
UNIT 2 STATE OF NATURE AND THE 'NOBLE SAVAGE'*

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

The aim of this unit is to familiarize you with Rousseau's ideas of the State of Nature and The Noble Savage. After studying this unit, you should be able to:

- State reasons for Rousseau's State of Nature : His background
- State reasons for Rousseau's criticism of Enlightenment
- Understand Rousseau as a Republican
- Understand the emergence of civil society

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) is regarded as the greatest thinker the French have ever produced. He was a critic of enlightenment ideas. He believed that luxury and affluence have degraded the morality of human beings and has made him selfish and individualistic. He criticized the proliferation of arts and sciences that have caused depravity in society. Rousseau was a keen moralist who believed in the tall moral order of society. Rousseau understood that it is impossible for man to go back to the state of nature where he lived a peaceful and contented life.

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So he wanted society to be governed by morality. Rousseau was one amongst the three thinkers including Hobbes and Locke who enunciated the theory of social contract.

Inequalities existing in the French society of eighteenth century shaped Rousseau's political thought. Though he was regarded as one of the controversial thinkers who had contradictions and paradox in his ideas some regard him as the greatest mind of enlightenment. Contradiction in Rousseau's thought can be observed where he champions revolutionary changes in society on one hand, and defends the status quo on the other. Rousseau said that man would go for perfection that will allow him to abandon the peaceful state of nature and form civil society but at the same time he would like to sustain the formation of civil society, as it gives him a platform to advance his civilization.

The confusion persists over where Rousseau should be placed. Some regard him as an individualist who believed in upholding the freedom of individuals. Others considered him to be a collectivist as he gave priority to the *General Will*. For this reason, he is also regarded as a *Modern Totalitarian*. But others also call him a romantic collectivist for his General Will theory.

2.2 LIFE AND TIMES

‘Trust your heart rather than your head.’

The romanticism of Rousseau in the age of reasoning gained him immense popularity that invited the envy of notable stalwarts in philosophy namely *Diderot, Hume and Voltaire*.

Rousseau was born on June 28, 1712 in Geneva that was a city-state at that time and had embraced Protestant culture. Protestantism arose in protest against Catholicism and it refuted papal supremacy and sacraments. Originated in 16th century reformation, Protestants asked for reforms in the ill practices of the Church that was very powerful in Western Europe and was plagued by internal struggles for power and corruption. Protestants believe that God can be attained by good and noble works rather than relying on proficiency of sacred knowledge or being born in a particular race and caste.

Rousseau's father was amongst the 1500 eligible male citizens out of a population of 25,000 who was constituted in the General Council and had the right to vote. Geneva had a system of General Council that was governed by all the eligible male citizens, but they did not have any real powers. In reality, it was ruled by some 20 members of patrician families belonging to aristocrats and the upper class. But the voting rights created enough division between the ordinary class and the bourgeoisie. From 1707 to 1738, Geneva was a witness to the constant conflicts between the patricians and ordinary citizens over governance issues that also stimulated his writings on popular sovereignty and General Will.

Rousseau was born to a mother who hailed from an upper class family and his father was a watchmaker. Rousseau's mother died in just nine days after giving him birth and his father abandoned him when Rousseau was ten. Rousseau was taken care of by his mother's brother who attended a reputed school along with his cousin. Having to fend off his expenses, Rousseau took up an apprenticeship with an engraver at the age of 13 after completing his schooling whereas his cousin was sent off to an army training. His adverse social circumstances shaped his philosophical thoughts to an extent that he said "Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains". At 16, Rousseau abandoned the work, got converted to Catholicism and became a vagabond moving from one European country to another. He came in liaison with many women from whom he also enriched his philosophical ideas. *De warrens*, whom Rousseau called the greatest love of his life, introduced him to the world of letters and ideas. At the age of 30, he moved to Paris and tried his hands at music, theatre, opera, poetry and writing. He also developed an intimate relationship with *Theresa* during this period who bore him five children and all were later abandoned in orphanage. This act came severe criticism of many philosophers including Voltaire. Hailing from a lower middle class family background and holding on to the belief that riches and wealth are a cause of immorality and corruption, he shunned the city life and moved on to the countryside. There he produced his notable works, *The Social Contract* and *Emile*. During his stay at different places, he befriended many great philosophers namely Diderot, Hume and Voltaire. With no formal training and an incomplete education, Rousseau's intellectual tryst with philosophers and his travels helped him in his self-education. The book *Confessions* that was published posthumously, in two parts, in 1782-1789 has the autobiographical details of the Swiss author.

