

# Comparative Examination of Social Contract Theories: Insights from Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau

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**Abstract:** *The social contract theory is a political philosophy that explains the origin and legitimacy of the state and the rights and obligations of its citizens. The theory is based on the idea that individuals voluntarily agree to form a society and a government that can protect their natural rights and interests. The social contract theory has been developed by various thinkers, such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean - Jacques Rousseau, who have different views on the state of nature, the government formation, and the individual rights. This paper aims to compare and contrast the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, and to evaluate their strengths and weaknesses. The paper argues that while Hobbes provides a realistic account of human nature and the need for a strong sovereign, he fails to justify the absolute power of the sovereign and the loss of individual liberty. Locke, on the other hand, offers a more balanced view of human nature and the government, but he does not adequately address the problem of consent and representation. Rousseau, finally, proposes a radical vision of democracy and equality, but he overlooks the practical difficulties and dangers of his ideal society. The paper concludes that the social contract theory is a useful framework for understanding the political order, but it also has some limitations and challenges that need to be addressed.*

**Keywords:** social contract theory, State of Nature, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau

## 1. Introduction

The social contract theory has long been a cornerstone of political philosophy, offering a compelling explanation for the establishment and legitimacy of the state and the rights and obligations of its citizens. Developed by influential thinkers like Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean - Jacques Rousseau, this theory delves into the fundamental question of how individuals come together to form societies and governments, willingly entering into a pact to secure their natural rights and mutual interests.

Throughout history, the social contract has been explored by various philosophers, each bringing their unique perspectives on the state of nature, government formation, and the extent of individual rights. As we embark on this journey of comparative analysis, we shall delve into the nuanced ideas of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, seeking to uncover the strengths and weaknesses that underlie their respective social contract theories.

Thomas Hobbes, with his uncompromising realism, depicted the state of nature as a chaotic and brutish realm, where individuals exist in a perpetual "war of all against all." His vision of a powerful sovereign emerged as the necessary solution to establish order and security in society, with the relinquishment of certain individual liberties in favour of collective protection. Nevertheless, Hobbes' advocacy for absolute sovereign power raises critical questions about the potential abuse of authority and the potential loss of individual freedom.

In stark contrast, John Locke offered a more balanced view of human nature, emphasizing the inherent rights to life, liberty, and property. Locke's conception of government was built on the idea of consent, contending that legitimate

authority must arise from the approval of the governed. While his approach appears to safeguard individual liberties, it leaves open the challenge of adequately addressing the complexities of representation and ensuring a government that remains truly accountable to its people.

Jean - Jacques Rousseau, the visionary philosopher, presented a radical vision of democracy and equality through his social contract theory. According to Rousseau, true sovereignty lies with the collective will of the people, and each citizen should actively participate in shaping the laws and institutions governing society. However, his idealistic vision seems to neglect the practical difficulties and potential dangers that can arise in such a direct democratic setup.

As we delve into the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, we aim to critically evaluate their concepts, illuminating the underlying strengths and limitations that they bring to our understanding of political order. While the social contract theory undoubtedly offers valuable insights into the nature of governance and the rights of citizens, it is essential to recognize the challenges and complexities inherent in its implementation.

In the subsequent sections of this paper, we will explore the core tenets of each philosopher's social contract theory, scrutinizing their ideas on the state of nature, government formation, and individual rights. By analyzing their contributions, we hope to gain a comprehensive perspective on the timeless relevance of the social contract theory, along with the imperative need to address the inherent challenges it presents.

As we journey through the ideas of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, we shall endeavour to shed light on the enduring

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significance of the social contract theory in the realm of political philosophy while acknowledging the nuanced debates that surround it. By understanding the strengths and limitations of each perspective, we can better grasp the complexities of governance and the on-going pursuit of just and equitable societies.

**State of Nature: Comparing and contrasting the three philosophers' views on the state of nature, i. e., the hypothetical condition of human beings before the establishment of organized societies. Hobbes famously described it as a state of "war of all against all," Locke saw it as a state of natural rights and freedom, while Rousseau believed it to be a peaceful and harmonious state.**

Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean - Jacques Rousseau each presented distinct and contrasting perspectives on the state of nature, envisioning vastly different scenarios that shaped their respective social contract theories.

