# From: B. Russell, *A history of western philosophy, 1945*

## Hobbes’s Leviathan

**An outline by B. Russell**

It is supposed that a number of people come together and agree to choose a sovereign, or a sovereign body, which shall exercise authority over them and put an end to the universal war. I do not think this “**covenant**” (as Hobbes usually calls it) is thought of as a definite historical event; it is certainly irrelevant to the argument to think of it as such. It is an explanatory myth, used to explain why men submit, and should submit, to the limitations on personal freedom entailed in submission to authority. (…) The covenant must confer power on one man or one assembly, since otherwise cannot be enforced. “Covenants, without the sword, are but words” (President Wilson unfortunately forgot this). The covenant is not, as afterwards in Locke and Rousseau, between the citizens and the ruling power; it is a covenant made by the citizens with each other to obey such ruling power as the majority shall choose. (…) A multitude so united is called a commonwealth. This “Leviatan” is a mortal God. (…) This is the exact antithesis to the views of Locke and Montesquieu. The English Civil War occurred, says Hobbes, because power was divided between King, Lords and Commons.

**Russell’s interpretation**

Let us now try to decide what we are to think of the Leviathan. The question is not easy, because the good and the bad in it are so closely intermingled. (…) The merits of Hobbes appear most clearly when he is contrasted with earlier political theorists. He is completely free from superstition; he does not argue from what happened to Adam and Eve at the time of the Fall. He is clear and logical; his ethics, right or wrong, is completely intelligible, and does not involve the use of any dubious concepts. (…) Without criticizing Hobbes’s metaphysics or ethics, there are two points to make against him. The first is that he always considers the national interest as a whole, and assumes, tacitly, that the major interests of all citizens are the same. He does not realize the importance of the clash between different classes, which Marx makes the chief cause of social change. (…) Another point in which Hobbes’s doctrine is unduly limited is in regard to the relations between different States. There is not a word in Leviathan to suggest any relation between them except war and conquest, with occasional interludes.

# Exercises

## Use of English

Practicing your language skills

1. **Find synonyms for the word “covenant”.**
2. **Find the adjectives Russell uses to describe Hobbes’s political view.**

## Writing

Interpreting secondary sources

**3. Some lines of the text are underlined. Why? Russell is surely thinking about some politics and social facts. Which ones? Write a short essay (600-700 words).**

## Locke’s political philosophy

**An outline by B. Russell**

He begins by supposing what he calls a “state of nature”, antecedent to all human government. In this state there is a “law of nature”, but the law of nature consists of divine commands, and it is not imposed by any human legislator. It is not clear how far the state of nature is, for Locke, a mere illustrative**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**, and how far he supposes it to have had a historical existence; but I am afraid that he tended to think of it as a **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**that had actually occurred. Men emerged from the state of nature by means of a **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_** which instituted civil government. This also he regarded as more or less historical. But for the moment it is the state of nature that concerns us.

What Locke has to say about the state of nature and the law of nature is, in the main, not original, but a repetition of medieval scholastic doctrines. Thus Saint Thomas Aquinas says: “Every law framed by man bears the character of a law exactly to that extent to which it is derived from the law of nature. But if on any point it is in conflict with the law of nature, it at once ceases to be a law; it is a mere perversion of law”. (…) Property is very prominent in Locke’s political philosophy, and is, according to him, the chief reason for the institution of civil government.

**Russell’s interpretation**

The whole of this theory of the state of nature and natural law is in one sense clear but in another very puzzling. It is clear what Locke thought, but it is not clear how he can have thought it. Locke’s ethic, as we saw, is utilitarian, but in his consideration of “rights” he does not bring in utilitarian considerations. Something of this pervades the whole philosophy of law as taught by lawyers. Legal rights can be defined: broadly speaking, a man has a legal right when he can appeal to the law to safeguard him against injury. A man has in general a legal right to his property, but if he has (say) an illicit store of cocaine, he has no legal remedy against a man who steals it. But the lawgiver has to decide what legal rights to create, and falls back naturally on the conception of “natural” rights, as those which the law should secure.

# Exercises

## Use of English

Practicing your language skills

1. Read the first paragraph of the text carefully and fill the boxes with the correct word.

He begins by supposing what he calls a “state of nature”, antecedent to all human government. In this state there is a “law of nature”, but the law of nature consists of divine commands, and it is not imposed by any human legislator. It is not clear how far the state of nature is, for Locke, a mere illustrative \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, and how far he supposes it to have had a historical existence; but I am afraid that he tended to think of it as a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ that had actually occurred. Men emerged from the state of nature by means of a \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ which instituted civil government. This also he regarded as more or less historical. But for the moment it is the state of nature that concerns us.

**contract – stage – hypothesis – social**

## Writing

Interpreting secondary sources

2. Having read Russell’s excerpt, write answers to the following question.

Russell’s sympathy is not for Locke. Why? Does he have internal or external argument against him?

## Listening

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00h9lz3/episodes/player>