

Role of reason in society



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The state of nature and the emergence of the human capacity to reason has been a common interest for writers throughout history. John Stuart Mill, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and John Locke, all address these issues in their works, “On Liberty” , “ Discourse On The Origins of Inequality” and the “ Second Treatise of Government”, respectively. While all three of these authors agree that the state of nature is the era before civilization and government, they all differ in their ideas of the importance of reason in the state of nature. While Mills and Locke adopt a positive outlook on the role of reason in society, Rousseau believes that it is the basis for the corruption of morals.

In John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty, he asserts that the “ natural” human capacity to reason is dependent on debate with those of opposing ideas. According to Mill, the goal of debate is not to persuade the other side to convert its way of thinking, but rather to justify one’s own views while disproving the opposition. Only through this process, can someone truly understand and construct an opinion. Throughout his work, Mill continually asserts the importance of the individual. Every individual is free to form his or her own opinions about life; however, Mill believes that it is necessary to understand the arguments of the opposing party in order to truly understand one’s own opinion. By using reason to establish one’s opinion and refute the ideas of another, one effectively utilizes his “ natural” human capacity to reason in order to form an educated opinion. Without considering the alternative views on a position, the meaning is insufficient to justify one’s claim. Mill stresses that one should not believe anything unless he or she can justify the reasons why the opinion is correct. In order to understand the truth, one is required

to use reason to refute all alternative possibilities. If an opinion is not debated thoroughly, then the meaning is lost.

While Mill adopts a positive outlook on reason, Rousseau's assertion about reason is negative. He believes that reason is responsible for many of the problems that plague civil society. In *Discourse on the Science and the Arts* and *Discourse on the Origin of Inequality*, Rousseau describes man's fall from the state of nature. He describes this state as the condition of man before the development of society and reason. All humans are naturally good and compassionate; therefore, in the state of nature, there is no need for morals or reason. People will do the right thing out of compassion. As reason develops, man is corrupted and experiences a fall from his initial position. Man's compassion eventually evolves into competition, leaving morality out of the equation. Institutions of reason, such as education, are responsible for this need to distinguish oneself from others. The need to be better in comparison to others eventually becomes the motive for one's actions, rather than compassion. This demoralization of humanity is a step that Rousseau does not believe can be reversed. Reason has been corrupted and used to the advantage of self-interest; therefore, its institutions, such as education, cannot be used to restore humans to their natural state.

Locke believes that reason is the governing force in the state of nature, which is expressly different from Rousseau's point of view, who believes that compassion is the governing force in the state of nature and reason is what brought people out of the state of nature. Like Mill, Locke takes a positive look at human's natural capacity to reason. In the state of nature, there is perfect equality. Everyone has the same advantages and capacity for

reason; therefore, Locke believes that everyone should have the same ideas for the Laws of Nature. One example of a natural law that Locke believes everyone should understand and follow is that of self-preservation and the preservation of mankind. “ And Reason, which is that Law, teaches all mankind, who will but consult it, that being all equal and independent, no one ought to harm another in his Life, Health, Liberty or Possessions” (271). These limitations to perfect liberties are in interest of preserving individual liberty and justified through reason. In Locke’s state of nature, every individual has the capacity to use reason to choose the correct moral path. Reason is responsible for mankind’s ability to morally regulate himself in accordance with the Laws of Nature, without the need for a central authority.

Mill, Rousseau and Locke all address the issue of man’s natural capacity to reason and its effect on society. All three authors agree that reason is an important concept, both in the state of nature and in civil society; however, the scope of reason’s influence differs from author to author. Mill and Locke both believe that reason is beneficial to society, but for different reasons. Mill asserts that reason is necessary in order to understand truths about the universe, while Locke believes that reason is the law in the state of nature. Rousseau, on the contrary, believes that compassion is the ruling body in the state of nature and reason is accountable for man’s corruption. While these authors may not agree on the role that reason plays, the fact that they all three address it in their works shows its general significance.