

[Home](#) > [Imam Khomeini, Ethics and Politics](#) > [Part 1: Imam Khomeini's Code of Ethics](#) > [Man in the State of Nature](#) > Imām Khomeinī's view

Man in the State of Nature

One of the questions that preoccupy the thinkers' mind is this: In essence, what is man—angelic or devilish? Assuming that there had been no powerful institution to administer and control human beings, in such a case what would have been the people's behaviour toward one another? Would they have mutually respected and observed their rights, or would they, like wolves, have fallen on and torn one another apart?

Any sort of answer to this question necessitates the existence of a specific political and educational system. If we say that the human being is intrinsically wicked, in that case we will inevitably need to perpetually control individuals. If we declare that man is innately angelic, it follows that we have to remove all restrictions and limitations, and set him free.

In this context, in order to comprehend the Imām's viewpoint well, we cannot help but embark on the subject by touching on the views of other thinkers as well, and to study their historical circumstances. Hence, we will deal initially on the viewpoint of Thomas Hobbes[56] on this issue as well as his famous statement, "Man is the wolf of other man." Subsequently, we will explore the view of Jean-Jacques Rousseau,[57] and then examine the Imām's point of view. As such, we will approach the discussion from the following three (3) angles:

- Hobbes' view;
- Rousseau's view; and
- Imām Khomeinī's view.

Hobbes' view

Thomas Hobbes was one the greatest English political thinkers. He was a skeptic philosopher. As he

failed to present exact and fixed foundations for ethics, he resorted to cynicism and accepted relativism in ethics. With the denial of the exact foundations of ethics, he had no alternative but to present a principle for it in society.

It is owing to this that he arrived at the conclusion that for the appearance of morality in society, we are in need of a centralized and resolute authority that would maintain and promote public morality. In the political realm, he was anti-democracy and a partisan of absolute monarchy. He believed that only in the presence of a centralized authority could the morals of society be preserved. His beliefs were greatly influenced by the events of those days in England as well as the civil wars there.

One of the key concepts of Hobbes is the expression, 'man in the state of nature'. What is meant by 'the state of nature' is a hypothetical state wherein there is no political institution and administrative organization existing in the society, the people being left to their own business and to do whatever they like.

Since the instinct of love and defence of one's self is very strong in everybody, the people would be at each other's throats and would destroy one another: "In the state of nature in which everybody is his own master, one is at odds with the others concerning the nomenclature of things, and it is these differences that give rise to disputes and conflicts." [58]

Life in such a society is very difficult, laborious and perilous; in the words of Hobbes it is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." [59] According to Hobbes, in no way is this kind of living to one's benefit and advantage. Therefore, members of society themselves come to the conclusion that they have to choose a person or persons and give them enough and complete prerogatives to maintain security and so prevent individuals from assailing one another. 'Civil society', 'commonwealth', '*civitas*' and 'country' are all born of this.

According to Hobbes' view, civil society is the opposite of the state of nature, the latter being nothing but life in the jungle and even worse, for it is possible for the animals to have rules and regulations for themselves and to respect one another's domain; yet human beings in the state of nature are not like that.

Such an approach to human beings draws Hobbes toward absolute monarchical rule, totally centralized authority and the creation of powerful and commanding supervisory organizations, drags him totally away from populism, and makes him conclude, thus: "It is, therefore, clear that so long as there is no government over the people to compel them to obey, they will exist in a state, which they have named 'a state of war', this war pitting every individual against another." [60]

Hobbes' views on ethics, human beings and politics are highly controversial. Many are those who have repudiated or endorsed them, have uncovered their inner contradictions and shown his contradictory statements one by one. In the words of Richard Tock: Even during his life time Hobbes was reputed to have conflicting thoughts. He was regarded as a stubborn debater and an irascible dogmatist; yet, he

would vigorously assail any kind of dogmatism. He was strongly against the notion of the authority of the Church as was, for example, exerted over the universities; yet, he wanted his philosophical works to be adopted as textbooks in them. While extolling and commending liberalism, he used to support absolute rule that exercises complete authority over intellectual activities.[61]

The most important criticism levelled against his pessimistic view on man is that if human beings, as what he says, are so bloodthirsty, how did they arrive at the conclusion that they themselves should create an establishment that would prevent them from transgressing against others? Hobbes replies that they had come to this conclusion through their sound reasoning. In that case, it is the same sound reasoning, which is superior to their instincts and directs them toward a life devoid of want and hostility; this, however, is not meant to be a critique of Hobbes' outlook.

