

The Social Covenant

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Foreward

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Need for a New Social Covenant

What this project is, and why we undertake it.

1.1 Liberal democracy is in big trouble

1.2 A central problem: confusion over our shared basic values

1.3 The concept of a *social covenant*

A covenant:

- establishes (or re-establishes) a community;
- defines who is a member of the community;
- identifies what it is that binds the community together – divine command, blood relations, shared allegiance to a sovereign power, voluntary association, ...
- identifies the *terms* of association, the shared *values*, and some foundational laws that members of the community proclaim, accept, and agree to live by

1.4 The difference between a social covenant and a constitution

1.4.1 A constitution is a political document

1.4.2 A social covenant is both political and spiritual

The adoption of a new social covenant is *always* ritualized, in a grand ceremony.

Periodic rituals reaffirm the commitment to the community.

Always, *symbols* are used to stand for the community as a whole, and indicate membership in it. (Flags, patches, logos, ...)

1.4.3 The terms of the covenant are *incomplete*

The covenant states broad, general principles or values by which the community will live. These values are not stated with legal precision. The statement of principle does not cover all cases of application, and is not intended to.

The covenant does not describe the process of governance. It does not state the number of members in representative political bodies, their powers, and the mechanisms of their selection and replacement. Rather, the covenant states objectives and constraints that governance processes must adhere to.

1.5 The U.S. today: A contested covenant

A central confusion in the U.S. today concerns the disputed terms of our unwritten social covenant, and confusion over the difference between our covenant and our Constitution.

1.5.1 The U.S. has a *de facto* social covenant

The U.S. has a written social contract: the Constitution.

The U.S. has an *unwritten* social covenant. In fact, more than one.

Our social covenant is spread over a few places: The Declaration of Independence. The Preamble to the Constitution. The Bill of Rights. The Pledge of Allegiance.

1.5.2 The social covenant of the U.S. is *contested*

Some basic terms of our social covenant have never been settled.

Who is a full member of the community?

What are the rights and obligations of community members to one another?

What role does religion and religious scripture hold in setting the terms of the covenant – if any?

1.6 The project we undertake in this book

Our project in this book is to update social contract theory for the 21st Century and beyond.

We argue that before entering into a social contract, a community must first form its social covenant.

In Part I, we review concepts and examples of social covenants in scripture and in pre-modern history. These covenants typically involved divine sanction or divine command.

In Part II, we review the concept of the *social contract*, and how it grew out of the philosophical environment of the Enlightenment. We also discuss how, where, and why the political project of the Enlightenment went wrong. (Did it?) Spoiler alert: the mistakes were to lose sight of the *sacred and spiritual* nature of the covenant, and to lose sight of *human flourishing* as the *only* appropriate objective for political arrangements.

Starting in Part III, we examine deeply the philosophical foundations of the Enlightenment political project. We focus on the key concepts of *autonomy*, *self-governance*, *reason*, and *eudaemonia* a.k.a. *human flourishing*.

Part IV discusses the political arrangements that underpin conditions that support human flourishing. It investigates how the social covenant relates to the social contract and to the constitution.

In Part V, we propose a new social covenant for the United States. We offer proposed text, and describe the form of ritual ceremony in which it would be adopted, proclaimed, and affirmed.

Part I

Social Covenants in Scripture and in History

Part I provides an historical survey of social covenants, and an intellectual history of the concepts of social covenants, social contracts, and constitutions.

Chapter 2

As God Commands: Divine Covenants in the Bible

The Hebrew Bible, the Christian Bible, and many other religious and mythological texts offer narratives in which God sets the terms of the social covenant.

2.1 Creation covenants in the Hebrew Bible

2.1.1 The first creation story

Instrumental skills and abilities.

(What is the Hebrew count-part to “dominion”? What are the nuances in the Hebrew that “dominion” doesn’t capture? “Stewardship” implies authority plus responsibility, and limitation on ownership.)

2.1.2 The second creation story

God blows the spirit into Adam. The creation covenant: a shared spiritual essence.

Provides to all humanity an equal spiritual basis. (Makes baptism unnecessary?)

Shared responsibility between humanity and God to maintain and secure conditions necessary for all living beings to survive and flourish.

Beginning of human moral agency.

2.2 The covenant with Noah

A covenant with all of creation.