Rousseau is a product of his times. He existed at the time when absolute feudal order reigned large. Hierarchy was the order of the day and political privileges and power and social prestige were confined to nobility and aristocracy. Access of decent standard of living and survival became difficult for the commoners. The expenses for the profligacy of the ruling classes were borne by the masses in whom the discontentment and disenchantment were brewing. A new class of French bourgeoisie emerged that joined hands with the peasantry and desired change of the social, political and economic order. Class conflicts and desire for change strengthened the calls for the revolution finally leading to the French Revolution in 1789, eleven years after Rousseau's death. Rousseau's ideas on equality, freedom and democracy provided the much-needed leadership to the ideas and lent a strong foundation to the thoughts of the revolution. That is why Rousseau is also regarded as the *spiritual father* of the French Revolution. It is also important to note that though he was an Enlightenment thinker giving modern ideas of equality and democracy, he did not come close to modernity. For him, modernity has resulted in immorality and corruption and devoided the individual of feelings. Reason has replaced the sentiments of an individual making him cold and pleasure seeking. For this reason, Rousseau was also called as a romantic.

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. Discuss the life and times of Rousseau.

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2.3 ROUSSEAU’S CRITIQUE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

“Man is born free but everywhere he is in chains.”

These contradictory lines of Rousseau in his seminal work *The Social Contract* reflect his love for freedom and happiness and sadness over the loss of it in modern society. Rousseau has attacked enlightenment as it enchains and enslaves the individual to the unnecessary needs and demands in life. Modernity has brought along with itself extravagant demands and needs which is contrary to his real self and he pursues those things just to fit in a society. He aggressively nurtures ambitions and goals and many a time, even marginalizing his fellow being. This has taken a toll of compassion, empathy, love and warmth. Man has become selfish in modern society. He looks at others as his competitors and not a part of society. He learns to rule and exclude rather than cooperate, enjoy and becoming a part in a society. Man forgets his real nature and starts conforming to the vanity of civil society. This makes him isolated from his real self and he becomes morally void. Modernity, according to Rousseau, has made man morally corrupt. It has deprived him of his sentiments, feelings, love and happiness and made them more self centered, competitive and aggressive towards others and himself. And this cunning behavior of man has been institutionalized by the creation of the modern state. Rousseau believes that the formation of *the modern state* has furthered the vices of modernity. The modern state has been created for the purpose of self-preservation. The purpose of the modern state is not to look after the well-being and happiness of the individual, but rather to preserve the distinction between the rich and the poor. Since, the superfluous wants of the modern man cannot be satisfied in a modern society, so it becomes important for him to oppress the other. The reason for his non-fulfillment of demands is that he is *not* in his *real self* where he will be satisfied with minimal resources required for survival. But in modern society, he seeks comfort in luxury and wastes or exploits resources for his cheap thrills. Man turns into a pleasure-seeker in modern society. The sustenance of his pleasures can only happen when he deprives the other being of his rightful resources. Therefore, he marginalizes the

weak and does not allow them to emancipate. The mechanism of the modern state and its laws are designed in such a way that it allows each man to pursue his selfish gains. He concentrates wealth and power to aggrandize himself and oppresses the poor and the weak. Therefore, modern state sows the seeds of hierarchy and derives benefits in sustaining divisions in society. The relationships are then based on money and private interests rather than on trust, sociability and welfare. Therefore, the civil society which was built for mutual interdependence and mutual aid has now become an arena where men pursues their self-interest and work only for their own advantage. Modern state and civil society have, therefore, sowed the seeds of conflict and discontentment in society. For this reason, Rousseau despises modernity and enlightenment. He says modernity is not the indicator of progress and prosperity; rather, it is a sign of depravity and an impoverished mind. It has resulted in the destruction of good life.

