

Hobbes's Locke's social contract theory

Thomas Hobbes, a 17th-century English philosopher, was one of the first political theorists to develop a comprehensive theory of the social contract. Writing during the chaos of the English Civil War, Hobbes sought to understand the nature of human society and the basis of political authority. His most influential work, *Leviathan* (1651), outlines a political philosophy grounded in a pessimistic view of human nature. Hobbes argued that in order to escape a violent and lawless natural condition, individuals must agree to submit to an absolute sovereign through a social contract. This essay will examine Hobbes's social contract theory by analyzing his concept of the state of nature, the formation of political society, and the justification for absolute authority.

The State of Nature

At the heart of Hobbes's theory is his conception of the state of nature—a hypothetical condition in which humans exist without government or laws. According to Hobbes, in this natural state, every person is free to do whatever they believe is necessary to survive. However, because all individuals have equal ability to harm or kill one another and because they pursue their own self-interest, the state of nature quickly devolves into a condition of constant conflict and fear.

Hobbes famously described life in the state of nature as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Without a common power to keep people in awe, there would be no justice, no law, and no security. In Hobbes's view, the natural condition of mankind is one of war—of every man against every man.

The Social Contract

To escape this dangerous condition, Hobbes argues that rational individuals would voluntarily come together and form a social contract. This contract is not made between the people and a ruler, but among the people themselves. They agree to give up certain natural freedoms and submit their will to a sovereign power in exchange for peace and protection. This mutual agreement creates a commonwealth—a political society ruled by a sovereign authority.

Importantly, Hobbes believed that in order for peace to be maintained, the sovereign must have absolute and undivided power. The sovereign—whether a monarch or an assembly—must be strong enough to enforce laws, maintain order, and prevent society from falling back into the state of nature.

Absolute Authority and No Right to Revolt

Hobbes's view of sovereignty is extremely authoritarian. Once individuals enter into the social contract, they cannot withdraw their consent or rebel against the sovereign, even if the ruler is harsh or unjust. The only limit Hobbes places on the sovereign's power is that it must protect the lives of its subjects. If a ruler fails to provide basic security, then citizens have a right to defend themselves, but not to overthrow the government outright.

Hobbes believed that even a bad government is better than the chaos of the state of nature. For him, peace and order are the ultimate goals of political society, and only a powerful, centralized authority can provide them.