Thomas Hobbes, a staunch realist, characterized the state of nature as a bleak and perilous existence. In his seminal work, "Leviathan," he famously described this pre-social condition as a "war of all against all." According to Hobbes, in the absence of a central authority, human beings are driven by their inherent self-interest and fear of others, leading to a perpetual state of conflict and chaos. In this state, life is "nasty, brutish, and short," and individuals are in constant competition for resources, safety, and power. Hobbes' vision of the state of nature served as a fundamental premise for his advocacy of a strong sovereign government to maintain order and prevent societal disintegration.

In stark contrast, John Locke portrayed the state of nature as a realm of relative peace, abundance, and natural rights. Locke believed that all individuals are born with inherent and inalienable rights, including the right to life, liberty, and property. In his influential work, "Two Treatises of Government," Locke argued that humans are rational beings capable of moral conduct, and they have the capacity to govern themselves according to the natural law. While Locke acknowledged that conflicts may arise in the state of nature, he believed that the abundance of resources and reason would generally facilitate peaceful cooperation among individuals. Despite this relative tranquillity, Locke recognized the need for a social contract and the establishment of a government to protect individual rights and resolve disputes more effectively.

Jean - Jacques Rousseau, the visionary philosopher, offered yet another contrasting view of the state of nature. In his work, "The Social Contract," Rousseau posited that humans in their natural state were fundamentally innocent and harmonious beings, living in a state of idyllic simplicity. He suggested that it is only with the emergence of private property and the establishment of social hierarchies that the state of nature is corrupted and peaceful existence is disrupted. For Rousseau, the state of nature represented a primitive stage of human development characterized by equality and a genuine sense of freedom, unencumbered by the constraints of modern society. He proposed a return to a more egalitarian and communal social contract, where

individuals collectively create laws and institutions that reflect the general will of the people.

Therefore, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau presented divergent viewpoints on the state of nature, ranging from a state of constant conflict and self-interest to one of inherent rights and peaceful cooperation, and finally to an idealized vision of simplicity and harmony. These contrasting perspectives significantly influenced their social contract theories, shaping their notions of the role of government, the consent of the governed, and the extent of individual rights in the quest for a just and orderly society.

**Government Formation: Examining how each philosopher proposes the formation of governments and the reasons behind it. Hobbes advocated for an absolute monarchy or authoritarian rule to maintain order, Locke argued for a limited government based on the consent of the governed, and Rousseau favoured a social contract where individuals collectively determine the rules and laws.**

Each philosopher, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, proposed different approaches to the formation of governments, driven by their respective views on human nature, the state of nature, and the primary goals of governance.

#### **Thomas Hobbes:**

Hobbes believed that the state of nature, marked by constant conflict and self-preservation, necessitated the establishment of a strong and centralized government. In his work "Leviathan," Hobbes argued that without a powerful sovereign authority, life in the state of nature would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." To escape this state of perpetual war, individuals would willingly enter into a social contract, surrendering their individual rights and liberties to the absolute authority of a monarch or an authoritarian ruler.

Hobbes' rationale for advocating for an absolute monarchy or authoritarian rule stemmed from his belief that a strong and centralized government was necessary to maintain order and prevent the disintegration of society. The sovereign's authority would be absolute and unchallenged, ensuring that individuals' natural inclination towards self-interest and conflict did not disrupt the social order. In this authoritarian system, the government's primary role was to provide security and stability by wielding significant power and control over the citizens.

#### **John Locke:**

In contrast to Hobbes, Locke's perspective on government formation was rooted in his belief in natural rights and the consent of the governed. Locke's work, "Two Treatises of Government," postulated that in the state of nature, individuals possessed inherent and inalienable rights to life, liberty, and property. However, since conflicts and disputes could arise in the state of nature, individuals voluntarily agreed to form a government through a social contract to better protect their natural rights and ensure a more orderly society.

According to Locke, the formation of a government required the consent of the governed. Individuals, by agreeing to be part of a political community, established a social contract with the government. In this contract, the government's authority was derived from the consent of the people it governed. The primary purpose of the government, as per Locke's theory, was to protect and preserve individual rights. If the government failed in this duty or violated the people's rights, individuals had the right to alter or abolish the government and form a new one, ensuring that the power remained accountable to the governed.

