

The Social Contract – Hobbes (1651)

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, ***deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.***

- Thomas Jefferson, Declaration of Independence (1776)

1. Hypothesis: The State of Nature: Thomas Hobbes begins by noting that all people are basically equal in strength and intelligence. No single person is so smart or powerful that they cannot be defeated or outwitted by someone else (or maybe a few others).

That being so, everyone thinks to herself that she is capable of getting whatever she wants. Furthermore, people only ever act out of self-interest. He writes, “of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself.” This leads to competition of every human against every other for the resources that we want to acquire.

Hobbes concludes that, in our natural state (pre-government), we humans would be in a constant state of war and quarrel with one another—everyone competing and fighting for the resources, which are not abundant enough for everyone to have everything they desire. This natural state of man is one where people live in “continual fear and danger of violent death” and life itself is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”

Basically, Hobbes is saying that mankind is generally selfish, and so, without laws to restrain him, he will do whatever he needs to in order to sustain his own life (even if it means stealing from or killing others).

The proof: Hobbes says, if you don’t believe that mankind is naturally selfish and even dangerous, then examine your own habits. Do you lock your doors at night? Do you lock your car? Do you carry a bottle of pepper spray when walking alone at night? These are all indicators that Hobbes is right.

Hobbes admits that the world was never in a TOTAL state of war or “state of nature”, but he points out that even the modern world supports his point: Nations are constantly at war with one another, or else have to constantly threaten each other with bombs and send spies over each other’s borders to collect intel in order to maintain peace.

2. Supporting Rationale: The Prisoner’s Dilemma: One explanation for why people are more likely to betray each rather than cooperate (i.e., as Hobbes predicts that they would in the state of nature) comes from game theory. Given that people are primarily motivated by self-interest. Consider this scenario:

- Two Prisoners: Two people are brought in for a crime, but there is not enough evidence to convict either of them fully. Both detainees are offered the same deal: If they testify against the OTHER prisoner (i.e., accuse the OTHER person of the crime), they will go free, so long as the other person remains silent.

A diagram of the four possible scenarios would look as follows:

| | Prisoner B remains silent | Prisoner B betrays prisoner A |
|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Prisoner A remains silent | Prisoner A: 1 year Prisoner B: 1 year | Prisoner A: 10 years Prisoner B: Goes free |
| Prisoner A betrays prisoner B | Prisoner A: Goes free Prisoner B: 10 years | Prisoner A: 5 years Prisoner B: 5 years |

Consider the scenario where prisoner A betrays the other prisoner (B). If prisoner B remains silent, prisoner A will go free rather than getting 1 year (for remaining silent). On the other hand, if prisoner B betrays prisoner A, prisoner A will only get 5 years rather than 10 years if he remains silent. So, EITHER WAY, prisoner A is better off betraying prisoner B. And the same goes for prisoner B.

The lesson is that, if we are PURELY looking out for our own self interest, it is often (always?) better to do something which makes others worse off. BUT: Now add up the totals for each box. The total is 10 years for every box EXCEPT the one where both prisoners remain silent (the total is only 2 years in that box). So, the TOTAL harm is minimized if the two prisoners can make some sort of contract with one another where both agree to remain silent. The trick is: How can either prisoner be sure that the other will keep up his end of the bargain?

3. Solution: The Social Contract: Our natural inclination is to fall into a state of war. But, Hobbes points out that all of this mistrust and deception and betrayal which would go on in our natural state would disappear if there were both (a) a social contract, and (b) some institution in place to enforce the contract.

While mankind is by nature generally selfish and would, if left to his own devices, act as if he had a right to everything he wanted, the best scenario for EVERYONE would be for everyone to cooperate with one another for the common good. But, doing so would

require a contract, where each person forfeits some of their liberties in exchange for something else. For example, I agree to not kill or steal from you if you agree to do the same for me (the benefit that we receive in return is safety and peace of mind).

