborated in Chs. XIV and XV of the Leviathan.

The most common manner of attributing crudity to Hobbes's psychology is to take the view that Hobbes believes individual men to be essentially selfish animals, but this is a mistake. Being an individualist, Hobbes looks for the cause of individual behaviour within the psychology of the individual himself. His appetites are for things that help his vital motion and his aversions are to those things that hinder his vital motion. It is not a psychological but a logical principle for Hobbes that each individual desires 'bonum sibi', his own good, which is continual life, security and

25 Elements of Law; op.cit., Part I. Ch.XIV.Sec.6, pp.54-55.
power; and each desires to avoid evils to himself, and especially the greatest of evils—his death.