

# *Social Contract Theory*

*ethics by agreement*



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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?

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Liberal values emphasizing progress and individuality.

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Liberal values emphasizing progress and individuality.

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

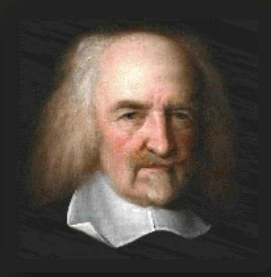
# *Hobbes and the Social Contract*



1588-1679

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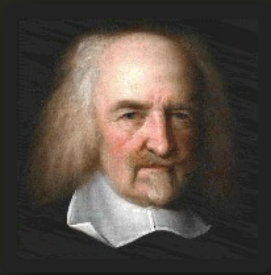
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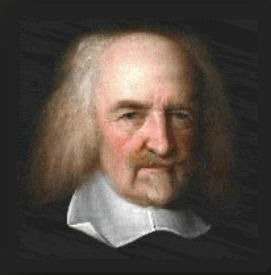
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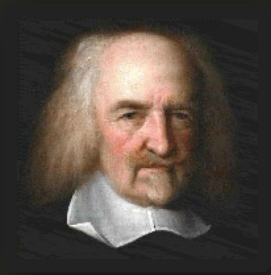
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His 1651 book *Leviathan* asks:

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?



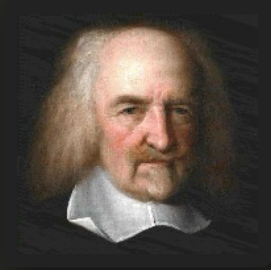
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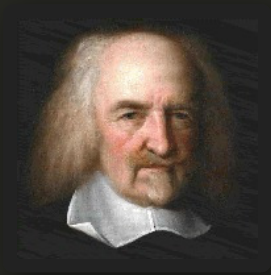
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If there were no rules, and we lived in a "State of Nature," we would be free to do as we please, thus leading to "war of all against all."

*"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."*

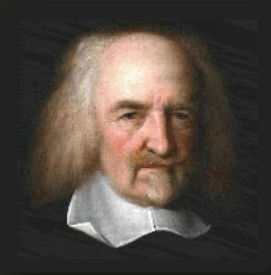
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This is the Social Contract that creates moral and social rules and establishes society on the basis of reason.

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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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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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?

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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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