

The organic and mechanistic views of the origins of the state essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Organic and mechanistic are the names given to two very broad and encompassing philosophical views on the origin of the state. After a purely nominal inspection, it might seem quite clear that these theories are opposite and completely isolated from each other, as one suggests something of natural occurrence and the other of human intervention. This, as will become apparent in the body of this essay, is not the case beyond the fundamentals of each theory. There are areas of intercept and overlap existing between the theories.

Moreover, on the black/white spectrum of opposing political beliefs, it can be perceived that state theory is more concentrated in the middle, shades of gray regions, than it is in the outer extremes of either black or white persuasion. It is therefore for the purposes of categorization that the basic and necessary ideologies of each theory can be identified, to thus allow classification of any ideological perspective. Organic theories may generally be classified as theories which hold an almost supernatural view of state origin, outside of which mankind can never find true fulfillment.

Mechanistic theories generally see the state as being of human construct, existing as one social institution among others, performing a specific function. To shed more light on the distinction between organic and mechanistic theories, the views of four political philosophers will be employed. These are Plato and Rousseau, representing the organic theory, and Hobbes and Marx representing the mechanistic theory. Interestingly, few philosophies are ever completely divorced from the historical or social predicament of their philosopher.

The influence of these factors in forming the basis of the philosophers' political thought and by extension his state theory, will be explicitly presented in the further paragraphs. This will show the importance of subjective analysis in the original formulation, and (more importantly for us), in an accurate interpretation of these organic and mechanistic theories. Finally, the theory which gives the more accurate account of the powers of the state in relation to the individual will be stated and demonstrated.

It is said that organic theory was launched on its career by Plato. Plato was born in Athens around 428 BC. He was a student of Socrates and was very much influenced by his teachings, especially the motto of the Delphic Oracle, 'know thyself'. Plato wrote extensively on a wide range of subjects including science, religion and politics. Motivated by his teacher and the predominant intellectual tide of his era, Plato focused more on values and living the 'good life' than on empirical science. His view on state origin thus followed more moral based premises.

Plato believed that evil was due to lack of knowledge, so that discovery of the good life was very much an intellectual exercise. Plato saw the state as no more than an extension of certain principles relating to ethics, idealism, the constitution of the universe and the implications of distinctions between matter and form. For Plato, the world around us is merely an imperfect copy of the world of Forms, which are ideal, in the same way that a painting is an attempt to translate the ideas of the painter on to canvas.

Yet the world of Forms or Ideas is held together by one basic idea – the idea of Good. According to Plato, the state arises out of some basic needs such as food, shelter or clothing, thus leading by necessity to a basic division of labour and a system of exchange. The state therefore naturally evolved from the family and the village, to satisfy those basics. This process of natural evolution immediately gives embodiment to the organic nature of his views. Further, Plato argues that the form of the state should be determined by its goodness, and that the state is but the individual ‘ writ large’.

It is thus concluded that the state must correspond to the good of the individual. The good of the individual therefore determines the good of the state. In this way, the two are almost inextricably linked, without the individual there could be no state. Again influenced by Greek thinking, justice for Plato consists in the allocation of the rational, spirited and appetitive to their appropriate role on the state. These three refer to different classes, with the rational and the spirited forming the ruling and guardian classes, and the appetitive, the working class.

He maintains a deterministic view that each man is born to a specific class (the myth of metals) and receives training appropriately, although he allows for promotions and demotions. This way he ensures that the tasks required for the maintenance of the state are carried out. It is in each man’s acceptance of his lot in life and doing it well, that justice in the state and the individual will coincide. Therefore, it is impossible for an individual to find fulfillment (or justice) outside the state, because it is only in the state that

man can perform the role for which he was destined to perform and truly comprehend the world of forms.

Therefore, although a common good joins the state and the individual, the will of the state transcends individual interest or aspiration because the needs of the state form the determining factor. Plato's concepts of natural evolution of the state and of the moral enrichment to be found in social life, confirms his organic outlook on state origin. This is also reinforced by his totalitarian view of the state in relation to the individual.

The state therefore is not simply an institution functioning to advance a particular class interest, but it is the institution to which all others must conform and through which we derive our identity as social beings, indeed, as human beings. Rousseau is a French philosopher who is regarded as being an organic theorist. His philosophy on state origin is a good example of philosophy existing in gray areas as previously mentioned. His views are in some aspects consistent with mechanistic theory however it can be correctly argued that he is an organic theorist.