Shared responsibility between humanity and God to maintain and secure conditions necessary for all living beings to survive and flourish.

2.3 The Mosaic covenant

A covenant specifically with the Jewish people.

2.4 Jesus and the Last Supper

“It shall be for you a new and everlasting covenant...”

2.5 Common features of divine covenants

*The covenant creates a **new tribe, community, or nation**.* By participating in the covenant, a collection of individuals forms a new *tribe* - bound together with reciprocal ties of loyalty, responsibility, claims and obligations.

*The **terms** of the covenant define the social compact for the new tribe.

Entering into the covenant changes the individual participants fundamentally. The act of joining the tribe is also a event of individual re-birth. It changes who you are.

God sets the terms. The asymmetry in power between God and man is absolute.

Because God sets the terms entirely, the covenant cannot really be called a *contract*. A contract is a voluntary agreement between parties that seeks to advance mutual interest. Even if one party entirely sets the terms, others have the option to decline.

In all the biblical covenant stories, there is no sense whatsoever that man has any leverage, any option of refusal. The Covenant is God's gift, and God's command, framed entirely on God's terms. It's not even a take-it-or-leave-it offer: there is no genuine option to leave-it, that one can discern.

(There are other biblical stories that do involve bargaining with the divine, e.g., in the story of Sodom and Gommorah “What if I can find just *ten* righteous men?”, or Satan's bargaining with God over the fate of Job. But these are not covenant stories. They don't concern the terms for forming a new community or nation.)

Chapter 3

Athens and Jerusalem: Social covenants in the Greco-Roman World

Athens: the first democracy.

Plato.

Aristotle.

Chapter 4

Medieval and Early Modern Covenants

Continuing the historical survey after the Biblical period.

These covenants invoke divine sanction and mission, but are organized by humans: prophets, kings, community leaders.

4.1 7th Century: Mohammed and the formation of the muslim *ummah*

4.2 Nordic nations: Egalitarian covenants

4.2.1 10th Century: Denmark's "founding" by Haarald Bluetooth

Denmark adopts Christianity, becomes a new nation.

4.2.2 Iceland

4.3 17th Century: The Pilgrims at Plymouth Rock

On landing in North America, the pilgrims adopt a new social covenant. They explicitly bind themselves together in a new community, distinct from Europe;

and articulate the terms of their association as a Christian brotherhood.

Part II

The Enlightenment Project

Chapter 5

The Enlightenment Concept of *The Social Contract*

Was the social contract theory that emerged from Locke et al.: Was this originally meant to be a contract or a covenant? Was it mis-stated?

Rousseau maybe was closer. Concept of “the general will”.

Is there such a thing as “a spirit of the people”? Are “the people” anything more than a collection of individuals engaged in mutually advantageous transactions? Under what conditions would you sacrifice for the greater good of your people?

Chapter 6

Social covenant, social contract, and the U.S. Constitution

Chapter 7

The breakdown of the Enlightenment project

The French Revolution leads to the Reign of Terror, leads to Napoleon.

Marx. Materialism. The disastrous experiments of state authoritarian socialism. Soviet, Chinese, etc.

This history requires analysis: how did the Enlightenment promise of governance through human reason lead to such humanity-crushing disaster?

What were the key errors?

Contrast: JFK: “Ask what you can do for your country.” vs Reagan: “Are you better off now than you were four years ago?”

The Republican program since at least 1980 has been a sustained assault on the very idea of community, of the common good.

Claim: A social contract alone cannot bind a nation together. An enduring nation must be bound together by a social covenant.

And in a truly democratic nation, the terms of the social covenant must be developed collaboratively, not imposed from on high.

7.1 Black thought on the U.S. social covenant

Part III

The Enlightened Self

Part III focuses on the individual human, prior to entering into a social covenant.

Chapter 8

Autonomy, Self-Governance, and Flourishing

In the Enlightenment concept of the self, certain concepts are central:

- *autonomy*, or *self-governance*;
- *reason*;
- Aristotle's concept of *eudaemonia*, translated as *human flourishing*.

Epistemologically, the project adopts an *empirical* approach, based on observation of the senses.

Revealed truths, declarations based on religious scripture, claims grounded on clerical or political authority, received traditions – these are not held to be sound bases for the discovery of knowledge about the self.

