

Explain the Relevance of the Prisoner's Dilemma to Hobbes' Social Contract Theory

Hobbes' social contract theory is based on the premise that people are naturally frightened. This does not mean that Hobbes thinks people are essentially highly strung nervous wrecks, terrified of their own shadow; he simply believes that people have a natural and rational aversion to danger. Hobbes has an atomistic view of the natural state of humans. He maintains that in the state of nature, individuals are essentially isolated from each other, occasionally colliding into and reacting against each other. The state of nature, when the structure organising people into civil society is removed, is in Hobbes' words "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short".

"The Prisoner's Dilemma" backs up Hobbes' argument of how individuals react to each other in the state of nature. Individuals are concerned with their own self interest and the focus on that means that they produce less beneficial results to themselves than cooperation with others would produce. Aversion of the state of nature, and cooperation with others in civil society is a rational preference to the state of nature.

To avoid the perpetual fear of living in the state of nature, Hobbes argues that people possess the natural and rational impulse to enter into a social contract, which involves the individual giving up the right to govern oneself. This right is given up to a sovereign. The sovereign may be an individual or a ruling body, and citizens are required to obey it because it is the sovereign that keeps society from degenerating into the state of nature. The sovereign is therefore the authorised representative of the people and decides what is right and wrong on their behalf. While this may seem autocratic, Hobbes assumes that the sovereign is as eager as everyone else to avoid breaking down into the state of nature, and will therefore act in the people's best interests.

This is one major weakness in Hobbes' social contract theory. There is no guarantee that the sovereign will act in the people's best interests. The sovereign is in complete control and because the citizens are obliged to obey it, Hobbes' social contract leaves the sovereign in a position to abuse its authority. Hobbes' also seems to be justifying any kind of state as being favourable to no state at all, even a repressive and dictatorial one. Whilst this may be historically accurate (think of the Nazi's popularity in Germany) it is, at the very least, morally objectionable.

Hobbes also seems to regard the state of nature as being historically accurate. However the state of nature is ahistorical. From the beginning, people have always lived in social, organised groups. Primitive social order can even be observed in animals in the natural world. However Hobbes considers this and agrees that the state of nature was “never generally so, all over the world.” He does however point towards the life of Native American tribes as examples of the state of nature, pointing out that without a government they live in a “savage” and “brutish” environment. However it is possible that like so many people of the time, Hobbes may simply have regarded Native Americans as savage and brutish because their society was simply different and possibly slightly more primitive to his own.

Nevertheless the historicity of the state of nature is not the point of Hobbes’ argument. What is important to Hobbes is that without a sovereign to govern people, society would simply collapse into the state of nature. The fact that there has always been some sort of social order seems to support Hobbes’ point that the aversion of the state of nature and the necessity of any sort of government rather than none at all, is a natural and logical impulse for people.

Another criticism of Hobbes’ is that he seems to be insisting that fear is a rational impulse and a guiding influence that must be followed. This however is unrealistic. Fear and rational thinking are mutually exclusive. Many people have irrational fears, the influence of which should be controlled rather than allowed to guide the individual. This fact, and the way in which he seems to justify dictatorship, means that Hobbes’ is rather out of date. Hobbes’ argument seems to be a reflection of his historical context. His idea of the state of nature and the importance of fear in his social contract theory seems to have been influenced by the English Civil War This is supported by Hobbes’ own admission that “fear and I were born twins”.

Hobbes has some convincing arguments. The emphasis he places on the importance of the state providing social order is attractive and the main strength of his argument. However his social contract theory is coloured by the general beliefs of his time. He seems to justify dictatorship, as democracy was in its infancy. The civil unrest of his time means that urgent fear is prevalent in his social contract theory and considered a rational impulse when, upon reflection, this is problematic. Hobbes presents us with arguments worthy of serious consideration and debate, but he is not as successful in being completely convincing as he believed himself to be.