

State of nature



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What is the state of nature? The state of nature is a term in political philosophy that describes a circumstance prior to the state and society's establishment. Philosophers, mainly social contract theory philosophers, and political thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean Jacques Rousseau discussed and considered the "state of nature" as a starting point to their political and philosophical ideas. John Locke, whose work influenced the American Declaration of Independence, believes that the state of nature is the state where individuals are completely equal, natural law regulates, and every human being has the executive power of the natural law. Similarly Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose writings are said to influence the French revolution, also assumed a state of nature prior to the formation of a "political person". However Rousseau had a different view about the state of nature. According to Rousseau the state of nature is a condition where private individual interest dominates over the public good and general will. John Locke in his Second Treatise of Civil Government addresses the issue of state of nature. According to Locke, The state of nature is a condition earlier the development of society where all individuals are free and equal. Furthermore, it is a state where power and jurisdiction is "reciprocal". (Locke, 1690) No man has power over another and individuals are entirely equal. However, this liberty does not permit individuals to harm other's freedom or property. Therefore the state of nature has "a law of nature to govern it, which obliges every one" (Locke, 1690). This law of nature is reason according to Locke. Reason compels individuals to be all equal and not harm another's "life, health, liberty, or possession", and whoever does not abide by this law enters a "state of war". Moreover, Locke states that whoever violates the law of nature violates the "law of reason".

In the state of nature, each individual is responsible to implement the law of nature. Locke argues that every human being has the right to "punish" the transgressors if they offend his or her liberty or property. An offender in the state of nature is a danger to mankind, according to Locke, and man has the right to punish this transgressor in order to protect mankind on one hand, and to frighten the offender and by his example other aggressors from future offences on the other hand. This punishment, however, must be proportional to the strength and degree of the offence. However, Locke affirms to the objections that it is unreasonable for men to be judges of their own case, and that "self love will make men partial to themselves and their friends... and revenge will carry them too far in punishing others" (Locke, 1690). Locke therefore explains that civil government, which is established by "common consent", is the "proper remedy for the inconveniences in the state of nature". The main purpose of establishing a civil government according to Locke is to protect the freedom and security of individuals. As previously mentioned, in the state of nature each individual holds the executive power of the law of nature. Therefore, there is no such thing as a juridical authority in the state of nature. However such an authority is established when a civil government is recognized with the aim of resolving arguments fairly. When a juridical authority is established in a civil government the individual is no longer viewed as the executive power of the law of nature, and the former is solely responsible to "punish" the transgressors. In addition, Locke argues that in a civil government individuals cannot gain power or authority over others since all men are required to equally obey civil laws put by the juridical authority in the civil government. Although Locke affirmed that the state of nature is an insecure state, he viewed this state as the most "

peaceful and pleasant state". Similarly, Jean Jacques Rousseau hypothesized the existence of a state of nature prior to the formation of a government. In addition, Rousseau akin to Locke believed that all human beings are born free and equal. Also both Locke and Rousseau believed that individuals do not lose their freedom when they exit the state of nature and no man will have power over another. However, Rousseau had a different view on the state of nature. According to Rousseau, in the state of nature all individuals are equal. Therefore, no man has power over another except through force. Rousseau argues that in the state of nature, human beings behave and act according to their own private interest. In contrast to John Locke, Rousseau claims that the law of nature is the " law of self preservation". Men, according to Rousseau, have no responsibilities toward others in the state of nature since they are motivated by their personal benefit. Rousseau argues that in the state of nature individuals reach a point where they face difficulties and obstacles in the " way of their preservation in the state of nature". Therefore men have no other choice than to unite and aggregate " sum of forces great enough to overcome the resistance" (Rousseau, 1762). This sum of forces will formulate a " single motive force" which can be brought into existence in the case where several individuals come together. This causes a problem though, how can an individual bind their forces together and form a society with others and still maintain his or her freedom? Rousseau explains that the social contract provides the proper solution for this " fundamental problem". This social contract is established when individuals " surrender" their natural liberty to gain civil and moral liberty. In addition, the " public person" established as a result of the social contract is a distinct and unified body and has a life and will of its own.

Rousseau identifies this " public person" as the republic or " body politic", and " it is called by its members State when passive , Sovereign when active, and Power when compared with others like itself" (Rousseau, 1762).

Furthermore, Rousseau states that the conditions of the social contract are the same for all individuals. Therefore it is in no one's interest " in making them (social contract's conditions) burdensome to others" (Rousseau, 1762).

In addition, Rousseau argues that when the social contract is formulated, individual's freedom is preserved since no person has power over one another. Rousseau in many ways considers the " sovereign" to be an individual person. Rousseau argues that, " each individual, in making a contract, as we may say, with himself is bound to in a double capacity" (Rousseau, 1762). They are bound to themselves as a member of the " sovereign", and bound to the " sovereign" as a member of the state. In addition, the " sovereign" cannot injure the individuals because by that it would be injuring itself, and it cannot defy the social contract that was the reason of its existence. In the state of nature, the individual will and the personal interest dominates the public's interest and general will. However, Rousseau claims that when the civil society is established, the opposite is true. The " general will" and public interest has a bigger significance over the individual's will and private interest. However as mentioned earlier this does not mean that the freedom of the individual is taken away, it is rather preserved. In conclusion, both John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau agree that a " state of nature" exists before the formation of a type of a " civil government" or " political body". They also both argue that man is free and equal; however they both differ in many ways concerning the state of nature. John Locke believed that all human beings are completely equal and free in

the state of nature. Also Locke believed that the law which governs in the state of nature is reason which is the "law of nature", and every individual is considered the "executive power" of this law. Whereas, Jean Jacques Rousseau considers that individuals in the state of nature are driven by their personal interests and benefits. Furthermore, Rousseau considers that the state on nature will face hindrances at some point of time that will result in the formation of a "sovereign" political body under the conditions of the social contract.