

# Hyrule and the State of Nature

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Link, the faultless hero, does everything in his power to restore Zelda and her Royal Family's right to rule over Hyrule. This seems to describe what happens in most of the games. But *should* we accept the moral and political assumptions at play? Do the diverse inhabitants of Hyrule such as the Rito, Zora, and Goron really have reason to comply with the rule of the Hyrule Royal Family, simply because "they are chosen by Gods?" And should we really be so accepting of Link's unchecked power over others? After all, he can violate the rights of others at will, for example, by entering their homes uninvited, breaking their pots, or throwing their Cuccos.

With these questions in mind, the setting of two recent games in the series, *Tears of the Kingdom* (TOTK) and *Breath of the Wild* (BOTW), have a significant feature. In this setting, Hyrule lacks a common political authority. After the Great Calamity, both Zelda and Ganondorf are sealed away in Hyrule castle, unable to rule over their would-be subjects. Although there are various communities—the Rito, Zora, Goron, Gerudo—with various social rules and norms, there is no overarching political authority or shared law.

This setting contrasts sharply with other games in the series. In *Ocarina of Time*, for example, Hyrule is unified, for a time. After the Hyrulean civil war, even Ganondorf had sworn fealty to the King of Hyrule, placing himself and the Gerudo under his power—at least until his acquisition of the Triforce of Power. Or consider *Skyward Sword*, which takes place in an isolated and unified political community, existing on a sky island (Skyloft), without awareness of or contact with others (Figure 1.1). Both *Link's Awakening* and *The Wind Waker*, too, involve isolated political communities that share a unified political authority.

By contrast, the shared world of TOTK and BOTW, characterized as it is by a *lack* of political order, presents a distinctive setting, and one that has been significant, in different forms, in other genres as well (think of the Zombie apocalypse scenarios in games such as *Dying Light* or *The Last of Us*).

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**Figure 1.1** Riding his Loftwing Link approaches Skyloft, existing as its own isolated political community (*Skyward Sword*, Nintendo Wii, 2011).

Since long before the *Zelda* series, however, imagining a world without political order has been an important starting point for philosophical reflection. At least since Thomas Hobbes’s (1588–1679) *Leviathan*, originally published in 1651, philosophers have conceived of what it would be like for people to live without a central political authority—in a so-called “state of nature”—as a basis for theorizing about central issues in political philosophy.<sup>1</sup> These issues include, first, the nature of political legitimacy—involving the question of what, if anything, gives a government or ruler the *right* to rule; and second, the nature of political freedom—involving the question of what it means to be free in the sense required by justice. Now, let’s see how these two issues connect with the state of nature found in *TOTK* and *BOTW*, examining them alongside important philosophical contributions, both canonical and contemporary.

## Do We (and Hyrule) Need Political Authority?

The state of nature is a theoretical device or thought experiment intended to clarify what, if anything, could confer legitimacy, or a “right to rule,” to a political authority or government. A political authority has legitimacy when its subjects have genuine reason to comply with its directives, and is distinct from rule by mere force or coercion.

To illustrate, imagine Link is exploring Hyrule Field when a gang of Yiga clan members approaches and demands 100 rupees, threatening to kill Link if he does not comply. This may not be a very credible threat, perhaps, depending on how far Link has progressed in terms of having

acquired Heart Containers and high-attack weapons. Nevertheless, the gang could give Link *one kind of reason* to comply with their demands. Perhaps Link doesn't have so many hearts or a strong weapon, and the threat is credible. Or perhaps he'd rather be spared the inconvenience, and 100 rupees is worth less to him than the time it would take to fight off the gang. In these cases, Link would have a reason based on *self-interest* to comply with the Yiga clan members' demands. He has a reason to hand over the 100 rupees either to avoid a Game Over or, at least, a hassle. But this is different from a reason based on *legitimate authority*. Compare this situation with one in which a government demands money in the form of taxes. If that government is legitimate—perhaps the tax money will go to worthy public goods such as roads, schools, and so forth—then that money may be demanded with a genuine kind of authority, and taxpayers may have distinct reason to comply based on that authority and not just their own self-interest.

