

Might, Rights, and Natural Law



In a classic *Calvin and Hobbes* strip, Calvin declares to his tiger friend Hobbes, “As far as I’m concerned, the ends justify the means. . . . Might makes right. It’s a dog-eat-dog world so I’ll do whatever I have to and let others argue about whether it’s ‘right’ or not.” Without warning, Hobbes shoves him into a puddle. A mud-covered Calvin comes up spluttering, demanding an explanation. Hobbes smiles: “You were in my way. Now you’re not. The ends justify the means.” Calvin protests, “I didn’t mean for everyone—JUST ME!” Hobbes’ raised eyebrow says the rest.

The humor hits home because it exposes a temptation as old as humanity: we like moral rules that restrain others, not ourselves.

What is “right”? And what are our “rights?” Our answer to these questions shapes not only our laws but our national character.

Today’s America seems locked in endless conflict over competing claims of rights: a right to life, a right to abortion, a right to property, a right to healthcare funded by taxing someone else’s property, a right to security, a right to self-defense, a right to sexual liberty, a right to religious liberty, a right to define and speak one’s own truth. The list grows longer; the divisions deepen. Much of our political turmoil reflects fundamentally different answers to the question: What is the source and limit of rights?

For some, the answer is a question of power. Whichever coalition can command 50 percent plus one—or control the most powerful institution—gets to define which rights prevail. In effect: might makes right.

That view is most closely associated with 17th century philosopher Thomas Hobbes (not the cartoon tiger). Hobbes imagined a “state of nature” in which individuals exist in a perpetual “war of all against all.” In such a world each person has a natural right to do anything in the interest of self-preservation. Society and government exist only as a human invention to escape chaos. Only brute force exercised by others limits power.

But America’s origins are not Hobbesian. Our philosophical foundation was largely influenced by John Locke. Writing in the 17th century, Locke agreed with Hobbes that individuals are by nature free and equal and that legitimate government rests on consent. But Locke introduced a crucial distinction: *natural law*.

Locke argued that all people are subject to a higher moral order. These natural laws are the source of rights and duties—which belong equally to all—kings and peasants alike. Rights, he argued, are inseparable from duties, and natural law binds us not only to defend our own lives, liberty, and property, but to respect and protect the equal rights of others.

The concept of natural law changes everything.

Under a Hobbesian framework, politics becomes a permanent tug-of-war among competing interests. Every debate is zero-sum. Every election feels existential. Power shifts; rights shift with it. No principle stands above the fray.

Locke's natural law framework elevates the political conversation. If rights come from a source higher than government, then neither majorities nor courts may redefine them at will. And if those rights belong equally to all, then my freedom is bounded by my obligation to respect yours. Equality is not achieved by forcefully elevating one group over another, but by applying the same standard to all.

Admittedly, grounding rights in "nature's God" is more challenging in an increasingly "Godless" culture. Yet even those that reject traditional religious foundations inevitably construct moral frameworks of their own. The debate is not really whether moral limits exist, but who defines them—and on what authority.

When the debate gets heated, we must remember that the American experiment was never premised on isolated individuals battling for dominance. Contrary to Hobbes' assertion that nature placed individuals alone to fend for themselves, we all enter the world in families. We survive and flourish in communities. Our freedoms were secured not by solitary actors, but only by mutual sacrifice.

These convictions echo in our Declaration of Independence, which appeals to "the laws of nature and of nature's God." In it is found, not merely a bold claim of individual rights, but a unifying moral vision: that certain rights are unalienable because they are endowed upon all by the Creator of all. That claim binds us together as much as it frees us.

To the degree we honor our common commitment to natural rights—and the corresponding duties they impose—we preserve the promise of ordered liberty—Americans and America as One Nation Under God. To the degree that we abandon that common commitment we should not be surprised to find ourselves, sooner or later, figuratively face-down in a Hobbesian mud-puddle.