#### **Jean - Jacques Rousseau:**

Rousseau's concept of government formation was distinct from both Hobbes and Locke. In his work "The Social Contract," Rousseau emphasized the need to create a new social order that would restore individual freedom and equality. Unlike the other two philosophers, Rousseau believed that individuals in the state of nature were fundamentally innocent and harmonious beings, but the development of private property and societal inequalities led to the corruption of human nature.

Rousseau proposed a social contract in which individuals would collectively participate in creating laws and institutions that reflected the "general will" of the community. In this system, individuals would be free and equal participants, determining the rules and laws that govern society. The general will represented the common interest and the collective good, with each individual contributing to the formation of laws that would promote the well-being of the entire community.

Thus, Hobbes advocated for an absolute monarchy or authoritarian rule to maintain order, emphasizing the necessity of a strong government to prevent chaos. Locke argued for a limited government based on the consent of the governed, focused on protecting individual rights and maintaining accountability. Rousseau favoured a social contract where individuals collectively determined the rules and laws, aiming to restore individual freedom and equality through the expression of the general will. Each philosopher's approach to government formation reflected their broader views on human nature, the state of nature, and the fundamental objectives of governance.

#### **Social Contract: Analysing the concept of the social contract as presented by each philosopher**

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premise for his advocacy of a strong sovereign government to maintain order and prevent societal disintegration.

In stark contrast, John Locke portrayed the state of nature as a realm of relative peace, abundance, and natural rights. Locke believed that all individuals are born with inherent and inalienable rights, including the right to life, liberty, and property. In his influential work, "Two Treatises of Government," Locke argued that humans are rational beings capable of moral conduct, and they have the capacity to govern themselves according to the natural law. While Locke acknowledged that conflicts may arise in the state of nature, he believed that the abundance of resources and reason would generally facilitate peaceful cooperation among individuals. Despite this relative tranquillity, Locke recognized the need for a social contract and the establishment of a government to protect individual rights and resolve disputes more effectively.

Jean - Jacques Rousseau, the visionary philosopher, offered yet another contrasting view of the state of nature. In his work, "The Social Contract," Rousseau posited that humans in their natural state were fundamentally innocent and harmonious beings, living in a state of idyllic simplicity. He suggested that it is only with the emergence of private property and the establishment of social hierarchies that the state of nature is corrupted and peaceful existence is disrupted. For Rousseau, the state of nature represented a primitive stage of human development characterized by equality and a genuine sense of freedom, unencumbered by the constraints of modern society. He proposed a return to a more egalitarian and communal social contract, where individuals collectively create laws and institutions that reflect the general will of the people.

Therefore, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau presented divergent viewpoints on the state of nature, ranging from a state of constant conflict and self-interest to one of inherent rights and peaceful cooperation, and finally to an idealized vision of simplicity and harmony. These contrasting perspectives significantly influenced their social contract theories, shaping their notions of the role of government, the consent of the governed, and the extent of individual rights in the quest for a just and orderly society.

#### **Individual Rights: Investigating the differing perspectives of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau on individual rights and freedoms within the context of their respective social contract theories.**

Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau had distinct views on individual rights and freedoms within the context of their respective social contract theories. Each philosopher addressed the role of government in protecting or restricting these rights in different ways, reflecting their broader conceptions of the social contract and the relationship between the individual and the state.

#### **Thomas Hobbes:**

Hobbes' perspective on individual rights was influenced by his pessimistic view of human nature and the state of nature's "war of all against all." In his social contract theory, individuals voluntarily surrender some of their natural rights to a sovereign authority in exchange for protection and the

establishment of civil society. This concept, known as the "contractual surrender," meant that individuals relinquished their rights to self-governance and the use of force in favour of the sovereign's absolute authority. Hobbes argued that without a strong government, life would be characterized by chaos and insecurity, and the protection of life would be impossible.

In Hobbes' view, the role of the government was crucial in maintaining social order and protecting the rights of individuals. The sovereign authority, whether a monarchy or any other form of absolute rule, had the responsibility to ensure peace and stability by acting as an impartial arbiter and enforcing the laws that safeguarded the lives and property of citizens, while individuals gave up some freedoms through the social contract. Hobbes believed that this was a necessary sacrifice to avoid the anarchy and violence inherent in the state of nature.