Rather, we are after articulating this perspective on man. It was an outlook that deeply influenced later thinkers who showed each of these influences in one way or another. The interesting point on the works of Hobbes is that he gave the title, *Leviathan*, to his most important political writing; what he meant by Leviathan was the same centralized ruling authority. Leviathan means a legendary sea-monster that devours everything. It is this oddity and irony that the government's position can possibly annihilate its citizens and, at the same time, its existence is necessary.

Anyhow, Hobbes' standpoint on the human being has its roots in the older tradition of Judeo-Christian faith. In fact, according to both the Old and the New Testaments, man is sinful and innately impure. It is this legacy that reaches Hobbes and which he theorizes, and on the basis of which he lays the foundation of his ideal political system. According to the Book of Genesis,[62] Adam and Eve ignored the commandment of God not to go near the forbidden tree, and due to the temptation of the serpent, they ate the fruit of the tree. As a consequence, they earned the wrath of God; they were expelled from heaven and were sent down to the accursed world.[63]

The sin that was committed by Adam and Eve, according to the Judeo-Christian tradition, did not embroil only them; rather, this sin passes down from generation to generation of humankind, and is deemed as being part of man's nature. Accordingly, man is inherently sinful and, by nature, evil. This sinfulness is not only restricted to human beings for "even the heavens are not pure." [64] According to the ancient Psalms of David, "Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me." [65]

Paul, the greatest official exponent of the Christian Church and the promoter of Christianity, in his epistle to the Roman Christians thus claims,

"What shall we conclude then? Are we any better? Not at all! We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. As it is written: 'There is no-one righteous, not even one; there is no-one who understands, no one who seeks God'." [66]

Elsewhere, he concludes that “the whole world is a prisoner of sin.”[67]

At any rate, sin is among the rudimentary concepts in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The human being is said to be inherently imprisoned in its clutches; he will be born with it and it has a place in his natural disposition [*fitrah*]. Only through faith is it possible for him to absolve himself. Such an approach to the nature of mankind, regarding sin to be at one with man's nature, provided fertile ground for the emergence of pessimistic and anti-democratic notions of persons such as Hobbes. As a result, we come up against a theory that reckons man as wolf unto another, regards him as innately evil, and believes that there must always be an authority to control him by forcible means.

Rousseau's view

Jean-Jacques Rousseau's (1712–1778) view is diametrically in opposition to that of Hobbes. His thoughts had a positive influence on the Great Revolution of France. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, on which his famous statement has left its imprint, owes him too much. In the beginning of his celebrated book, *The Social Contract*, Rousseau writes, “Man is born free; but he lives everywhere in slavery.”[68] Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights thus also states: “All human beings are born free and equal in...rights.”[69]

In contrast to Hobbes' view and the traditional notion of the Church based on the sinful nature of man, Rousseau believed that man in the state of nature is decent, well-mannered, free-minded, and peace-loving, and that it is the society which corrupts him. In his opinion the debasement of man commences when he joins the civil society and relinquishes his own freedom. A human being left to himself would never resort to attacking others and waging war against anybody:

Man is by nature amiable and timid; he runs away from the least danger. He acquires a pugnacious temperament by virtue of habits and experience. Pride, interest, prejudgments, vengeance, and all yearnings that can draw man to welcome the risk of death do not exist in nature. It is only when man enters human society that the thought of assaulting others enters his mind. After becoming a citizen he changes into a soldier. Therefore, man, by nature, has no inclination to wage war against his fellow human beings.[70]

So long as man lives in the lap of nature and is not a captive of society, he is in harmony and intimacy with all the constituent parts of nature. His needs are limited and can easily be met. Neither is there any sign of avarice and covetousness, nor envy and the killing of one another:

We see him eat his fill under the oak, drink water from the first spring that is within reach and quenches his thirst. He spreads out his bedding under the same tree that provided him with food. In this manner; all his needs are satisfied. The earth is absorbed in its natural productive processes, and a substantial part of it is covered with vast expanses of forest.[71]

It is regrettable that this state of affairs does not last long. It is not clear why man abandons this comfort and serenity, and decides to establish a human society. This act is tantamount to forfeiting one's own natural freedom and destroying one's own pure nature and natural disposition; for "it is the society that corrupts and defiles human beings... the more human beings gather together, to the same extent will they be further corrupted." [72]

The source of human wars and conflicts is the desire to own, which in turn is an offshoot of society. It is this longing for possession that drives human beings to kill one another, and causes so much bloodshed:

The first person who erected a wall around a plot of land and said, 'This is mine,' thinking the people to be so naïve as to believe him, was the actual founder of civil society. If someone had pulled out the wooden stakes around the above-mentioned land... and had shouted to his fellowmen, 'Do not listen to this swindler; land belongs to everybody,' the world might have possibly been safe from crimes, wars, homicide, rancour, vengeance, and suffering.[73]

In short, Rousseau's views which are mainly found in *The Social Contract* and *Discourse on the origin of the lack of equality*, gave rise to different and conflicting reactions and his naturalist understanding became highly controversial. One of the fiercest oppositions was expressed by Voltaire,[74] another one of the enlightened philosophers. Rousseau, who had much attachment to him, sent him in 1755, a copy of the book, *Discourse*, on the origin of the lack of equality. While expressing gratitude to him, Voltaire replied, thus:

I have received the book that you have written against the human race, and wish to thank you for it. Such intelligence had never been applied to fool us people. By reading your book, people would like to walk on their two hands and two feet. But for me, since I abandoned such a habit sixty years ago, I feel, with all regret, that to begin it again is beyond me. To search for the savage people of Canada is also not possible. The ailments with which I am afflicted have put me in need of European surgeons. Moreover, there is a war going on in those regions, and copying our actions has also made the savages corrupt like ourselves.[75]

As such, contrary to Hobbes, Rousseau puts emphasis on the pure nature of man and regards the civil society as its demolisher. In view of the fact that there is no possibility of perpetuating the state of nature and, in effect, such a state has never existed, being more hypothetical than real, Rousseau's solution is

the acceptance of civil society provided that it is based on the social contract and guarantees individual liberties. Yet, in practice, Rousseau's idea stems from either the negation of government and attacking society or results in a self-centered government. It is this point that thinkers have seriously dealt with but is beyond the ambit of our discussion.

However, what is interesting for us here is his outlook on the nature of man. He holds it immune from any kind of blemishes and has reckoned even training and education as corrupting this wholesome natural disposition [*fitrah*]. In the book, *Emile*,^[76] he suggests that we should completely leave the child to himself to grow in whatever way he likes as in the case of wild pennyroyal, and be one with nature.

If Hobbes used to view the nature of man so pessimistically and regarded the existence of a powerful government to be indispensable for deterring human beings from aggression against one another, Rousseau stands on the proposition that in reality it is the society and government that tarnish the clear nature of man, the best state of man being that very state of nature.

Imam Khomein's view

These two traditions and perspectives have both advocates and antagonists. They have been put to the test time and again and have shown their shortcomings. Doubtlessly, each of these two outlooks possesses a part of the truth.

If human beings are left to themselves and no law or moral principle controls them, certainly egoism would sway them to compete with and, finally, obliterate one another.

Apparently, the cynical outlook of Hobbes is more in consonance with reality than the positive view of Rousseau. In Islamic anthropology, strong threads [of the reality] can be seen from Hobbes vantage point.