Rousseau also attacks *arts* and *sciences*. In his first major *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* in 1750 that won the prize in an annual essay competition organized by the Academy of Dijon. The question asked in the competition was 'Whether the progress of the Arts and Sciences has contributed to the purifying of the morals?'. And Rousseau answers it *negatively*. He was not in favor of the idea that Arts and sciences are an indicator of progress and human civilization. He articulates "Our minds have been corrupted in proportion as the arts and sciences have improved". He rather says that Arts and sciences have become a cause of moral corruption. The nourishment and sustenance of arts and sciences requires an ambience of luxury and comfort. It is required to feed the idle curiosity of men. Only the rich and the upper class can derive the pleasure from the Arts and sciences as the poor and the weak have no idle time and luxury to rejoice in it. Arts and sciences have further perpetuated the distinction between the rich and the poor. Lot of money is spent to preserve those arts and sciences whereas the marginalized have to guard those very same commodities that have caused their impoverishment. The modern society is, thus, characterized by inequality and injustice.

Rousseau says "The arts, literature and the sciences, less despotic though perhaps more powerful, fling garlands of flowers over the chains which weigh them down. They stifle in men's breasts that sense of original liberty, and cause them to love their own slavery."

Rousseau's infamous essay *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* led to a lot of criticisms in which it was argued that he has simply underestimated the cruelty of the barbarians in ancient society. To which Rousseau replied that private property, wealth and inequality are the prime motivators of injustice and immorality in modern society.

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. Why did Rousseau criticize Enlightenment?

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2.4 ROUSSEAU AS A REPUBLICAN

Rousseau was a republican at heart. He favored that society should be governed with the consent of man and there should not be an imposition by a majority on a minority. He admired the virtuous life in the ancient cities of Greek and Rome. According to Rousseau, these cities were built on the virtues rather than the comfort, luxuries and oppression of men. Virtues mean good citizenship in which men work efficiently and do their duties well. For Rousseau, state has to be formed on the basis of virtues and in a civil society, men have to give up their private wishes for the benefit of all. The size of cities was so small that everybody knew each other and there was no difference between the ruler and the ruled. Though he also said that there was a need to improve upon this and moral education is a pre-requisite for a sound civil society.

2.5 STATE OF NATURE

Rousseau believed that the modern state and civil society are the artificial constructs of the human. The purpose was self-preservation. They aimed to sustain the distinction between the rich and the poor so that the powerful and rich can enjoy the luxuries and comfort at the cost of the poor. The state and civil society are not natural, but an artificial edifice. It is man-made. It, therefore, becomes important to understand how state and civil society originated.

Rousseau bases his theory on the state of nature. He joins the triumvirate along with Hobbes and Lock to enunciate his theory on the state of nature.

He says man is not primarily a social and a political being. He also does not have rationality in him. In the state of nature, man does not require a reason because his interaction with his fellow being is very limited. Since he has no social life, so words and communication have not been founded. For Rousseau, man in the state of nature is just like any other animal. He is free and roams around in forest in search of his food. He tries to secure his minimum necessities of daily life. His needs do not include any comfort and luxuries of life, but has simple needs of food, clothing and minimal shelter. Man in the state of nature does not have the tendency of accumulation also. They are not afraid of their future. Since the resources are freely available in nature to man, therefore he does not accumulate also. Man is not frightened of death because he does not conceive it. He just avoids pain to himself and does not intend to harm others.

For Rousseau, man in a state of nature is idle. He enjoys his freedom from danger, freedom from lack of resources and freedom from inequality and injustice. He is in one with nature and has no demand that is in conflict with nature. He is able to enjoy his existence and his true being. He possesses no evil qualities of greed, concentration of wealth, killing, harming others. He makes a move only when it is required for him to have his bare necessities. Only a man who has foresight, a desire for accumulation and fear of the future that he moves beyond his natural capacity and starts working and oppressing others.

