

## The Country of No-Nation

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*“...this is not at all the original state of men” (Rousseau 1984, 136)*

### **The State of Nature and the Social Contract**

“State” – what a beautifully ambiguous word. A word referring both to the nation state we find ourselves in, and the inner state of mind we use to perceive and change it. This all-encompassing word for our outer and inner world also alludes to that mythic-philosophical origin of mankind – “the *state* of nature”. Such a trinity of meaning makes “state” the ideal word with which to imagine another state of being, another “state of men” (Rousseau 1984, 136).

In imagining a different now, we must first cast our minds back to the origins of that now. Today, the state of nature is but a distant dream. Or a looming nightmare. This original state of unity of man, with no laws or conventions separating him from his fellow beings, is either a harmonious utopia to yearn for, or a violent dystopia to dread. What man would do to man in that original state is a quarrelsome question that still ripples throughout the fabric of our social contract. After all, it is the question that sparked the contract itself. This *original contract* suffocated mankind’s natural unity in the state of nature and substituted it with a contractual unity of a *civil state*. It was the exchange of individual natural freedoms for the common security and benefit of the collective. A voluntary act, a leap of faith, to try to live better lives in unison. Millennia later, however, both this choice and the memory of it is gone. David Hume writes of this “*original contract*” and postulates that it “may be supposed too old to fall under the knowledge of the present generation” (Hume 1994, 189). For Hume, this foundational contract, “being so ancient, and being obliterated by a thousand changes of government and princes, it cannot now be supposed to retain any authority” (Hume 1994, 189). The loss of this original contract is what I will address.

Although the state of nature's original unity of man is long gone, it is still present in our state of *mind*. It has become a theoretical realm, useful only to imagine what came before, and what might follow after, the civil society that buried it. Human unity, however, continues to inspire thinkers far and wide to question whether or not the nation state of today is the best way realise it. "Today the ideal of human unity is more or less vaguely making its way to the front of our consciousness. The emergence of an ideal in human thought is always the sign of an intention in Nature" (Aurobindo 1997, 280). For Sri Aurobindo, Nature has a plan. She has a *telos* for us, and it is in the spirit of teleology that I situate my argument. My *telos*, however, is in the distant mythical past, in the natural state of freedom in which the original contract was entered into. Yet my aim is not our physical return to that state but rather our collective theoretical recovery of it. It is a theoretical return to Nature so that we may make the original leap of faith into civil society again, continually, for each generation. I am therefore writing in a teleological spirit but with a cyclical aim. And my argument is a mental exercise to test, and continually re-test, that choice made by our ancestors millennia ago. Of Nature, Sri Aurobindo writes that "She tempts humanity, her thinking instruments, and tests how far it is ready for the harmony she has imagined" (Aurobindo 1997, 280). I surrender to that temptation. As her thinking instrument, I cast my mind towards our primordial unity – the *state of nature*.

This original state is full of problems and disputes. Thomas Hobbes writes that certain creatures such as bees and ants can peacefully coexist in nature, but that "men are continually in competition for honour and dignity, which these creatures are not; and consequently among men there ariseth on that ground, envy and hatred, and finally war" (Hobbes 2000, 156). Conversely, for Rousseau the state of nature "is the one most conducive to peace and the most suited to mankind" (Rousseau 1984,

98). Nevertheless, even Rousseau admits that “The original state of Nature, [...] could no longer endure, and the human race would have perished had it not changed its manner of existence” (Rousseau 1948, 254). The very fact that this original state is but a spectre in our state of mind is enough to conclude that, whatever it was, it was untenable. We developed and started looking for other ways to coexist. Like Aurobindo, G. W. F. Hegel envisions unity as our teleological end, not guided by Aurobindo’s Nature but lead by the world’s *Geist*. For Hegel, at the end of history, mankind’s “supreme duty is to be a member of the state” (Hegel 2000, 156). This kind of civil or nation state seems today to be the most accepted end to man’s historical and intellectual development. I, however, envision another *state* as our end.

### **The State as a “State of Continuous Development”**

I argue that the nation state need not be the permanent end to man’s intellectual-historical development but can rather be a temporary *state of continuous development*. A state that preserves the original freedom of the original choice. A state that even though it suppresses the state of nature, still manages to give its citizens continuous chances to reevaluate and reaffirm the *original contract*. I therefore envision an intermediary state longing and looking towards some Rousseauian state of nature “most conducive to peace and the most suited to mankind” (Rousseau 1984, 98). Interestingly, we can think of ourselves as living in a Rousseauian state today. Yet it is a *nation state* founded on a *social contract*. This nation state has subsumed our individual wills, remnants from that original state of nature, to some *general will*. Nevertheless, “There is often considerable difference between the will of all and the general will. The latter is concerned only with the common interest, the former with interests that are partial, being itself the sum of

individual wills” (Rousseau 1948, 274). There are then, broadly speaking, two sets of wills in our current nation state. To imagine the state of unity which Nature has intended for us, the original position in which the crucial choice that led to now was made, these two wills must return to one.

