

# *Social Contract Theory*

*ethics by agreement*



George Matthews

2020

*The ties that bind*

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*Our next question:*

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## *Our next question:*

Is there a *rational basis* for trust, or must trust be based on something besides reason, like feelings of sympathy, shared history, or emotional identification?

# *Traditional and modern societies*

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Liberal values emphasizing progress and individuality.

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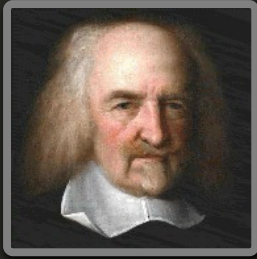
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Liberal values emphasizing progress and individuality.

Many societies are somewhere in between, with traditional and modern institutions, aspects and values.

# *Hobbes and the Social Contract*



Thomas Hobbes  
1588-1679

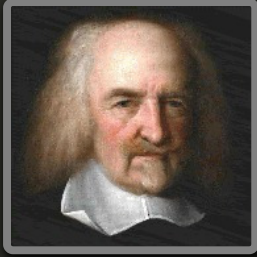
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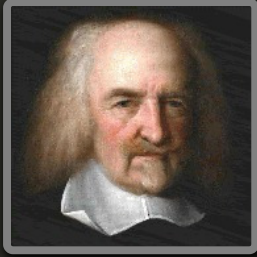


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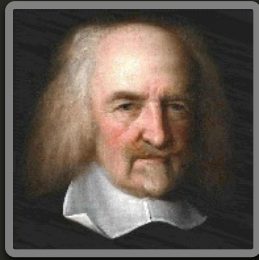
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His 1651 book *Leviathan* asks:

If there were no religion, no customs and no laws, how and why would individuals form a society and establish laws, and what would they look like?



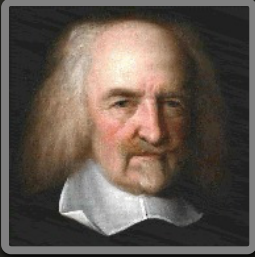
# *Hobbes and the Social Contract*



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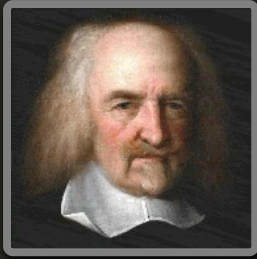


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If there were no rules, and we lived in a "State of Nature," we would be free to do as we please, thus leading to a "war of all against all."

"No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

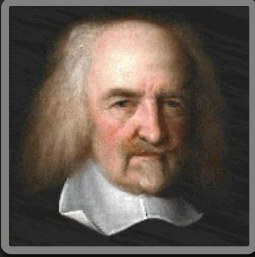
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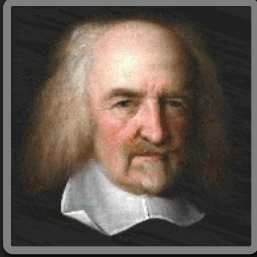
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- Thus it makes sense that we would agree to establish rules limiting individual liberty in exchange for the security.
- This is the Social Contract that creates moral and social rules and establishes society on the basis of reason.
- The same arguments apply to all moral rules -- they are *invented by us* to keep the peace in a world of *self-interested, but also rational agents*.

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Thus we all have an interest in establishing and abiding by basic rules against lying, stealing, murder, not keep promises, etc.

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- We may have an *interest* in establishing rules, but does this mean that we can do so on the terms set out so far?

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Let's consider a famous illustration of the problem of trust.

# *The prisoner's dilemma*



## *The prisoner's dilemma*

You and your partner have been caught robbing a convenience store. The police have evidence that you are also responsible for a bank robbery but not enough to convict you. So they make each of you the following offer in separate rooms:

- If you both stay silent about the bank job you each get 1 year in jail.
- If confess to the bank job and your partner does not, you will go free and your partner will get 5 years in jail.
- If you both confess you each get 3 years in jail.

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Think about this for a moment before going on...

# *The prisoner's dilemma*

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## *The rational solution*

Since you cannot tell ahead of time whether your partner will confess or not, you should consider each possibility in turn.

- If your partner confesses, you should confess, since 3 years in jail is better than the 5 you'd get if you stayed silent.
- If your partner stays silent, you should confess, since going free is better than the 1 year in jail you'd get if you also stayed silent.
- So *whatever* your partner does it is better for you to confess.

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Too bad you couldn't both keep your mouths shut and get only 1 year in jail instead of 3!

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Where in our real social lives do similar dilemmas appear?

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**The fisherman's dilemma:** If we are to have sustainable livelihood and not deplete the fish stocks we all have to limit our catch. But it sure is tempting to over-fish now for the easy money while I still can and before the other fisherman hang me out to dry by themselves over-fishing.



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- When you start to notice them, prisoner's dilemmas are all over the place, especially in their multi-person variants known as "free rider problems," like the last two above.

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- But where do these come from and why are they so fragile?

# *Locke's Social Contract*



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1632-1704

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- In addition, he thought that the terms of the social contract establishing political communities were subject to revision -- an idea that influenced Jefferson and other American Revolutionaries.
- But this appeal to our "natural" sympathies won't convince anyone who doesn't already care.

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## *Find out more*

**Hobbes and Contractarianism:** another in the great Crash Course series.

**Social Contract Theory:** this article at the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy also covers the ancient history and more current versions of the theory.

**What's in it for me?**, Ya-Yun (Sherry) Kao, in *Introduction to Philosophy: Ethics*. This chapter covers Social Contract Theory as well as Egoism.





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