Man in a state of nature has two fundamental passions- one, desire to preserve himself and second, a pity and sympathy for those who are suffering. The second feeling does not put him in conflict with nature and other beings. He lives in peace and does not intervene and harms his fellow beings. Since nature provides for free his bare necessities, he does not find the need to interact or compete for resources. Therefore, man needs no virtue or qualities in the state of nature. Virtues are required only when the functioning of the society has to be organized and ordered. Since, the state of nature is already peaceful and naturally well organized, virtues are not a pre-requisite. Even morality cannot be commented upon because whatever man does, is for his own appeasement and pleasure without harming the other.

All the men are by themselves. There is no inequality in access to natural resources as no one person or authority has the control of resources. Even if the men are different in terms of physical strength, there is *no* Darwinian state in society. Survival of the fittest rule does *not* apply here. A big fish eats a small fish is not applicable in Rousseau's state of nature. So differences in physical strength are not important, as there is no conflict or war over resources. This is entirely different from the description of state of nature given by Thomas Hobbes and John Locke.

Hobessian state of nature was horrid and cruel. It resembled a state of war. Hobbes describes man as solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short. In his pre-political and pre-civil society state, man is always fighting with another for his survival. His life is always under threat. In this volatile environment, there is no industry, no knowledge, no civilization, no culture, no navigation, no use of commodities, no arts and letters, no time, and danger of death is always lurking. That is why men mutually agree to form a State that Hobbes names it as *Leviathan*. The powers of Leviathan are absolute, undivided and unlimited. Hobbes does not grant the men the right to question or revolt against the state. The purpose of the formation of Leviathan is that of self-preservation. If any individual feels that the sovereign has become incapable of protecting his life, only in that condition can the individual resist and refuse the authority of the state. Hobbes's political philosophy on social contract has to be read in his context. A 17th century English philosopher, Hobbes lived through the *English civil war*. A long and a bloody struggle between the parliament and the crown shaped his political ideas.

John Locke was another social contractarian. But his state of nature was *not* a state of war like Hobbes. Locke's state of nature was a state of freedom and equality. It was a state of peace, goodwill, mutual assistance and preservation. Men governed according to the *laws of nature*. And the laws of nature were based on reason. Men were granted liberty and equality, but within the limits of reason. They were not supposed to harm other individuals. There was a difference between liberty and license. Liberty is based on reasoning whereas license is unhindered freedom without taking care of any one's rights. Therefore, Locke's state of nature was governed on the principle of liberty and equality. But he feared that there might be some men that will disturb the order of pre-political and pre-civil society. And to discipline such men, state is required. The state is entrusted with *three* functions namely to legislate, to execute and of the judiciary. But if the government, which is the head of the state, fails to protect the life, liberty and property of an individual then the government can be overthrown and replaced by a new government. Locke distinguishes between state and government. State is indivisible but the government can be revolted against and replaced with a new government. Locke was writing at the time of a peaceful English civil war that shaped his political ideas.

In Rousseau's state of nature, the contact and interaction with fellow beings are miniscule. There exists no hierarchical relation with one another. No man rules over another and oppression does not exist. Strong has no right over the weak and the enslaved can any time revolt and get back his freedom. No one can make any one his slave because they do not need one. With their simple needs, they are sufficient to take care of themselves. In the state of nature, no one has moral obligation towards another. Relations are casual. The concept of family does *not* exist. Mother takes care of her children till they are ready to fend for themselves. There is no duty towards one another.

But he differentiates between man and animal. He says man does *not* become an animal in the state of nature, as man possesses two qualities – freedom of will and perfectibility. In this state, man is not governed by his instincts. He is at his free will. He can choose, accept or reject. No amount of greed, lust, pleasure or vices attract him. He is in full control of himself. This liberty helps him in attaining the spirituality of his soul. Rousseau calls him a *noble savage*.

