

From *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

Hobbes:

3. The State of Nature

To establish these conclusions, Hobbes invites us to consider what life would be like in a state of nature, that is, a condition without government. Perhaps we would imagine that people might fare best in such a state, where each decides for herself how to act, and is judge, jury and executioner in her own case whenever disputes arise—and that at any rate, this state is the appropriate baseline against which to judge the justifiability of political arrangements. Hobbes terms this situation “the condition of mere nature”, a state of perfectly private judgment, in which there is no agency with recognized authority to arbitrate disputes and effective power to enforce its decisions.

Hobbes famously argued that such a “dissolute condition of masterless men, without subjection to Laws, and a coercive Power to tie their hands from rapine, and revenge” would make impossible all of the basic security upon which comfortable, sociable, civilized life depends. There would be “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; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” If this is the state of nature, people have strong reasons to avoid it, which can be done only by submitting to some mutually recognized public authority, for “so long a man is in the condition of mere nature, (which is a condition of war,) as private appetite is the measure of good and evil.”

Although many readers have criticized Hobbes’s state of nature as unduly pessimistic, he constructs it from a number of individually plausible empirical and normative assumptions. He assumes that people are sufficiently similar in their mental and physical attributes that no one is invulnerable nor can expect to be able to dominate the others. Hobbes assumes that people generally “shun death”, and that the desire to preserve their own lives is very strong in most people. While people have local affections, their benevolence is limited, and they have a tendency to partiality. Concerned that others should agree with their own high opinions of themselves, people are sensitive to slights. They make evaluative judgments, but often use seemingly impersonal terms like ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to stand for their own personal preferences. They are curious about the causes of events, and anxious about their futures; according to Hobbes, these characteristics incline people to adopt religious beliefs, although the content of those beliefs will differ depending upon the sort of religious education one has happened to receive. With respect to normative assumptions, Hobbes ascribes to each person in the state of nature a liberty right to preserve herself, which he terms “the right of nature”. This is the right to do whatever one sincerely judges needful for one’s preservation; yet because it is at least possible that virtually anything might be judged necessary for one’s preservation, this theoretically limited right of nature becomes in practice an unlimited right to

potentially anything, or, as Hobbes puts it, a right “to all things”. Hobbes further assumes as a principle of practical rationality, that people should adopt what they see to be the necessary means to their most important ends.

4. The State of Nature Is a State of War

Taken together, these plausible descriptive and normative assumptions yield a state of nature potentially fraught with divisive struggle. The right of each to all things invites serious conflict, especially if there is competition for resources, as there will surely be over at least scarce goods such as the most desirable lands, spouses, etc. People will quite naturally fear that others may (citing the right of nature) invade them, and may rationally plan to strike first as an anticipatory defense. Moreover, that minority of prideful or “vain-glorious” persons who take pleasure in exercising power over others will naturally elicit preemptive defensive responses from others. Conflict will be further fueled by disagreement in religious views, in moral judgments, and over matters as mundane as what goods one actually needs, and what respect one properly merits. Hobbes imagines a state of nature in which each person is free to decide for herself what she needs, what she’s owed, what’s respectful, right, pious, prudent, and also free to decide all of these questions for the behavior of everyone else as well, and to act on her judgments as she thinks best, enforcing her views where she can. In this situation where there is no common authority to resolve these many and serious disputes, we can easily imagine with Hobbes that the state of nature would become a “state of war”, even worse, a war of “all against all”.

Rousseau:

Rousseau repeatedly claims that a single idea is at the center of his worldview, namely, that human beings are good by nature but are rendered corrupt by society. Unfortunately, despite the alleged centrality of this claim, it is difficult to give it a clear and plausible interpretation. One obvious problem is present from the start: since society, the alleged agent of corruption, is composed entirely of naturally good human beings, how can evil ever get a foothold? It is also difficult to see what “natural goodness” might be. In various places Rousseau clearly states that morality is not a natural feature of human life, so in whatever sense it is that human beings are good by nature, it is not the moral sense that the casual reader would ordinarily assume. In order, therefore, to address this puzzling central claim, it is best to look first at the details of Rousseau’s moral psychology, especially as developed in the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* and in *Emile*.

Rousseau attributes to all creatures an instinctual drive towards self-preservation. Human beings therefore have such a drive, which he terms *amour de soi* (self love). *Amour de soi* directs us first to attend to our most basic biological needs for things like food, shelter and warmth. Since, for Rousseau, humans, like other creatures, are part of the design of a benevolent creator, they are individually well-equipped with the means to satisfy their natural needs. Alongside this basic drive for self-preservation, Rousseau posits another passion which he terms *pitié* (compassion). *Pitié* directs us to attend to and relieve the suffering of others (including animals) where we can do so without danger to our own

self-preservation. In some of his writings, such as the *Second Discourse*, *pitié* is an original drive that sits alongside *amour de soi*, whereas in others, such as *Emile* and the *Essay on the Origin of Languages*, it is a development of *amour de soi* considered as the origin of all passions.