It is worth noting that some philosophers believe that a government can never have authority in this way. These “philosophical anarchists” believe that demanding taxes is always in a way like a robber demanding money.<sup>2</sup> For these theorists, we may have reasons to obey a government's laws, but these reasons are always based on self-interest or something other than the government's legitimate authority. This position is not widely accepted, however, and many would agree that government, when suitably constituted, can be legitimate. At least, that is, regarding some central functions such as national security and the provision of basic infrastructure.

So, what, exactly, is the state of nature and how is it intended to help us understand this issue of legitimacy? Crucially, we don't need to think of it as an actual or historical state of affairs. Instead, it is a *hypothetical* state of affairs used for theoretical purposes. The central feature, as mentioned, is the absence of shared political authority. This means that each person is free to decide for themselves how they should act. If a dispute arises between two people, each person is free to decide how the dispute should be settled, and if a punishment is warranted. Suppose Link shoots an Arrow at a rabbit, hoping to later prepare a tasty meal. But at the same time, a member of the Yiga clan had the exact same idea. Both Link and the Yiga clan member shoot an Arrow at the same rabbit, neither aware of the other's intention. Both Arrows hit the rabbit, and only then do they realize that the other has also “hunted the rabbit.” Predictably both might view themselves as having a right to the rabbit, and so a dispute would arise. Because of the absence of a shared authority—a common power to adjudicate such a dispute, and secure compliance with a known code of conduct, conflict is likely to arise. In the state of nature, this example generalizes. Without a common power over us to enforce and adjudicate a shared law, there is the ever-present threat of dispute and conflict over various issues that may arise—about who owns what, about how to interpret the terms of different agreements and contracts, and so on.

Because of the ever-present threat of conflict on this basis, Hobbes famously remarked that the state of nature is “a state of war” and life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>3</sup> Hobbes’s view was motivated by having lived through the English Civil War—something to which Hyruleans may relate, at least in the *Ocarina of Time* timeline. But, for many philosophers such as John Locke (1632–1704), this sentiment seemed exaggerated.<sup>4</sup> And it also seems exaggerated when we look at the Hyrule of *TOTK* and *BOTW*. Certainly, there are ubiquitous threats including rampant Bokoblins, Moblins, and so on, not to mention the terrifying Gloom Hands of *TOTK*. And things are particularly bad during the Blood Moon, as players know. But many communities seem to live in relative security, including the Rito, Zora, and Goron. Moreover, these communities follow and enforce various laws; for example, those involving property. This is evidenced by the fact that Link can buy goods from various vendors, as well as own a house. The fact that there are laws that regulate exchange and property ownership in these ways, then, makes it appear that Hyrule is not quite a state of nature in Hobbes’s sense of it being a state of war.

However, even if there is not continual conflict in the state of nature, there is the continual *threat* of conflict. This is evidenced by what happens to Lurelin Village, having been taken over by pirates between the settings of *BOTW* and *TOTK*. Perhaps the same could have happened to Kakariko Village, or any of Hyrule’s other communities. And even if the various communities of Hyrule are fairly stable, we can imagine conflict breaking out *between them*. Suppose, for instance, that the Goron and Zora disagree about who should have exclusive fishing rights at a lake at their border. Without a shared authority, a dispute may arise, posing the threat of a civil war. Thus, even though there are communities in Hyrule such as the Rito, Goron, and Zora that have political order internally, they remain in a state of nature with regard to one another. As such, we might think, agreeing with Hobbes, that in the Hyrule of *TOTK* and *BOTW* there is an ever-present *threat* of civil war.