The second quality of perfectibility does not allow him to be satisfied with what he has. But this perfectibility cannot be equated with restlessness, aggressiveness or competition. But rather the passion for perfectibility in man in Rousseau's state of nature is for his own improvement. He wants to improve his faculties and advances his civilization. Only a man has the faculty to improve his race. This distinguishes him from an animal. He wants to better himself to that he can further develop his potential. He does not want to sit idle. He does not want to be lazy and spend his life in everyday routine. He does not want to confine his existence to just self-preservation and having sympathy for the suffering of others. He wants to do more with his life. He wants to contribute to enhancing his

capacity and developing society. Though man is very happy in a state of nature where there is no conflict for resources, his passion for perfection leads him to a civil society. He leaves his peacefulness, contentment and happiness behind which he was enjoying in the state of nature and moves towards mastering himself and developing society. Rousseau says man moved towards misery in order to perfect himself.

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
- ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. Explain Rousseau's concept of State of Nature.

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2.6 EMERGENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The reason that Rousseau gives for abandoning the peaceful state of nature is *unfortunate accidents*. Man leaves his peaceful and contented state because of natural catastrophes. These unforeseeable accidents force man to seek protection and come in closer contact with another. When he comes closer to another, he develops speech that further helps in binding them together. He starts establishing further contacts and securing his women and children. Now man has become dependent upon another. But even at this earlier stage, man is free. There are no laws, no state and no inequality. He can withdraw from this early-civilized state at any time. If he feels that his liberty has become restricted due to his interaction with men, he is free to withdraw. But now the men feel that being engaged with one another has its own benefits so he continues further advancing in this civilized state. Though he still prioritizes and protects his freedom to withdraw from it at any point of time.

The formation of this society gives rise to a new evil; that is of *vengeance*. In Rousseau's state of nature, men possessed the qualities of natural pity and passion for perfectibility. But due to frequent interactions and the lack of laws and a central authority, frequency of conflicts and friction also increased and the natural pity towards fellow being weakened. But interestingly, frequent conflicts do not become the predominant reason for the formation of civil society. It is the protection of private property that becomes the reason for the formation of civil society. Private property arose when man started cultivating land and claiming it as his own. When man was in the state of nature, he did not have any aspirations. Clothing, food, shelter was freely provided to him by nature.

But when man started possessing property, he became prone to thoughts. He starts thinking of future and fearing for the protection of his property. He wants to save his property/land that he acquired by working and cultivating on it. The man now also aspires and thinks about increasing his wealth and power.

Possession of property gives rise to another major problem. And that is, the *origin of inequality*. The rise of inequality happens because different men have different capabilities and talents and this will cause the difference in possession of property also. Men who are more talented and skilled will come to possess more property than men who are weaker in strength and talent. Since there exists no state and laws, there is no judge to resolve the difference in claims of property. And since the need for property is not natural, but manmade, so there exists no natural law to resolve the issues. This causes state of war between the haves and have-nots.

At this point, man has made his life miserable. He is now dependent on others for money and glory. The feeling of pity for others and self love has been replaced with vanity and selfish desires for infinite possessions, and man gets into endless quarrels to sustain that vanity and acquire more possessions.

This insecure man gets into a social contract and forms a civil society to protect his property and possessions. He seeks consent of other men in this vulnerable social formation to maintain peace and protect himself and his property from aggression. Nature no longer protects him and satisfies his increasing need. The poor can rebel anytime at the unequal possessions of property and loot his property. The man at this stage has become so fearful that he devises social contract that seeks acquiescence of the poor. This social contract appears to give legitimacy to the inequality originating in society. Laws are made to justify the inequality. In this situation, the rich are able to maintain their property while the poor hold themselves responsible for their own destitution. So the naturally free man in the state of nature has now become a miserable man where the rich are scared of losing the property and the poor is suffering from wretchedness.

The government that has been formed is also not neutral. It does not contribute much in mitigating the rising inequalities and forming a just society. Rather the government gets to be governed by those who are driven by infinite passions, selfish needs and particular demands. Rousseau demands that only *stringent moral education* can rectify the faultiness in civil society. So man creates morality so that the interests of the common good can be prioritized over the interests of the individual and the conflict between the society and individual can be resolved.

Rousseau contrasts this paradoxical man who is free yet everywhere he is in chains in civil society. He compares it with the natural man of Hobbes and Locke.

