Social Contract Theory

ethics by agreement



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



Thomas Hobbe 1588-1679



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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?



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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*.

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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.

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

The arms race: Nuclear weapons are really expensive and dangerous to have around, but can we trust the Russians *not* to build them? Nope! Too bad we can't spend that money on something that would have made our lives better!

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The fisherman's dilemma: If we are to have sustainable livlihood 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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- Moral rules about keeping promises, loyalty and working together would help establish and maintain trust.
- But where do these come from and why are they so fragile?



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- We are not, in his view, simply motivated by our own interests as Hobbes thought, but also by our concern for other people.
- 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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- Are we stuck with "might makes right?"



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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