To imagine this, I turn to ancient India. Reconciling and realising the individual self in the universal Self is the principal teaching of the Upanishads. “*Tat tvam asi* (That art thou)” (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 38) is their ultimate wisdom, and knowing one’s individual “*Atman*” is “*Brahman*” (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 38) is the supreme knowledge attainable to man. I want to bring this teaching into dialogue with the social contract. I want to imagine a state where the will of the individual becomes the will of the general. A state where every individual *atman* becomes the universal *brahman* and their respective wills become one. This realisation, this dissolution of the individual in the general, will both complete and dissolve the social contract. The citizens, having realised they are nothing but the general will of all, that they are the universal Self, will leave the nation state behind and re-enter the state of nature. A state of original unity in the one true reality – *brahman*. This is the apex of my vision of another state for mankind, one not founded on a permanent social contract, but a temporary *social curriculum*. It is a state of learning geared towards continually reevaluating itself.

In *The Taittiriya Upanishad* it is declared that “Learning and teaching are necessary for spiritual progress” (Easwaran 2007, 250). This spiritual progress is towards unity in *brahman*. However, complete unity in such a *general will* is impossible without reconciling “the sum of individual wills” (Rousseau 1948, 274) with it. This is the gap that must be bridged. Interestingly, according to *The Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, this separation between the individual self and the universal Self *does not exist in reality*.

“The Self is indeed Brahman, but through ignorance people identify it with intellect, mind, senses, passions” (Easwaran 2007, 114). The two competing wills in the social contract is then nothing but an illusion born from ignorance. Learning and teaching should therefore be an integral part of any state based on a social contract. It is this kind of education that will reconcile its two wills in the general, in *brahman*. This realisation of *atman* in *brahman* produces citizens who “see themselves in everyone and everyone in themselves” (Easwaran 2007, 115-116). In such a state there can be no enmity, since its citizens are “Free from evil, free from sin and doubt, they live in the kingdom of Brahman” (Easwaran 2007, 116). Therefore, the state that dispels the illusion of the individual will, will become the perfect state for mankind.

Nonetheless, having, in a sense, reset the choice that birthed the state, the state inevitably dissolves. Subsumed by the whole, the individuals that entered into that foundational social contract are no longer present. They exist no longer for themselves but only in the general. The contract is then no longer enforceable and the state it instituted is no more. Consequently, its citizens are released back into the only state available to them – the state of nature. “What a frightening prospect!”, one might say. “No”, I answer. For then one has forgotten what they have learned. “Until we realize the unity of life, we live in fear. For the mere scholar who knows not the Self, his separateness becomes fear itself” (Easwaran 2007, 254-255). These released citizens *have* realised the unity of life. They are beyond separateness, having become one with *brahman*. “When one realizes the Self, in whom all life is one, changeless, nameless, formless, then one fears no more” (Easwaran 2007, 254). Enlightened beings initiated in *brahman* need not fear the state of nature. They are no longer “continually in competition for honour and dignity” (Hobbes 2000, 156), “they are free because all their desires have found fulfilment in the Self” (Easwaran

2007, 115). They find themselves without a nation state, but within a larger and greater one – as cosmopolitan citizens in the state of *brahman*.

### **The State as an Unnecessary Necessity**

A sceptical mind might say that these citizens are right back where they started, as if they never left the state of nature to begin with. It is true that the state of nature is the same, but *they are no longer the same*. Think of what they have been through as a rite of passage, of “*separation—initiation—return*” (Campbell 2008, 23). The rite of passage that springs to mind is one of separation from the community, initiation in nature, and return to the community. What I envision is the precise *inverse* of that. Our citizens have been separated from the state of nature, initiated by the state, and then returned to the state of nature. They have returned, however, *initiated in brahman*. The state, then, as a temporary institution of learning, is like Buddha’s *Dhamma*. It “is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping” (Nanamoli and Bodhi 2005, 228). Having gotten the knowledge we need from the state, it should be abandoned. We have merely used it to cross from one state of nature to another.

A skeptical mind might insist, however, that the state is then unnecessary. There seems to be little point in instituting it for the sole purpose of dissolving it.

