

Assess the view that consent is based on protection.

Social contract describes a broad class of republican theories whose subjects are implied agreements by which people form nations and maintain a social order. Such social contract implies that the people give up some rights to a government and other authority in order to receive or jointly preserve social order.

Social contract theory provides the rationale behind the historically important notion that legitimate state authority must be derived from the consent of the governed.

The starting point for most of these theories is a heuristic examination of the human condition absent from any structured social order, termed the “state of nature” or “natural state”. In this state of being, an individual’s words or action are bound only by his or her personal power, constrained by conscience. From this common starting point, the various proponents of social contract theory attempt to explain, in different ways, why it is in an individual’s rational self-interest to voluntarily subjugate the freedom of action one has under the natural state, their so called “natural rights”) in order to obtain the benefits provided by the formation of social structures.

Common to all of these theories is the notion of a 'sovereign will', to which all members of a society are bound by the social contract to respect. The various theories of social contract that have developed are largely differentiated by their definition of the 'sovereign' will, be it a Monarchy, a Council or The Majority (republic or democracy).

This essay will enable us to not only question the nature of our morality but also our relationship with authority, By examining different philosophers views regarding the social contract theory.

The English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) is best known for his political thought, and deservedly so.

His vision of the world is strikingly original and still relevant to contemporary politics. His main concern is the problem of social and political order: how human beings can live together in peace and avoid the danger and fear of civil conflict. He poses stark alternatives: we should give our obedience to an unaccountable sovereign (a person or group empowered to decide every social and political issue).

Otherwise what awaits us is a ‘state of nature’ that closely resembles civil war – a situation of universal insecurity, where all have reason to fear violent death and where rewarding human cooperation is all but impossible.

Hobbes argues that the problems of political life mean that a society should accept an unaccountable sovereign as its sole political authority.

Nonetheless, we still live in the world that Hobbes addressed head on: a world where human authority is something that requires justification, and is automatically accepted by few; a world where social and political inequality also appears questionable; and a world where religious authority faces significant dispute. We can put the matter in terms of the concern with equality and rights that Hobbes's thought heralded: we live in a world where all human beings are supposed to have rights, that is, moral claims that protect their basic interests.

A criticism of Hobbes is does He see human beings as purely self-interested? Some people support such a reading, leading some to think that his political conclusions can be avoided if we adopt a more realistic picture of human nature. However, most people now accept that Hobbes himself had a much more complex view of human motivation

Another problem with the social contract theorists, and especially with Hobbes, is that the whole notion of the theory is that moral obligation and duties are reciprocated.

For example the reason why you don't scratch other people's cars is in the hope that nobody scratches your car.

However, one flaw with this argument is that we might exclude certain groups who would not be expected to return the favour, which we need not exclude. These groups could include people with learning difficulties or young children, as they cannot be held responsible for their own actions.

Is power always what counts as Hobbes argues, does power not give a person the right to exercise it to the disadvantage of others e.g. the power may allow himself more money than others. Even if this does lead to social stability.

What about the rights of the individual surely they are important? In Hobbes view of society the sovereign would be controlling them.

Writing a few years after Hobbes, John Locke had definitely accepted the terms of debate Hobbes had laid down: how can human beings live together, when religious or traditional justifications of authority are no longer effective or persuasive? How is political authority justified and how far does it extend? In particular, are our political rulers properly as unlimited in their powers as Hobbes had suggested? And if they are not, what system of politics will ensure that they do not overstep the mark, do not trespass on the rights of their subjects?

John Locke who felt that our morality is not based on law and government, or the social contract. In fact Locke envisaged that the state of nature' would be a much more inhabitable place. His reason for this is that we have natural laws that are also referred to as God-given laws. Locke recognises that there would still be the need for some sort of governing body, but in contrast to Hobbes theory, individuals are morally equal and would personally be able to enforce punishments for bad behavior.

One criticism here would be that individuals could have the tendency to be biased.

For example one person would see a mother stealing food to feed her baby as fine, another would see it as bad behaviour and wish to punish her.

Another obvious criticism is that Locke's state of nature' is dependent on a lot of religious connotations.

People are not very religious any more due to secularisation.

However, you have to take in to consideration that it was written in a period when this would be a lot more relevant.

Locke's theory would make inequality and the gap between the classes huge.

Also this would create disparities between the rich and the poor.

Due to the class divide, people in the lower classes basically don't have a chance at life, or a fair one at that.

There would be no self-recognition for the individual.

However it can be argued is survival of the fittest always a problem. Surely this means the best will survive.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau famously wrote 'The Social Contract' which central aim was to explain the sources and limits of legitimate authority.

Rousseau believes that we are not sacrificing freedom to adhere to the state because so much freedom can be gained from the state. He stated "we might add that man acquires the civil society, moral freedom, which alone makes man a master of himself; while obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself is freedom."

This is a slightly different concept because he is saying here that a state or ruling body needn't be oppressive, in fact quite the opposite because he explains our moral obligations can only flourish. In spite of this Rousseau doesn't make any assumptions about human beings having any superior moral values without a so-called social contract. He does however explain that humans are naturally compassionate and do not like to see others come to any harm or distress.

This is not only an interesting notion, but also maybe a convincing one. It could be argued that not all moral actions are as a result of law and order, but because we care and genuinely want to do the right thing. There are plenty of examples of people wanting to "do good", such as charities e.g. Oxfam, or quite simply helping an elderly gentleman who has fallen.

Obviously, it would be unrealistic and naive to assume that everyone is a do-gooder and even without a government everyone would be civilized. Also, this view of compassion is a huge contrast to Thomas Hobbes ideas about everyone being out for him or herself. Maybe it could be said that there is some truth in both arguments.

By examining each of these philosophers views regarding the social contract theory we can begin to not only question the nature of our morality but also our relationship with authority.

It would be difficult to determine whether all our moral obligations could be justified by a social contract theory.

As mentioned above there are acts of kindness seen everyday from people which don't expect anything in return.

It is Hobbes who argues against this point, stating that people are primarily concerned with themselves, leaving little attention for anyone else.

Locke is more optimistic about human nature and our moral reasoning; however, a lot of his views are backed up with religion making them less believable to some readers.

Both Hobbes and Locke cleverly explain that our moral obligations can be justified by portraying life without rules and regulations. This state of nature' is a great thought experiment to see how we would act and behave, but most importantly whether our principles would change.

Rousseau gives a more convincing and optimistic view of human nature.

I believe that we are naturally impelled to abide by the rules of society and maintain our moral duties because without them society would collapse. Our moral obligations and duties are by nature complex and can be justified in a number of ways, and the social contract theory could be just one of them.