### **Does the Hyrule Royal Family Have the Right to Rule?**

For Hobbes, the right to rule is based on the ability of a political authority to make life better for people than what they would experience in the state of nature. People have reason to obey a political authority because it can provide security and assurance that would be otherwise absent. An implication of this view, according to Hobbes, is that even a tyrannical or oppressive government could have a right to rule: obeying such a government would be “sensible, in respect of the miseries, and horrible calamities, that accompany a civil war.”<sup>5</sup>

This raises an interesting question about who has a right to rule in Hyrule. Hobbes would argue that were Ganondorf able to gain political authority, he could make life better than that of the state of nature, and on this basis could have a right to rule. In fact, a similar possibility is realized in the Super Nintendo Entertainment System title, *A Link to the Past*, when the King of Hyrule is murdered and the wizard Agahnim takes power. As long as Agahnim secures a life for those under his power better than that of the state of nature, his power is justified.

Of course, Hobbes's position is contestable. We might think that being in a state of nature would probably be better than being under the oppressive rule of the likes of Ganondorf or Agahnim. This would appear to be the case in the state of nature of *TOTK* and *BOTW*. Things are somewhat bad, but they would be worse—and perhaps much worse—under the rule of Ganondorf or another oppressive ruler. As Locke remarked, accepting Hobbes's view “is to think, that men are so foolish, that they take care to avoid what mischiefs may be done them by pole-cats, or foxes; but are content, nay, think it safety, to be devoured by lions.”<sup>6</sup> It seems better, Locke suggests, to be subject to the risk of several smaller threats in the state of nature than a singular but immense threat of oppressive rule.

For this reason, then, we might disagree with Hobbes that oppressive rulers can have a right to rule. Instead, we might think that a ruler's right to rule depends on them securing at least a minimal standard of justice—in other words *not being oppressive*, but instead protecting the rights of their subjects. Indeed, this is the view endorsed by Locke. Even though Locke was less pessimistic than Hobbes about how bad the state of nature would be, he still thought that government was needed to address the disputes (for example, over property rights) that could arise in the state of nature. And so a government is legitimate if it secures the basic rights of its subjects. Perhaps Ganondorf could do this, but it would not be very likely, Ganondorf being who he is. So, we may judge that the Royal Family of Hyrule has a right to rule based on their securing a minimal standard of justice, and indeed making the residents of Hyrule better off than they would be in the state of nature.

There is, however, another important reason to doubt the Royal Family's legitimacy. This is because their claim to rule seems to depend on a kind of religious or metaphysical claim—in other words a claim about “true” nature of God or reality. The Royal Family of Hyrule are said to have descended from the Goddess Hylia, and this legitimizes their claim to rule. In other words, the Hyrule Royal Family claims a kind of “divine right” to rule. For many people today, however, and perhaps for many of Hyrule's residents, the appeal to a divine right is unacceptable. A central reason for this is that people simply do not share the same religious convictions or beliefs about who may or may not have such a divine right. As Hobbes would have urged, these claims are bound to be faced with disagreement, and this is likely to lead to conflict.

With this kind of consideration in mind, the famous 20th-century political philosopher John Rawls (1921–2002) argued that any political authority must be grounded by *public reason*. This means that political power must be in some sense justifiable to the people it governs on a basis they themselves can accept. A society may be made up of diverse people who hold diverse views about matters such as religion and spirituality, and so the justification of political power cannot appeal to any one of these particular views.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, as we see in the *Zelda* games, different groups worship different Gods: the Goron worship Din, or the mountain Goddess, while the Zora worship Nayru. Because these different groups worship different Gods, they may be unwilling to accept the claim that because the Hyrule Royal Family descended from the Goddess Hylia they have political authority. As such, we may have reason to doubt whether the Hyrule Royal family does indeed have legitimate authority over the diverse residents of Hyrule.

## Does Link Make Others Unfree?

Let's turn now to examine the notion of political freedom. Political legitimacy and freedom are connected ideas because, on the face of it, any government restricts or removes people's freedom. In a state of nature, people are free to do as they like, and installing a government looks as if it will remove or reduce this freedom, and so this raises the issue of legitimacy. In another sense, however, the absence of government authority restricting how people may act may also seem to impair people's freedom. If anyone can do whatever they like, then no one will be protected from the interference of others. So a question we can ask at this point is whether and how people might actually be less free in a state of nature than they would be under a shared political authority.

