

11. CHAPTER 11: THE IDEA OF A SOCIAL CONTRACT

11.1. Hobbes's Argument

Thomas Hobbes, was the foremost British philosopher of the 17th century.

Hobbes consider humanity to be in a *state of nature*. This was determined by four basic facts of human life.

1. There is the fact of *equality of need*.
2. There is the fact of *scarcity*.
3. If there is not enough the essential goods to go around, who will get them?
4. If we cannot prevail by our own strengths, what hope do we have?

Limited altruism: even if people are not wholly selfish, they nevertheless care very much about themselves; and you cannot simply assume that whenever your vital interests conflict with their vital interests, they will step aside. Almost no one will be willing to forego the satisfaction of his or her needs in favor of others. The result in his that humanity remains in a "constant state of war, of one with all."

To escape the *state of nature* people must agree to the establishment of rules to govern their relationships with one another. This agreement, to which every citizen is a party, is called the *social contract*. The essence of the *social contract* is: morality consists in the set of rules, governing how people are to treat one another, that rational people will agree to accept, for their mutual benefit, on the condition that others follow those rules as well.

11.2. The Prisoner's Dilemma

You are arrested and learn that:

If Smith does not confess, but you confess and testify against him, they will release you.

You will go free, whereas Smith, who does not cooperate, will be put away for ten years.

If Smith confesses and you do not, the situation will be reversed -- he will go free while you will get ten years.

If you both confess, however, you'll each be sentenced to five years.

But if neither of you confess, there won't be enough evidence to convict either of you.

They can hold you for a year, but then they will have to let both of you go.

What will get you free the quickest? From a personal interest standpoint you must confess. If you had both done the opposite, each of you would have gotten out in only one year. By rationally pursuing your own interests, you both end up worse off than if you had acted differently.

11.3. Some Advantages of the Social Contract Theory of Morals

1. What moral rules we bound to follow, and how are those rules justified? We could not live together very well if we did not except rules prohibiting murder, assault, theft, lying, breaking promises, and the like.
2. Why is it reasonable for us to follow the moral rules? It is not reasonable for us to want an arrangement in which people violate the rules anytime it is advantageous for them to do so -- the whole point of the social contract is that we want to be able to count on people to keep the rules.
3. Under what circumstances are we allowed to break the rules? Only in cases of dire necessity.
4. Does morality have an objective basis? Morality is the set of rules that rational people would agree to except for their mutual benefit.

11.4. The Problem of Civil Disobedience

Social contract theory: each of us participates in a complicated arrangement whereby we gain certain benefits in return for accepting certain burdens. In order to gain these benefits, we agree that we will do our part to uphold the institutions that make them possible. This means that we must obey the law, pay our taxes, and so forth -- these are the burdens we except in return. If we continue to demand that the disadvantaged group obey the law and otherwise respect society's institutions, we are demanding that they except the burdens imposed by the social arrangement even though they are denied its benefits.

Civil disobedience is in fact the most natural and reasonable means of expressing protest.

11.5. Difficulties for the Theory

Morality is like this. The game is social living; we derive enormous benefits from it, and we do not want to forego those benefits; but in order to play the game and get the benefits, we have to follow the rules.

The social contract theory can explain our duty in the case of normal people but not in the case of impaired people. This problem goes right to the theory's heart. The basic idea of the theory is flawed.