According to Qur'anic narration, since God announced to the angels His intention of creating man and appointing him as His vicegerent on earth, they asked all together in protest: ***“Wilt Thou place therein one who will do harm therein and will shed blood, while we, we hymn Thy praise and sanctify Thee?”***^[77]

In this objection of the angels, they indicated two points: one, this human creature would be a blood-shedding being; the other, they (the angels) were more deserving than man to be the vice-regents of God. What is important for us is the first point. The angels, for certain reasons, used to point to the shedding of blood and cruelties of this creature, perceiving the big and disastrous wars written on his face.

Interestingly enough, God neither rebuffed their views, nor said to them that man will not be murderous.

Instead, in various instances, including this one, He put the stamp of approval, and described man as iniquitous and imprudent.[78] God answered them with only a single sentence: ***“Surely I know that which ye know not.”***[79]

This general statement conveyed to the angels the fact that God also knows the other side of the coin of man's existence while they see only his murderous aspect. In such a way, He told them that though man is murderous and cruel, there is a more important feature in him that justifies his creation and appointment as God's representative on earth. In this manner, murder and bloodshed have been moulded in the existence of man and he has an inborn inclination to transgress his bounds and perpetrate tyranny.[80]

Of course, this point should be mentioned that this trait has no relation whatsoever to the Christian notion of Original Sin. According to the Glorious Qur'an, both Adam and Eve, too, were recalcitrant and disobeyed God's commandment; as a consequence, they were expelled from paradise and sent down to earth.

Nevertheless, after realizing their error, they repented and God, in turn, accepted their repentance, and the spiritual taint of that recalcitrance was wiped out. God, the Most High, states that Adam was beguiled by Satan: ***“And Adam disobeyed his Lord, so went astray. Then his Lord chose him, and relented toward him, and guided him.”***[81]

Thus, this point has no bearing at all on the Christian belief on the original sin of man. Such is the nature of man, egoist and self-centered.

This is the truth of the matter. Man possesses a predatory and destructive makeup. This is what Freud[82] called, 'instinct of annihilation' and considers it one of the two fundamental instincts of man. It is the same instinct that has been the cause of the ruinous and widespread wars throughout human history, has spawned great tragedies, and been responsible for father killing son, and son killing father. Of course, this instinct is vital in the life of man. If human beings were not egoistic, they would not have been able to contend with other animals and natural disasters, and would have been exterminated.

From this perspective, man is not different from predatory animals and is subject to the law of 'kill or be killed'. He destroys others in order to provide for himself, and gives priority to himself over others. The Imām describes this aspect of man in the following terms:

It is evident that at the time of his birth, after passing through certain stages, man is no better than a weak animal and has no distinction over other animals, except for his potentiality of becoming a human being. That is, his humanness is potential, not present. Therefore, man is an animal in actuality in the initial stages of his life in this world. No power but the law of animal nature, which governs through the faculties of Desire [*shahwah*] and Anger [*ghadab*], rules over him.[83]

Historical observations and reflections of thinkers corroborate and uphold this view and perspective; yet, this is not the end of the story. Man is murderous; yet, his pursuit is not only bloodshed. He is an animal; yet, he does not remain within the bounds of being animal [*hayawāniyyah*]. It is true that since the moment of his entering the world of existence, man is subject to the logic of animal life and in the words of the Imām:

Though it is not directly relevant to our topic, it is essential to know that the human soul is by nature and instinct inclined to believe not only in the principle of *tawhīd* [monotheism], but to follow all truthful doctrines also. Yet, since the moment of birth and stepping into this universe, man starts growing and developing along with his natural urges and animal desires.[84]

In spite of this, man can let his other aspect prevail over this aspect. This other aspect of man is evident to God though hidden and concealed to the angels. This aspect of man's existence is the very *fitrah* [natural disposition], which has been given remarkable emphasis in our religious texts. The key solution to this concern is the *fitrah*, which have recently been given much attention by Islamic thinkers such as the late 'Allāmah Tabātabā'ī[85] and Mutahharī,[86] and on the basis of which they have proved and established a great deal of knowledge and learning.

Fitrah means natural disposition and origination. In reply to the question concerning the noble *āyah* [verse], which states: "*The nature (framed) of Allah, in which He hath created man,*"[87] Imām as-Sādiq ('a) stated that it meant that God created all the people with a monotheistic instinct.[88]

According to the Imām, *fitrah* does not exclusively mean *tawhīd* [monotheism], as "it includes all the true teachings which God Almighty has ingrained in the nature of His slaves"[89] and these have been moulded in their being and personality.