The Enlightenment applies recently-emerged *scientific method* to questions concerning the means and ends of human life.

8.1 Autonomy

Autonomy is a central concept in the Enlightenment concept of the self.

Autonomy != satisfaction of desire

Rather, a being with autonomy is *self-governing*.

A being that is governed entirely by its desires and appetites is not self-governing.
(Ref: Plato's *Republic*.)

8.2 Reason

8.3 Flourishing

A translation of Aristotle's *eudaemonia*, human flourishing is the proper end of human life. It involves the realization of potential.

Eudaemonia is *not* the same as “happiness”, and certainly not the same as pleasure, or the satisfaction of desire.

When Jefferson wrote of human's unalienable right to “the pursuit of happiness”, *eudaemonia* is what he had in mind.

Chapter 9

Critiques of the Enlightenment Concept of the Self

9.1 Criticisms based on clerical or royal authority

9.2 Criticisms based on scepticism about the efficacy of reason as a guide to human life

The Reign of Terror gave reason a bad name.

Chapter 10

Morality Without God?

10.1 Flourishing, and its relation to the Good

Hume's argument re: "is" and "ought": cannot derive "ought" from "is".

Esp. re: religion: "God commands X; therefore, X ought to be done."

Must add the normative axiom: "God's commands ought to be followed."

G.E. Moore: Introduced the *naturalistic fallacy*. Target: utilitarianism. Bentham et al.

If you define "good" = "pleasure", then you assert: meaning of *good* = meaning of *pleasure*.

Then it would make no sense to ask: Q: "Is pleasure good?"

But Q is an informative question. Therefore, good cannot be defined as pleasure.

Called the *open question argument*.

Involves *paradox of analysis*: If you give an analysis, you give meaning of things in terms of other terms.

But if analysis is only matching conceptual identity, then analysis cannot generate new information.

Frege: "A = A" is not informative. "A = B" is informative. But

Leads to *sense-reference distinction*.

Fundamental question: Suppose we want to say that *flourishing is good*. Can we ask this question?

Could the answer be "No"? Could we entertain circumstances under which human flourishing is *not* a good thing?

Hypothesis: we cannot say this. We cannot imagine *any* conditions under which this is false.

Open Question Argument suggests: “pleasure = good” might be false.

Assertion: Relationship between “flourishing” and “good” is the same as the relationship between “murder” and “immoral” / “morally unjustified”.

Claim: Instances of the property of “genuine flourishing” will always be a sub-class of the property of “good”.

Key question: Why is it so difficult to imagine instances of flourishing that are not good?

Look for specific instances:

When we see flourishing, why is it so hard to reject the assertion that this is good?

Part IV

Designing a Social Covenant on Enlightenment Principles

Chapter 11

Social Contracts, Social Covenants, and Constitutions

11.1 What is a covenant? What is a *social* covenant?

11.2 What is the relationship between a covenant and a contract?

Contracts:

- are fully dependent on interests
- are motivated by individual interests of the parties
-

Covenants:

- defined by a set of values?
- not based on mere interest
- has a notion of the sacred

When you assume individuals have *autonomy*, this precludes the possibility that any entity (God; Tsar) can have absolute authority.

This why Catholic reconstructionists and Protestant dominionists are making a massive attack on autonomy.

11.3 The role of reason (in the Enlightenment sense) in the discovery of the covenant

Technology will change. Resources, other things will change.

Chapter 12

The Conditions that Support Flourishing

We have been setting up flourishing

... identify the conditions to flourishing, because those conditions then contribute to the good.

12.1 Challenges in Identifying the Conditions that support Flourishing

12.1.1 Empirical challenges: We can't know

12.1.2 The design challenge: human flourishing is not uniquely determined

12.1.3 Evolutionary challenge: Conditions change

Chapter 13

The relationship between the social contract and the social covenant

13.1 Policies are provisional

13.2 The process for revising the social covenant

1. Human flourishing is the yardstick.
2. Because of (1), there is some leeway to the modification of the elements of the covenant.
3. The social contract can be modified at higher frequency, with a lower threshold. Given changes in conditions...

13.3 The process for amending the social contract

Part V

Together We Flourish

Chapter 14

A New Social Covenant for the United States of America