However, because everyone's primary motive is selfishness (as Hobbes thinks), such a contract will inevitably be broken unless it is somehow enforced. (Contracts or agreements without any insurance against betrayal never go well. For instance, in movies, people are always hesitant to hand over the money in a hostage situation until they have received the hostage. They are always afraid of being betrayed by the other party because there is no one to penalize betrayal.)

So, to get out of the state of nature, a contract is needed AND some *enforcement* of that contract is needed, or else no one will keep it. So, we elect some third party person, or assembly of persons, to rule over us to enforce the contract (i.e., collect our payment and arrange/distribute the common goods). This is the beginning of government. For example, in our current society, we give up tax money, and the freedom to steal from or murder others without punishment, etc. in order to gain other common goods—e.g., protection from foreign invasion, police, firefighters, free education, etc. Hobbes likens the government to a great LEVIATHAN (a biblical monster that wields great power).

So, what legitimizes the government's authority over the governed? Simple. Our CONSENT. Hobbes' claim is that we are obligated to obey the governing rulers because we have a CONTRACT with them; we are obligated to hold up our end of that contract because we have CONSENTED to do so—and this is the basis of the government's authority. The duty of allegiance to the government, then, is like the duty to keep a promise, or hold up your end of the deal after signing a contract.

The Social Contract – Locke (1690)

1. Disagreement With Hobbes: John Locke also proposes that the government obtains its authority via social contract. The ideas expressed by Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence were VERY heavily influenced by Locke, who was in turn influenced by Hobbes. However, Locke disagrees with Hobbes on the following:

- The state of nature: Locke's version of the state of nature is much less brutal. He says it is merely a state of "men living according to reason" alone, rather than subject to some higher authority. It is very different from the state of war (where every man constantly takes away from others by force), which Hobbes seems to equate as the same thing as the state of nature. Though, Locke does admit that the state of nature more easily LEADS TO a state of war than a political society does.

- The law of nature: Hobbes' view is more cynical because he believes that in the state of nature there is COMPLETE liberty. Hobbes believes that, in the state of nature, "every man has a right to every thing; even to one another's body." That is, there would be no morality or law of any sort. Locke disagrees, saying we would still be subject to a 'law of nature' which governs people's actions: "The *state of nature* has a law of nature to govern it, which obliges everyone ... [such that] no one ought to harm another in his life, health, liberty, or possessions."
- Scarcity: Another reason that Hobbes believes that the state of nature would be more violent than Locke is that he believes the resources of the world are SCARCE. Since there is not enough (land, timber, fruits, vegetables, livestock, fuels, etc.) to go around for everyone, people will constantly fight over them. Locke's picture is very different. He likens the resources to an abundant, flowing river. His conclusion that the state of nature would not lead to much quarrel, then, seems to be a result of the fact that he believes there would be enough of everything to go around for everyone. Is this view of nature correct?

Is selfishness bad?: Even Locke admits that "every man is toward himself"—that is, motivated by self-interest. We tend to interpret this claim as the claim that "everyone is selfish", and this a bad thing. But is it? Is it possible to act always out of self-interest and be a GOOD person rather than a bad one? Perhaps the thing that makes Mother Teresa happiest is to help others. In that case, she helps others because she is motivated to make herself happy. But, then, is she a BAD or SELFISH person?

2. Locke on the Social Contract: Note that Locke does not think the state of nature would be TOTALLY peaceful. He admits that it would be "full of fears and continual dangers", "uncertain, and constantly exposed to the invasion of others" because there are certain "degenerate men". It is this fact which would lead people to make political contracts. Because it is an "ill condition" to remain in the state of nature, this drives people to want to give up certain freedoms in order to better protect their own property (i.e., life, freedom, and possessions).

The freedoms they give up are the ability to take justice into their own hands and personally punish others; also, in the state of nature, people have the ability to do WHATEVER they want to preserve themselves (short of harming others, which is against the law of nature). In society, they give up this freedom.

Locke says that mankind can only give up their liberties by CONSENT. What he recommends is a democracy (as opposed to Hobbes' monarchy) where we, by consent, establish a government to rule, and we consent to its laws and rulings by majority vote (either of the public, or of some publicly elected officials).