

Social Contract Theory

ethics by agreement



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press "h" for help on keyboard controls

The ties that bind

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

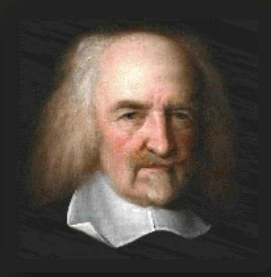
Hobbes and the Social Contract



1588-1679

Hobbes and the Social Contract

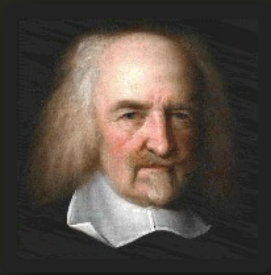
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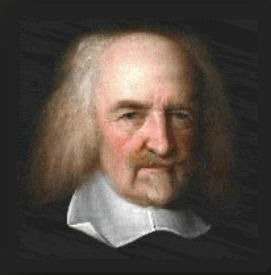
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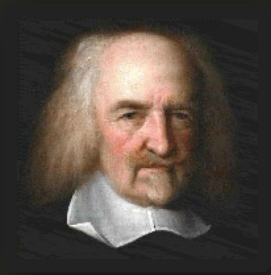
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His 1651 book *Leviathan* asks:

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

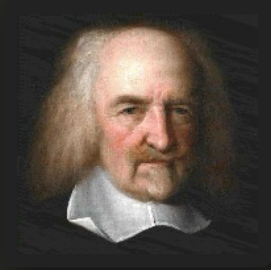
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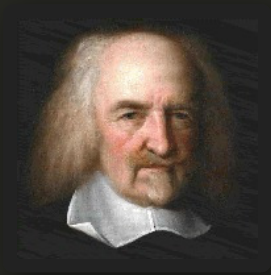
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"No arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

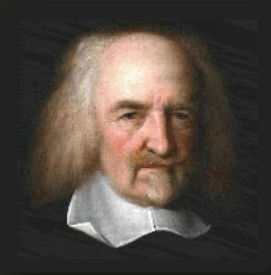
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This is the Social Contract that creates moral and social rules and establishes society on the basis of reason.

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*.

An argument for Social Contract Theory

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Morals by agreement

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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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- Yet why should we *trust the enforcers* to follow the rules if they are self-interested people just like us?
- 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...

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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 overfish now for the easy money while I still can and before the other fisherman hang me out to dry by themselves overfishing.

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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



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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