

Hobbes Locke and Rousseau Social Contract Theories

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Introduction

Social-contract theory asks why political authority is legitimate and what individuals owe to one another under government. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau each imagined a pre-political condition and used it to explain the origin, purpose, and limits of civil society. They did not describe an actual Stone Age or a signed historical contract. The “state of nature” is a philosophical device that reveals what each thinker believes human beings need from political association. (Rousseau, n.d.)

The original assignment also asks about empiricism. This second theme is related to social-contract theory because Locke’s political philosophy and theory of knowledge share a commitment to experience, criticism of inherited authority, and limits on what can be claimed without evidence. The discussion below first compares the three contracts and the historical pressures shaping them, then explains Locke, Berkeley, and David Hume as major British empiricists.

Thomas Hobbes: Security Through an Undivided Sovereign

Hobbes wrote during the political and religious crises surrounding the English Civil Wars. He feared not simply inconvenience or popular disagreement but the collapse of a common authority into armed conflict. In *Leviathan* (1651), the state of nature is a condition in which no recognized power can settle disputes or reliably enforce agreements. Human beings are sufficiently equal in vulnerability that even the strongest can be killed. Competition, distrust, and concern for reputation make peace unstable.

Hobbes’s famous description of life without common power is not a claim that every person is constantly fighting. It is a claim that insecurity dominates because there is no assurance that others will keep promises. Industry, trade, agriculture, and learning cannot develop securely when possessions and life remain exposed.

The contract occurs among individuals, who authorize a sovereign to act in their name. The sovereign is not an ordinary party promising obedience to the people; the subjects covenant with one another to create authority. Hobbes prefers undivided power because competing final authorities recreate the

conflict the contract was meant to solve. The sovereign may be a monarch, assembly, or other institution, although Hobbes considered monarchy especially effective.

Subjects retain a basic right of self-preservation. A person cannot be obligated to kill himself or quietly accept direct assault. Yet Hobbes gives no broad right to overthrow government whenever citizens judge it unjust. Rebellion risks returning society to civil war. His theory therefore places order before participatory liberty.

John Locke: Government as a Limited Trust

Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, published in 1689, emerged from conflicts over monarchy, religion, property, and the Glorious Revolution. Locke's state of nature is not identical to Hobbes's war. People are naturally free and equal under a law of nature that prohibits harming others in their life, liberty, health, or possessions. The problem is not the absence of morality but the absence of a neutral judge and reliable enforcement. (Locke, n.d.)

Individuals possess natural rights before government. They form political society by consenting to a common authority that can establish known laws, impartial adjudication, and effective enforcement. Government is therefore a fiduciary trust with limited purposes. Legislative power is important, but it is not arbitrary. Rulers must govern through law for the public good and may not take property without consent.

Locke's theory of property begins with labor: people acquire claims by mixing labor with resources, subject in the original account to leaving enough for others and avoiding waste. The introduction of money permits accumulation by consent, but it also raises problems of inequality that later interpreters debate.

When rulers systematically violate the trust—placing themselves above law, attacking rights, or preventing lawful representation—the people may resist and establish a new government. This is not a license to depose rulers over “minor problems.” Locke distinguishes ordinary error from a sustained design against the community.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau: Freedom Through the General Will

Rousseau wrote in an eighteenth-century world marked by monarchy, privilege, inequality, expanding commerce, and debates over civilization. His opening declaration that human beings are born free but found in chains criticizes forms of social dependence that disguise domination as legitimate order.

Rousseau's earlier *Discourse on Inequality* imagines humans before complex society as relatively independent beings with self-preservation and pity. The development of property, comparison, and

dependence creates inequality and competition. The problem is not society itself but a social order that allows some people to command others.

In *The Social Contract* (1762), each person transfers himself and his rights to the whole community under conditions equal for all. The resulting sovereign is the people collectively, and its legitimate will is the general will directed toward the common good. The general will is not simply whatever a numerical majority happens to desire. Citizens must deliberate as citizens rather than as private factions seeking advantage.

Rousseau attempts to reconcile obedience and freedom: a citizen obeying a law he helps prescribe to the community is not subject to another person's private will. This ideal is powerful but difficult. Who identifies the general will? How can dissent be protected? Rousseau's preference for small republics, civic education, and limited faction reflects his awareness that institutional conditions matter.

Comparing the Three Contracts

Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau all reject the idea that political authority is legitimate merely because a ruler inherits it by divine right. Each bases authority on human agreement, but the agreement has different purposes.

For Hobbes, the fundamental problem is insecurity, and the solution is a powerful sovereign. For Locke, the problem is the unreliable protection of pre-existing rights, and the solution is limited government accountable to the people. For Rousseau, the problem is domination and dependence, and the solution is collective self-rule oriented toward the common good.