Here Link himself provides a useful point of departure for reflection. On the one hand, he is goodwilled and virtuous. His objectives are noble, usually aiming to save Zelda and restore peace to Hyrule. But on the other hand, he is much more powerful than others and is often able to use that power with impunity. Link is able to enter almost anyone's house as he pleases and break their pots without consequence. Likewise, he is able to throw around people's Cuccos whenever he likes. And despite all of this, he never faces any kind of penalty or consequence. (Only in some cases do the Cuccos gang up to punish him themselves, taking justice into their own talons, as it were.) This may make a player wonder: *could he get away with worse?* And if he could, we may think his unchecked power poses a real threat to the freedom others.

Now, we may wonder whether *actual* interference is necessary to undermine people's freedom, or whether the unchecked capacity of some to interfere with others alone does so. The contemporary political philosopher Philip Pettit illustrates this issue with the following case.<sup>8</sup> Suppose there is a slave

master who could interfere with their slave, say, by ordering them to do various tasks and by punishing them. However, because the slave master is benevolent or “kindly,” they do not, but instead let the slave do as they please. The crucial question, then, is whether this is enough for the slave to be free. On the one hand, the slave can do as they please, because the master is, as stipulated, kindly and noninterfering. On the other hand, the master maintains the power to interfere at any moment, should their goodwill no longer remain. For Pettit, this is enough to make the slave unfree. In particular, the slave is still *dominated*, even if they do not suffer actual interference.

To be sure, it seems that in some way Link is like the kindly slave master—at least in the settings of *BOTW* and *TOTK*. It seems, for instance, that Link has the unchecked power to throw around any nonplayer character (NPC) as he pleases, as he does Cuccos. Of course, the game programming stops Link from doing so, but there is nothing in the world of the game that does. We could imagine that the NPCs around Link *believe* him to have the power to interfere with them, they are unaware of the game programming. In fact, this seems to be the case because, when Link draws his Bow and points it at an NPC, they tend to cower with fear. Here the state of nature setting of *TOTK* and *BOTW* is relevant and contrasts with the settings of other games. For example, when Link is in Skyloft, in *Skyward Sword*, we know that Link is subject to the law of the community: were he to interfere with a person he would be punished. But this is not true in the settings of *BOTW* and *TOTK*. Nowhere is this more apparent than in *TOTK*, when Link interacts with lost Koroks trying to find their friends. Not even the game programming stops Link from interfering with them in whatever way Link wants. Thus, it would seem that Link dominates many of Hyrule’s inhabitants, making them unfree.

Perhaps, then, Link should not be celebrated as an unproblematic hero. Goodwilled as he is, his unchecked power may appear to undermine the freedom of others. Perhaps, also, the Hyrule Royal Family does not have the right to rule over the diverse inhabitants of Hyrule as they claim to—if that involves imposing a religious view not all could accept. It could be that were Ganondorf or some other agent able to bring into existence a shared law that protected everyone equally, on a basis everyone could accept, a more just Hyrule might be realized—whatever the game’s narrative tells us. Alternatively, a more just Hyrule might be realized if the Hyrule Royal Family sought the consent and participation of their diverse subjects rather than ruling only by supposed divine right.<sup>9</sup>

## Notes

1. Thomas Hobbes in Richard Tuck ed., *Hobbes: Leviathan: Revised Student Edition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
2. Robert Paul Wolff, *In Defence of Anarchism* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 1998).

3. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chap. XIII.
4. John Locke in Peter Laslett ed., *Locke: Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
5. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, Chap. XVIII.
6. Locke, *Second Treatise*, Section 93.
7. John Rawls, "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," *The University of Chicago Law Review* 64 (1997), 765–807.
8. Philip Pettit, *Republicanism: A Theory of Freedom and Government* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999).
9. I would like to thank Vince Redhouse for helpful comments on a previous version of this chapter.