Hobbes Locke and Rousseau Social Contract Theories

Posted on October 5, 2022

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Introduction

Social-contract theory asks what makes political authority legitimate and why individuals should obey laws created by institutions that exercise coercive power. Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau answer that question by imagining a condition without established political authority and then asking what rational or free persons would agree to create. Their states of nature are not straightforward historical descriptions of prehistoric life. They are philosophical devices that reveal different assumptions about human vulnerability, rights, freedom, property, and social dependence. Hobbes's *Leviathan* responds to civil war by making security the first political necessity. Locke's *Second Treatise* treats government as a limited trust established to protect rights that exist before government. Rousseau's *Social Contract* asks how people can live under law without becoming subject to another person's private will. The assignment also connects these political theories with British empiricism. Locke, Berkeley, and Hume differently argue that experience is central to knowledge, extending a broader early-modern challenge to inherited authority in both politics and philosophy.

Hobbes: Political Order as an Escape from Insecurity

Hobbes wrote amid the political and religious conflicts surrounding the English Civil Wars, and his theory begins from the danger created when no common authority can make final decisions. In the state of nature, people are sufficiently equal in vulnerability that no one can be secure merely through strength. Competition, distrust, and concern for reputation produce a condition in which promises are unreliable because there is no accepted power to enforce them. Hobbes does not mean that every person literally fights at every moment; his point is that the possibility of violence dominates planning, ownership, commerce, and cooperation. Individuals therefore covenant with one another to authorize a sovereign capable of maintaining peace. The sovereign is not simply another party making a reversible contract with each subject, because Hobbes fears that divided final authority would reproduce the instability the covenant was designed to end. Subjects retain a basic right of self-preservation, yet Hobbes sharply limits political resistance. His theory prioritizes security

because he regards civil war and the collapse of enforceable order as more destructive than ordinary abuses of government.

Locke: Natural Rights, Consent, and Government as Trust

Locke begins from a more morally structured state of nature. People are naturally free and equal, yet they remain bound by a law of nature that prohibits harming others in their life, liberty, and possessions. The problem is not complete moral chaos but unreliable enforcement: individuals are partial judges in their own disputes, punishment can become excessive, and rights lack an impartial protector. People therefore consent to political society so that known law, independent adjudication, and legitimate enforcement can secure rights more effectively. Government is a trust rather than an unlimited transfer of authority. Legislative power must serve the public good, operate through law, and respect property and political consent. Locke also allows a right of resistance when rulers systematically destroy the purposes for which government was established. This is not a permission to rebel against every unpopular decision; it concerns sustained violations that dissolve political trust. His theory consequently provides a foundation for limited constitutional government. It also connects political legitimacy with consent more strongly than Hobbes, because rulers remain accountable to the community whose rights justify their authority in the first place.

Rousseau: The General Will and Civic Freedom

Rousseau's political problem is not only insecurity or weak rights protection but domination created by inequality and social dependence. In his earlier *Discourse on Inequality*, he argues that property, comparison, status competition, and dependence transform human relationships and allow some people to command others. In *The* Social Contract, Rousseau therefore asks how political association can preserve freedom rather than merely make obedience orderly. Each citizen joins the political community on equal terms, and sovereignty belongs collectively to the people. Legitimate law expresses the general will directed toward the common good rather than the private interests of one ruler or faction. Rousseau does not define the general will as whatever a temporary numerical majority wants; citizens must deliberate as members of a political community whose rules apply equally. This produces his distinctive idea of civic freedom: people remain free when they obey laws in whose legitimate authorship they participate. The theory is powerful but difficult because it raises questions about dissent, minority protection, faction, representation, and how institutions can distinguish genuine common interest from claims made in its name.

Comparing Security, Rights, Freedom, and Resistance

The three theorists share a contractual language but construct different political orders because they diagnose different fundamental dangers. Hobbes sees insecurity as the primary problem, so legitimate political authority must be strong enough to prevent a return to civil war. Locke sees insecure enjoyment of pre-political rights as the problem, so government must be limited, rule-bound, and accountable. Rousseau sees domination and unequal dependence as the problem, so legitimate law must arise from collective self-government. Their concepts of freedom follow these differences. Hobbesian freedom largely concerns the absence of external impediments within the space left by law. Lockean liberty is protected under known laws that preserve rights. Rousseauian freedom involves membership in a political community in which citizens participate as equals rather than obey another person's private will. Their views of resistance also diverge. Hobbes fears rebellion because it threatens the conditions of peace. Locke permits resistance when government dissolves its trust. Rousseau locates sovereignty permanently in the people and treats officials as agents. These contrasts show that "social contract theory" names a family of arguments rather than one uniform doctrine about government.

Empiricism from Locke to Berkeley and Hume

The assignment's second theme, empiricism, concerns the sources and limits of human knowledge. Locke argues in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that the mind does not begin with innate speculative principles already written into it. Ideas arise through sensation, which supplies experience of the external world, and reflection, which supplies awareness of mental operations such as remembering, willing, doubting, and comparing. George Berkeley accepts the empiricist demand that claims about reality remain connected to possible experience but rejects Locke's appeal to material substance existing behind perceived qualities. David Hume develops empiricism in a more skeptical direction, distinguishing vivid impressions from fainter ideas and arguing that causal necessity is not directly perceived. Repeated experience produces habits of expectation, but reason cannot prove without circularity that the future must resemble the past. These thinkers therefore share a commitment to experience while reaching very different conclusions about objects, causation, and certainty. Empiricism is not passive copying of the world; it is a critical investigation of how ideas arise and what evidence can justify claims about reality.

Political Authority, Experience, and the Critique of

Inherited Claims

Social-contract theory and empiricism are related less by a single doctrine than by a common early-modern willingness to question inherited authority. Locke's political philosophy asks whether government actually serves the purposes that justify it rather than treating hereditary power as naturally absolute. His epistemology similarly asks where ideas come from and whether claims can be warranted without experience. Rousseau's criticism of unequal social relations challenges institutions that appear legitimate merely because they are established, while Hume later criticizes simplistic contract histories by emphasizing convention and the gradual development of social practices. The connection should not be overstated. Hobbes drew heavily on geometry and materialism rather than Lockean empiricism, and Rousseau was suspicious of some forms of Enlightenment progress. Nevertheless, these debates helped transform modern thought by moving legitimacy and knowledge away from unquestioned tradition toward justification. Political authority had to explain why coercion was rightful, while philosophy had to explain how belief was grounded. The result was not one unified philosophy but a new culture of argument about consent, evidence, experience, rights, and the limits of power.

Conclusion

Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau use the social contract to answer the same broad question—why political authority can rightfully bind free persons—but their answers reflect different understandings of the human problem that government must solve. Hobbes authorizes strong sovereignty because insecurity threatens every other social good. Locke creates limited government because people already possess rights and establish political authority to protect them more reliably. Rousseau seeks a political order in which citizens remain free by participating in laws directed toward the common good. Their differences concern security, property, equality, consent, resistance, and the meaning of freedom itself. British empiricism adds another dimension to the assignment by examining how knowledge is acquired. Locke grounds ideas in sensation and reflection, Berkeley challenges the notion of unknowable material substance, and Hume shows how habit underlies beliefs about causation. Together, the political and epistemological debates demonstrate a broader early-modern shift toward justification. Institutions and beliefs could no longer claim legitimacy merely because they were inherited; they had to explain the grounds on which rational people should accept them.

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