Their conceptions of freedom also differ. Hobbesian liberty is largely the absence of external impediments within the space law leaves open. Lockean liberty is freedom under known law with protected rights. Rousseauian freedom is participation in making legitimate law and avoidance of personal dependence.

The right of resistance follows these differences. Hobbes sharply restricts political resistance because civil war is the greatest danger. Locke defends resistance when government dissolves the trust. Rousseau locates sovereignty permanently in the people, so officials are agents rather than owners of public authority.

Historical Influences

Hobbes's experience of civil war shaped his fear of divided sovereignty. Locke responded to struggles involving the Stuart monarchy, religious toleration, parliamentary power, and revolution. Rousseau addressed aristocratic privilege, inequality, luxury, and the corruption he associated with unequal social relations.

Biography should not replace argument. Hobbes did not simply produce absolutism because he witnessed Charles I's execution, and Locke was not merely "wise and polite." Their theories draw on logic, theology, science, law, and political controversy. Historical context explains the questions they considered urgent, while the texts explain their answers.

Empiricism: Knowledge Grounded in Experience

Empiricism is the view that experience plays the foundational role in human knowledge. It opposes strong theories of innate ideas but does not require the claim that people passively copy the world. Empiricists analyze sensation, reflection, perception, language, habit, and inference. Locke, Berkeley, and Hume reach different conclusions from this shared starting point.

Locke's Theory of Ideas

In *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke denies that the mind begins with innate speculative or moral principles. He compares it to blank paper, not to claim that human beings have no natural capacities, but to argue that the content of ideas arises from experience. (Locke, n.d.)

Experience has two sources. Sensation provides ideas through interaction with external objects. Reflection provides ideas of the mind's own operations, such as thinking, doubting, willing, and remembering. Simple ideas are received; the mind then combines, compares, and abstracts them into complex ideas.

Locke distinguishes primary qualities, such as shape, motion, number, and solidity, from secondary qualities, such as color, taste, sound, and smell. Primary qualities are treated as features of bodies, while secondary qualities are powers to produce experiences in perceivers. Modern science complicates Locke's exact distinction, but his central question remains important: which aspects of experience represent objects and which depend on the perceiving system?

George Berkeley: To Be Is to Be Perceived

Berkeley accepts the empiricist demand that meaningful ideas must connect with experience but rejects Locke's material substance. We never perceive an object stripped of color, texture, shape, and other sensible qualities. If all qualities are known only as ideas, Berkeley argues that positing an unknowable material support adds nothing.

For Berkeley, ordinary objects are collections of ideas perceived by minds. This does not mean that objects vanish whenever one human looks away. Their stability is grounded in God's continuous perception and the orderly laws of experience. Berkeley intends to defend common sense and religion, although many readers find his immaterialism counterintuitive.

The original text states too quickly that Berkeley believed both primary and secondary qualities were “part of the object.” His stronger claim is that the distinction cannot establish mind-independent matter, because both types are inseparable from perception.

David Hume: Impressions, Ideas, and Causal Habit

Hume develops empiricism in a skeptical direction. He distinguishes vivid impressions from fainter ideas, which are derived from impressions. Complex thought recombines experienced elements, even when imagination creates objects never encountered.

Hume’s analysis of causation is especially influential. We observe one event followed by another, but we do not perceive a necessary connection. Repeated conjunction produces an expectation through habit. The belief that the future will resemble the past cannot be proven without circularly relying on past experience.

He applies similar analysis to the self. Introspection reveals changing perceptions rather than a simple, permanent substance. This conclusion resembles, without being identical to, Buddhist analyses of impermanence and non-self. Hume’s skepticism does not make science impossible; it explains scientific inference as disciplined but fallible reasoning grounded in experience.

Empiricism and Political Authority

Empiricism and social-contract theory share an opposition to unsupported inherited claims. Locke asks citizens to evaluate whether government protects rights rather than accepting authority as naturally absolute. Empiricism asks thinkers to examine the origin and warrant of ideas rather than declaring them innate.

The relationship is not simple. Hobbes drew inspiration from geometry and materialism, Rousseau criticized aspects of Enlightenment progress, and Hume challenged contract stories by emphasizing convention and history. Still, both debates contributed to modern arguments about evidence, consent, law, and human equality.

Conclusion

The three social-contract thinkers begin with a shared question but design different political orders. Hobbes authorizes strong sovereignty to escape insecurity; Locke creates limited government to protect natural rights; Rousseau seeks collective self-government that replaces domination with civic freedom. Their views reflect civil war, revolution, inequality, and competing understandings of human nature. British empiricism then investigates how minds acquire knowledge. Locke grounds ideas in sensation and reflection, Berkeley challenges material substance, and Hume exposes the role of habit

in causal belief. Together, these thinkers transformed debates about both political legitimacy and the foundations of knowledge.

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