Nevertheless, “The passage from the state of nature to the civil state produces a truly remarkable change in the individual” (Rousseau 1948, 262). Again, it is not the state of nature that changes, but *man*. By initiation in the civil state “his faculties will develop, his ideas take on a wider scope, his sentiments become ennobled” (Rousseau 1948, 262). Therefore, “he would unceasingly bless the day which freed him for ever from his ancient state, and turned him from a limited and stupid animal

into an intelligent being and a Man” (Rousseau 1948, 263). This educational state is then something which should be welcomed as the beginning of knowledge. Yet it must only be welcomed with the foreknowledge that it must be left behind once its purpose has been fulfilled. It is precisely for this reason that ancient Indian wisdom is key. “India knew that society was not the ultimate end of man, but the collective endeavour of individuals was the best way towards liberation” (Tagore 1961, 89). The rite of passage I envision is one of individuals in the state of nature, forming a collective state for their common education, so that they may safely return to the freedom in the state of nature. Aptly, this is also how Rabindranath Tagore describes “the soul’s normal progress”: “From individual body to community, from community to universe, from universe to Infinity” (Tagore 1961, 94). This journey goes beyond the civil or nation state as the end. It is what allows me to say that *the state is nothing but a state of development* for ensuring a universal state of nature, of *brahman*, in perpetuity. It is an unnecessary necessity. Unnecessary in that it leads back to the state of nature. Necessary in that it transforms man along the way.

With the social contract dissolved, we are faced with what comes next for man. Our citizens have been released from their societal chains and are reborn free in the universal Self. “One who meditates upon the Self and realizes the Self sees the Self everywhere, and rejoices in the Self. Such a one lives in freedom and is *at home wherever he goes*” (Easwaran 2007, 140, my emphasis). What better way to describe a cosmopolitan citizen than one who is at home anywhere! This was the freedom before the original contract. It was the state of original unity, and what I imagine is a generation of selves living in *brahman* returning to it through learning. However, it is just *one generation*. In ensuring the permanence of the state of nature, the continuous freedom to make that fateful choice again and again, generation after



generation must pass through the same rite of passage. This requires a continuous making and breaking of the social contract. It must be made and unmade *ad infinitum*. Fittingly, this is also the very nature of our reality according to Henri Bergson. Being a “perpetual becoming”, our reality “is either making itself or unmaking itself, but it is never something made” (Bergson 2022, 239). Consequently, not only is a permanent nation state contrary to the state of the soul, it is contrary to *the state of reality*.

The “state” I have described is therefore something to be matriculated in and graduated from. This is the core of my argument – the social contract must become a *social curriculum*. Instituted as an education of reversal, it must undo our fall from the state of nature. According to Rousseau, “the true founder of civil society”, and consequently the destroyer of the state of nature, was “The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying ‘This is mine’ and found people simple enough to believe him” (Rousseau 1984, 109). Being simple, being ignorant, is then what led to mankind’s fall from his original state. Only by *unlearning* the false teachings of that prime mover of civil society can man return. Man must learn to be “free from the sense of ‘I’ and ‘mine’”, for only then “he attains peace” (Gandhi 2009, 33). That unlearning, however, is not a return to simplicity. It goes beyond man to *the true prime mover*, namely *brahman*. As *The Bhagavad Gita* teaches us: “Those whose intellect is suffused with That, whose self has become one with That, who abide in That, and whose end aim is That, wipe out their sins with knowledge and go where there is no return” (Gandhi 2009, 82). “That” is *brahman*. “That” is the permanent state of nature. “*Tat tvam asi* (That art thou)” (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 38).

Thus, the nation state is an unnecessary necessity. It is inevitable, yet need not be unsurpassable. Resting on a social contract, it can be transformed into a social curriculum. A social curriculum that undoes the very conditions that gave rise to it so that every generation can choose for themselves what state they want to live in. To return to the state of nature, or to reinstitute the nation state, that is the question. And what I have imagined is a theory of how everyone can get to answer it. It is a process where the state strips you bare of the state so that you may choose if you really want what it gives, and what it takes. Imagine going back to where you began, to the state of nature. Yet you are no longer you. Having been stripped bare of “I” and “mine”, even of yourself, you realise your individual will in the general will. You realise that your individual *atman* is the universal *brahman*. You realise “*Tat tvam asi* (That art thou)” (Radhakrishnan and Moore 1957, 38). The social contract then dissolves. The nation state withers away beneath your feet, putting you back in touch with the original state of nature, of pure natural unity and freedom. Having graduated from the social curriculum you are at home anywhere, residing in the state of *brahman*. Then, and only then, is the original choice of your ancestors yours.

This is the other “state” I imagine. Not an end but a journey. A continuous journey comprising the whole trinity of the meaning of the word “state”. Our minds, our surroundings, our origins. I imagine this so that we maybe one day can say: “this *is* the original state of men.” What do you want to do with it?

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