In Rousseau, man becomes miserable after he leaves the state of nature and adopts morality so that interests of common good can be put forth. Otherwise, if the individual keeps pursuing selfish interests, it will lead to anarchy and tyranny in society.

But Hobbes's natural man is driven by passions and selfish desires in the state of nature for which the sovereign is created so as to protect the life of the individual. And Locke said that the right to property is a natural right of an individual for which the civil society is formed to protect it.

Rousseau's *Social Contract* resolves the conflict between self-interest and duty and gives emphasis to General Will. General Will is governed on the principles of mutual sympathy, common good and interests of the whole.

Therefore, a closer look at Rousseau suggests how man was enjoying his natural freedom in the state of nature. He was independent and the resources available in nature satisfied his limited needs. Rousseau calls this man as a *Noble Savage*. As in the state of nature, he was not driven by unlimited desires and selfish needs and carried the heart of mutual pity.

Check Your Progress Exercise 4

- Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
- ii) Check your progress with the model answer given at the end of the unit.

1. According to Rousseau, how did civil society emerge?

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2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we dealt with the life and times of Jean Jacques Rousseau. Rousseau, whose thought was shaped by his circumstances. The travels he took ended up educating him on the philosophy of life. His freedom to move around at different places encouraged the thought that man is born free. This was also one of the reasons that he was termed a romantic. But his desire to being dependent and to stay in society and with his family, made him say that Man is free but everywhere he is in chains. He applied the same thought to the origin of social contract as well.

Man for Rousseau is a free animal in the state of nature. He is not dependent for his needs on anyone. Man also maintains limited contact with his fellow beings as his needs are controlled. But man is driven by two desires- Freedom of will and the passion for perfectibility. Man is free because he is not governed by any ill feeling of greed, jealousy or lust. He is in full control of himself that also allows him to develop spirituality of his soul. That is why Rousseau calls him the Noble savage. But this noble savage also has an innate desire of perfecting himself. He does not want to spend his life idling away in his daily routine. He wants to

contribute to society and help in the advancement of human civilization. This earnest desire to be significant takes him away from the life of peace and contentment to a civil society that is unequal, unjust and miserable.

Later, in this unit, we talk about how men keep entering the life of misery in civil society.

Man comes in close contact with one another due to some unfortunate accidents or natural fury. Once he comes into contact, he starts building closer alliances with fellow beings and develops a family. He also starts cultivating the land to feed his family and claiming it as his own. This gives rise to private property. But different men possess varied skills and talents that cause difference in acquisition of property. In this case, some men get to possess more property while others possess less, dependent on their skills. This creates a divide between the haves and have-nots. Class inequality has developed at this stage. And the feeling of misery, vengeance and ill will has also developed. Rich now fear an attack on their property. To save their property, they enter into a social contract. Social contract means an agreement where everyone agrees to follow the laws of society. This social contract takes the consent of the poor to follow the rules and regulations of society. But actually this social contract appears to give legitimacy to the unequal social order so that the property of the rich can be saved. The government that is formed out of this social contract is also run by people that are driven by insecurities over their property, passion and greed. In that case, expectations of justice and equality from the government become a far-fetched dream.

Rousseau says that moral education is a must to improve upon this unjust and an unequal state. Man creates morality so that society gives preference to community's interests rather than individual or selfish interests. General will of community should precede particular will of individuals.

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2.9 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

State of Nature and
the 'Noble Savage'

Check Your Progress Exercise 1

1. Your answer should highlight the following points:
 - Embraced Protestantism
 - Situation in Geneva
 - Rousseau's works

Check Your Progress Exercise 2

1. Your answer should highlight the following points:
 - Explain man is born free but everywhere he is in chains
 - Elaborate on his work 'The Social Contract'
 - Criticised modern state
 - Attacks arts and sciences

Check Your Progress Exercise 3

1. Your answer should highlight the following points:
 - Man in a state of nature
 - Two passions of man in State of Nature
 - Differentiates between man and animal

Check Your Progress Exercise 4

1. Your answer should highlight the following points:
 - Protection of private property
 - Emergence of thoughts
 - Man adds misery and insecurity to life. Forms civil society