In the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality* Rousseau imagines a multi-stage evolution of humanity from the most primitive condition to something like a modern complex society. Rousseau denies that this is a reconstruction of history as it actually was, and Frederick Neuhouser (2014) has argued that the evolutionary story is merely a philosophical device designed to separate the natural and the artificial elements of our psychology. At each step of this imagined evolution human beings change their material and psychological relations to one another and, correspondingly, their conception of themselves, or what Rousseau calls the “sentiment of their existence.” According to this narrative, humans live basically solitary lives in the original state of the human race, since they do not need one another to provide for their material needs. The human race barely subsists in this condition, chance meetings between proto-humans are the occasions for copulation and reproduction, child-care is minimal and brief in duration. If humans are naturally good at this stage of human evolution, their goodness is merely a negative and amounts to the absence of evil. In this story, human beings are distinguished from the other creatures with which they share the primeval world only by two characteristics: freedom, and perfectibility. Freedom, in this context, is simply the ability not to be governed solely by appetite; perfectibility is the capacity to learn and thereby to find new and better means to satisfy needs. Together, these characteristics give humans the potential to achieve self-consciousness, rationality, and morality. Nevertheless, it will turn out that such characteristics are more likely to condemn them to a social world of deception, dissimulation, dependence, oppression, and domination.

As human populations grow, simple but unstable forms of co-operation evolve around activities like hunting. According to Rousseau, the central transitional moment in human history occurs at a stage of society marked by small settled communities. At this point a change, or rather a split, takes place in the natural drive humans have to care for themselves: competition among humans to attract sexual partners leads them to consider their own attractiveness to others and how that attractiveness compares to that of potential rivals. In *Emile*, where Rousseau is concerned with the psychological development of an individual in a modern society, he also associates the genesis of *amour propre* with sexual competition and the moment, puberty, when the male adolescent starts to think of himself as a sexual being with rivals for the favors of girls and women.

Rousseau’s term for this new type of self-interested drive, concerned with comparative success or failure as a social being, is *amour propre* (love of self, often rendered as pride or vanity in English translations). *Amour propre* makes a central interest of each human being the need to be recognized by others as having value and to be treated with respect. The presentation of *amour propre* in the *Second Discourse*—and especially in his note XV to that work—often suggests that Rousseau sees it as a wholly negative passion and the source of all evil. Interpretations of *amour propre* centered on the *Second Discourse*

(which, historically, are the most common ones (for example Charvet 1974)), often focus on the fact that the need for recognition always has a comparative aspect, so that individuals are not content merely that others acknowledge their value, but also seek to be esteemed as superior to them. This aspect of our nature then creates conflict as people try to exact this recognition from others or react with anger and resentment when it is denied to them. More recent readings of both the *Second Discourse*, and especially of *Emile*, have indicated that a more nuanced view is possible (Den 1988, Neuhaus 2008). According to these interpretations, *amour propre* is both the cause of humanity's fall as well as the promise of its redemption because of the way in which it develops humans' rational capacities and their sense of themselves as social creatures among others. Although Rousseau held that the overwhelming tendency, socially and historically, is for *amour propre* to take on toxic and self-defeating ('inflamed') forms, he also held that there are, at least in principle, ways of organizing social life and individual education that allow it to take on a benign character. This project of containing and harnessing *amour propre* finds expression in both *The Social Contract* and *Emile*. In some works, such as the *Second Discourse*, Rousseau presents *amour propre* as a passion that is quite distinct from *amour de soi*. In others, including *Emile*, he presents it as a form that *amour de soi* takes in a social environment. The latter is consistent with his view in *Emile* that *all* the passions are outgrowths or developments of *amour de soi*.

Although *amour propre* has its origins in sexual competition and comparison within small societies, it does not achieve its full toxicity until it is combined with a growth in material interdependence among human beings. In the *Discourse on Inequality*, Rousseau traces the growth of agriculture and metallurgy and the first establishment of private property, together with the emergence of inequality between those who own land and those who do not. In an unequal society, human beings who need both the social good of recognition and such material goods as food, warmth, etc. become enmeshed in social relations that are inimical both to their freedom and to their sense of self worth. Subordinates need superiors in order to have access to the means of life; superiors need subordinates to work for them and also to give them the recognition they crave. In such a structure there is a clear incentive for people to misrepresent their true beliefs and desires in order to attain their ends. Thus, even those who receive the apparent love and adulation of their inferiors cannot thereby find satisfaction for their *amour propre*. This trope of misrepresentation and frustration receives its clearest treatment in Rousseau's account of the figure of the European minister, towards the end of the *Discourse on Inequality*, a figure whose need to flatter others in order to secure his own wants leads to his alienation from his own self.