The Imām elaborates on the role and place of *fitrah* in the human instinct, as well as some of its manifestations, in the exposition of the eleventh *hadīth* in his *Sharh-e Chehel Hadīth*. The most important principle of man's *fitrah* is his being monotheist; second, belief in the hereafter; and third, acceptance of the principle of prophethood [*nubuwwah*]. Another decree on man's *fitrah* is:

The natural inclination to seek perfection [that] is so universal [in] that if all the eras of human existence are probed and each of human individuals, no matter to what group or nation he may belong, is questioned, a love of perfection will be found to be part of his nature and his heart will be found to be pulled toward it.[90]

It is possible that owing to the influence of some circumstances or type of upbringing, individuals may have diverse opinions on the meaning and connotation of perfection. In essence, however, nobody holds a dissenting view. Everyone is looking for something which he thinks is better [and] similar is the case of men of science and craft and that of the entire human species. Whatever the activity and field of their concern, their eagerness grows with achievement and is directed toward the higher degrees of perfection. The more they progress and advance, the more their eagerness grows for the higher degrees

of perfection; its fire is never extinguished and becomes more intense every day.[91]

It is the same inclination to perfection and excellence that drives forward the caravan of human civilization and learning, and turned the early humans, who were afraid of the fierce and dreadful animals, into masters and rulers of the planets. It is the same penchant for perfection that eclipses man's murderous nature and makes him determined to overcome his defects and display the excellences in him. It is the same essence of *fitrah* that renders possible the founding of communities and civil society. It is the very quintessence that brings to the fore the murderous man's merit to be the Vicegerent of God and the epitome of divine attributes.

Had it not been for this essence, no social contract—whether in the world of imagination or in that of reality—would have been concluded; human beings would never be willing to give up some of his interests and tolerate others. So, Hobbes in saying that man is the wolf of another man and Rousseau in opining that man is, by nature, pure and peace-loving, are both right. Each of them has seen one facet of man's being. But if man were only wolf, the establishment of a civil society would not have been possible. On the other hand, if he were only angelic and peaceful in nature, do all these crimes and murders then make sense?

Hence, man is both this and that, but at the same time, is [purely] neither this nor that. In this context, the view of the Imām is both realistic and optimistic. He propounds that when man is born, he possesses abundant potentialities for deriving excellences as well as instincts for his security and survival. In fact, since the time he sets foot on earth, man is in need of attributes that could keep him away from dangers.

In this aspect, he is not significantly different from the other animals. Self-love, the need for food and drink, and the need to ward off danger and to reproduce are all attributes common to human beings and other animals. But, man does not remain in that stage as he possesses the capability to go beyond it and attain spiritual perfections while the other animals are devoid of that potentiality and only revolve in the vicious cycle of their instincts.

In view of this, this monotheistic and perfection-seeking disposition is the demarcation line between human being and animal. Nonetheless, it does not necessarily mean that as he enjoys a truth-seeking disposition man is no longer in need of training and education, and that every human being actually possesses all excellences. Man is *de facto* no less than an animal. It is only through self-edification that he can elevate himself from that position, leave behind him the degrees of existential perfection, and finally reach a station that is beyond imagination.

In short, from the viewpoint of Imām Khomeinī, man in the state of nature is a ruthless and self-centered creature possessing strong egoism, and in the words of the Imām, an adherent of the logic and “law of animal nature.”[92]

However, his monotheistic and perfection-seeking disposition—provided that it constitutes the basis for

growth and development—compels him to overcome his self and his animalistic logic, and to tread the path of perfection, and go beyond the stages of Divine Proximity, becoming the vicegerent of God and all-encompassing embodiment of His Attributes. But, this proximity to the Divine Presence is commensurate to the exit from the door of selfishness and self-worship as “the gnostic journey toward God and the spiritual migration does not take place without leaving the dark house of the self and the disappearance of its traces.”[93]

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