Born in Geneva in 1712, he was raised by a pastor because of the death and incarceration of his parents. At 16 he was admitted to a catholic seminary which would be his home for the next ten years. Rousseau published several works from which he got public recognition. His opinions soon became unpopular, especially in the eyes of the Catholic Church, and he was exiled from Geneva and France (his adopted home). It therefore comes as no

surprise that Rousseau should denounce his Catholicism and in *The Social Contract* criticize Christianity for driving a wedge between God and Man.

Rousseau's writings might easily be seen as contradictory but this is only by the person who has built up rigid paradigmatic constructs of theories falling neatly into organic or mechanistic 'boxes'. Because he was under great political pressure at the time of his latter writings, it was important for Rousseau to conserve his unorthodox theory while still being sensitive to the dominant traditional views of his day. His works have thus been subject to much misinterpretation and criticism. Two basic forces, self-interest and selfish interest drive man, according to Rousseau.

He saw man existing in a state of nature where life was indolent, solitary and amoral, concerned to gratify the most basic of his needs. As said by Rousseau, compassion separated man from the animals and it was compassion that gave rise to all other virtues. This gave men the ability to move from selfish identification to a sense of community with humanity. This sense of community multiplied with time and developed into the establishment of family units. The emergence of family developed the institution of private property and the drive towards accumulation leading to the destruction of compassion.

Rousseau described it as such. Usurpations by the rich, robbery by the poor and the unbridled passions of both, suppressed the cries of natural compassion and the still feeble voice of justice, and filled men with avarice, ambition and vice. The state was then offered by the rich to guarantee peace

for all. Upon its acceptance men left their natural liberty and ‘ran headlong into the chains, in hopes of securing their liberty’. Thus, the state for Rousseau exists not for the development of justice or individual fulfillment but to protect the property of the rich against the poor.

This utilitarian view of the state leans more toward mechanistic than organic theory. It suggests the rich made the state for the specific purpose of suppressing the poor. To remedy this injustice Rousseau doesn’t propose a return to the primeval state of nature, for this would be impossible, if not undesirable. Instead he suggests that men should work on the development of institutions which promote justice and equality. This can only be achieved if each man in the state is as free as he was while in the state of nature, but his rights are still protected under law by the collective force of all.

To attain this he develops The Social Contract, by which man escapes the state of nature but cedes his sovereignty only to the General Will of the state. Because, according to Rousseau, man has existed before the state and fashions the state to perform a function through The Social Contract, his view may be looked at as utilitarian and therefore lending itself to a mechanistic theory, but his introduction of the General Will enshrines his theory, however loosely, within organic rudiments. The General Will, for Rousseau, is that will that would be in each individual had they been privy to all the facts.

We are most truly ourselves when this will finds embodiment in our actions. Therefore, the real will in each of us is part of a common will which finds its

highest form in the state. In such an aspect therefore the state is the highest part of us. This conforms squarely with organic theory, which sees the individual and the state as being inseparable. The connection between the state and the individual, according to Rousseau, does not arise from the basic unit of goodness (as Plato would suggest), but from the General Will, which advances as a product of The Social Contract.

Thus the problem of state legitimacy is overcome, because in obeying the state, we are in fact obeying ourselves – or rather, we are obeying that best self which makes us one with and of our fellows and the state. The state is thus the universal, in which each of us as particulars finds our meaning. The General Will thesis consequently qualifies Rousseau's theory as being unequivocally organic. Because preservation of the General Will is so important to the maintenance of justice and equality, Rousseau, unlike Plato, thinks that the best form of government is that of a participatory democracy.

On account of his hybrid views, Rousseau is regarded as the most democratic of totalitarians and the most totalitarian of democrats. Based on the above discussion, the tenets of organic theory can therefore be summarized as theories which; prescribe to the state being of divine origin, possessing a moral basis for sovereignty; attribute a higher moral purpose to the state which transcends individualism; view the state and society as being inseparable, the individual being submerged in both and have a generally totalitarian view of state authority.

Organic views, as seen in contrasting the views of Plato and Rousseau, do not necessarily endorse a specific form a government but suggest the type of relationship that should ideally exist between the individual and the state. The common tread of these theories is this type of relationship between the state and the individual. There is little room for individualism or liberal behavior under organic regimes. This is because all actions have to be performed under the express permission of the state, for the advancement of society.

For Plato, this is achieved when individuals understand the world of Forms and perform the role attributed to them, for Rousseau, this is achieved by obedience to the General Will. Although Rousseau claims that the General Will allows one to regain the liberty that existed in the state of nature, this can only come about after he has surrendered his natural sovereignty, and is thereafter, ' forced to be free'. But, according to Plamenatz, a man's freedom lies in his ability to do us he pleases.

To force someone to be free is to be guilty of oxymoron. So despite justification of the ends sought, organic theories are essentially anti-libertarian in outlook and totalitarian in application. They therefore accord the state as having almost absolute power in relation to the individual. Thomas Hobbes, an English philosopher, was born in London in 1588. He attended Oxford University where he studied the classics. He traveled Europe and studied different forms of government.

Hobbes lived during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, at the beginning of the Elizabethan Era. He also witnessed the Union of the Crowns of Scotland and England by King James VI ; I. Likewise; he believed that only an absolute monarchy was the best form of government. It was the one form of government that could protect the people from their own selfishness and evil because the Crown would have the power of a Leviathan (sea monster). Hobbes, like Rousseau, also put forward a social contract theory through which man finds escape from the state of nature.

He is however considered as a mechanistic theorist because he demonstrated that the state could be set up like any other institution for whatever purpose desirable and he identified the sovereignty of the state as having a legal, as opposed to a moral, basis. Hobbes envisaged man as being selfish by nature. Also there was a relative equality in this primitive state where the weakest was strong enough to kill the strongest and the stupidest was smart enough to outsmart the smartest. Hobbes described this state as a war of all against all.

In Leviathan he says: In such a condition, there is no place for Industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth, no Navigation nor use of commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building: no Instruments of moving, and removing such things that require much force; no knowledge of the face of the Earth; no Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.

It was this state of nature that man sought to escape through the social contract. Man, in Hobbes' opinion was not a social animal but was driven into society by fear and cold calculation. In this contract, the state's main function is to provide security for the masses through the keeping of the peace. To do this, the sovereign would need to have extensive powers which included control of the army, the executive, finance and education. Thus the ideal sovereign power for Hobbes would have been an absolute monarchy (a Leviathan).

These powers, although they may serve alternative functions, exist mainly to fulfill the sovereign's contractual obligation which is security. The security for the citizen that the state provides thus makes possible his private pursuit of other goods. Therefore in this contract, the purchase is security and the price is the individual's sovereignty. Hobbes' mechanistic views take root once again in his concept of rebellion. If the sovereign becomes unable to provide security for the citizens, they then become free of their obligation and can change the political system through rebellion and revolution.

His views on rebellion were personified in the English Civil War and the French Religious Wars, both of which occurred during his lifetime, and possibly influenced his philosophy. Mechanism in Hobbes' philosophy arises also out of the fact that the state was created by mankind for the purpose of providing security for its subordinates. The state's only interest in religion, health or education is a security interest. The state's actions must parallel with the collective expectations of the people, if not they are free to rebel.

This is opposite to the organic view which places the state's will above the will of the individual and gives the state absolute power in relation to the individual. Even Hobbes' mention of the leviathan suggests limited powers. The leviathan, as a human as well, although he has extensive powers at his disposal for the maintenance of security; he only keeps that authority when the people are pleased. His powers must therefore be expended in provisions for the masses rather than in selfish ambitions. Authority for the state therefore evolves from no moral right to sovereignty but on a more legal basis.

The state must perform its legal obligation to provide security while the people execute their legal duty to obey the state – a breach of contract, on the state's part, can lead to a disintegration of its authority to command obedience, because anarchy would be the result of it. Hobbes' mechanistic theory therefore limits state power in relation to the individual and allows for more articulation of the interests of the people in the political arena. The final philosopher representing theories of state origin, who will now be considered, is Karl Marx.

He was born to Jewish parents in Trier, Germany in 1818 (just after the close of the Napoleonic Wars). Six years after his birth, his parents were converted to Lutherans so that his father could keep his job as a lawyer. It is hard to say what consequences this could have had on Marx but his radical criticism of religion as being 'the opiate of the masses' and his theories which attribute economic circumstances as being determinant to all other social

orders (including religion and morals) does strongly suggest it had some influence.

During his lifetime, he was prominent among radical circles but obscure, to the point of unknown, to the rest of the world. However, in the early 20th century, his philosophies became so popular that over half the world's population was living under regimes claiming to be Marxist. Marx believed that the doctrine that the state is something divine, and is not of man, but given to him from without, is very closely bound up in the interests of the exploiting classes, that is the landowners and the capitalists.

This doctrine of the state serves to justify social privilege, the existence of exploitation and the existence of capitalism. Therefore the struggle between different classes is expressed in the conflict of views on the state. Marx's mechanistic views on state origin can be summarized where Marx believes that the state has not always existed but that it appears whenever there is a division of society into classes or whenever exploiters and exploited appear. According to Marx, the emergence of societal divisions (the state) followed a general trend.

There was first primitive society where people were organized into families or small clans. In this society, we find a predominance of custom, authority, respect and power which was enjoyed by the elders of the clan (this may be comparable to the state of nature as articulated by philosophers mentioned previously). In such a society, we find no need for special apparatus for the systematic application and subjugation of the people by force. It is only later

in the development of society that need for this apparatus arises and consequently the state appears.

As the institution of private property began to take deeper root within the bowels of early society and the technology advanced, there was seen the first class division. That was into slaves and slave owners. The former group owned not only the means of production (the land and the tools), but they also owned the slaves. The slave owners regarded the slaves as their property, and the law confirmed this view. The state existed therefore to enshrine the rights of the slave owners to their means of production and to maintain the oppression of the slaves.

This slave system, in most countries, yielded to a successive form of social division – feudalism. Slavery evolved into serfdom. The fundamental division in society was now feudal lords and peasant serfs. It was different from slavery in that, although the feudal lords still owned the means to production, the serfs were not considered to be their property but worked for the feudal lords on a contractual basis. Despite the fact that the peasants did not have many rights or freedoms, this form began the trend that lead to systems of more representation of the people.

With the development of trade, the appearance of the world market and the rise of the power of money, there derived the power of capital. Feudalism was soon abolished and replaced by capitalism, under which class divisions remained assuming a different form. The owners of capital, who are always the minority, oppressed and exploited the whole mass of labourers. Thus in

all – society transitioned from slavery to feudalism and finally to capitalism. In these systems, the state has always been the executive committee of the dominant class, and the apparatus which possesses certain means of coercion.

Consequently the state is seen as the machine for maintaining the rule of one class over another. If there were no classes, there would be no need for a machine of this sort and there would be no state. Marx is therefore saying that not only was it possible for society to have existed before the creation of the state, but that it is possible for society to exist even after the state. To achieve this, Marx predicts that the society will develop through two more stages – socialism and communism.

It is only when private property is abolished and communism arises that they will be a withering away of the state. Marx's mechanistic theory proposes therefore that not only can man create the state but that he also has the power to destroy it. The state's will seems to be representative only of the interests of a particular class. The state owns the means of coercion but it does not have absolute power in relation to the individual. A summary of the views championed by the organic and mechanistic theories of state origin as pronounced by Plato, Rousseau, Hobbes and Marx, would be presented as follows.

The organic theory supports views of the state that claim a divine quality or a natural evolution to its creation. The state and society are one, and cannot exist without the other. The individual is liable to the state on moral grounds

and can find no fulfillment outside of it. And finally that the will of the state is greater than the individual wills of the people so therefore the state has almost absolute powers in relation to the individual. The organic view is basically totalitarian. The mechanistic theory says that the state is a man made institution.

The state was created to achieve a particular purpose, and all other exploits are indirect products of that function. Man is under no moral connection to the state and has the power to rebel against it. His oath of duty to the state arises from a legal basis. The state's powers are not absolute in relation to the individual. The mechanistic view is basically utilitarian. It is therefore left to conclude that the theory which gives the most accurate account of the powers of the state in relation to the individual is the mechanistic theory.

The state, at least the modern state, cannot suppose a totalitarian view of their powers in relation to the individual. Yes, although the state has extensive powers, it can only keep those powers if it realizes the individual's sovereignty (even if it is short lived). Therefore individual interests play an important role in the state's existence. The state is actually more dependent on the individual for its survival, than is the individual is dependant on the state for his. The organic view simply does not compensate for this and cannot therefore present an accurate representation.

The state has to be based on utilitarianism, where the state uses the individuals just as the individuals use the state. State power is not absolute. This concept is even more applicable now in the emerging globalization era

where international law plays a vital role and may even be seen as infringing on national sovereignty. The mechanistic theory, as purported by Thomas Hobbes and Karl Marx, thus offers a more accurate account of the power of the state in relation to the individual.