#### **John Locke:**

John Locke's perspective on individual rights was markedly different from Hobbes'. Locke's social contract theory was grounded in the belief in natural rights, including the right to life, liberty, and property. Unlike Hobbes, Locke had a more optimistic view of human nature, seeing individuals as rational and capable of coexisting peacefully in the state of nature. In this context, individuals retained their natural rights to life, liberty, and property, and they had the inherent right to self-preservation and self-defence.

According to Locke, the primary purpose of the government was to protect and uphold these natural rights. The government, formed through the consent of the governed, derived its legitimacy from the people's approval and had the responsibility to act in the best interests of the citizens. If the government failed in this duty or violated the people's rights, Locke believed that individuals had the right to revolt and overthrow the oppressive regime. Thus, while individuals surrendered some powers to the government through the social contract, they retained the ultimate right to hold the government accountable and protect their natural rights.

#### **Jean - Jacques Rousseau:**

Rousseau's perspective on individual rights was rooted in his belief in the concept of the "general will." He saw the state of nature as an idyllic and egalitarian state, where individuals enjoyed freedom and equality. However, with the advent of private property and societal inequalities, individual freedom and rights were compromised. Rousseau's social contract theory sought to restore these natural rights by creating a collective agreement, guided by the general will, to form a new social order.

According to Rousseau, individuals would regain their rights and freedom by participating in the creation of laws and institutions that aligned with the general will of the people. The government's role, in Rousseau's theory, was not to protect individual rights as much as to implement and enforce the decisions made collectively. The general will, representing the common good and the collective interest, would supersede individual preferences. In this way, Rousseau's social contract emphasized the idea of a

community that works collectively to uphold the rights and freedoms of its members.

Thus, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau had distinct perspectives on individual rights and the role of government in protecting or restricting these rights within the context of their social contract theories. Hobbes emphasized the need for a strong central authority to prevent anarchy, while Locke focused on protecting natural rights and empowering citizens to hold the government accountable. Rousseau's vision centered on the general will, seeking a more communal approach to safeguarding individual rights. These differing perspectives shaped their ideas on governance and the fundamental relationship between individuals and the state.

#### **Legitimacy of Authority: Assessing the legitimacy of political authority in the eyes of these philosophers.**

The legitimacy of political authority was a central concern for Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, and each philosopher had distinct views on the conditions under which a government could be considered just, as well as the rights of citizens to rebel against unjust rule.

#### **Thomas Hobbes:**

For Hobbes, the legitimacy of political authority was derived from the social contract, where individuals willingly surrendered their rights and liberties to a sovereign authority in exchange for protection and order. Once the social contract was established, the government's authority became absolute and irrevocable. Hobbes believed that any form of government, including an absolute monarchy or authoritarian rule, was just as long as it effectively maintained social order and prevented the "war of all against all" that characterized the state of nature.

According to Hobbes, citizens did not have the right to rebel against unjust rule, as the sovereign's authority was absolute and above challenge. Rebellion would only lead to chaos and a return to the state of nature, where life would be even more miserable and insecure. For Hobbes, the only legitimate form of resistance was to be obedient to the government and accept its authority, even if it was deemed unjust, as the alternative would be far worse.

#### **John Locke:**

Locke's perspective on the legitimacy of political authority was rooted in the concept of the social contract based on the consent of the governed. According to Locke, political authority was legitimate only when it had the consent of the people it governed. The government's role was to protect the natural rights of individuals, including life, liberty, and property. If a government fulfilled this duty and acted in the best interests of the people, it was considered just and legitimate.

However, Locke recognized that governments could abuse their power and violate the rights of their citizens. In such cases, Locke believed that citizens had the right to rebel against unjust rule. If a government acted tyrannically and violated the social contract by failing to protect the people's rights, then the contract would be broken, and the government's legitimacy would be lost. Locke argued that



citizens had the right to revolt and overthrow the oppressive government, replacing it with a new one that respected their rights and interests.

#### **Jean - Jacques Rousseau:**

Rousseau's perspective on the legitimacy of political authority was centered on the idea of the "general will" of the people. In his social contract theory, political authority was legitimate when it represented the collective will of the community, promoting the common good and the general welfare. Rousseau believed that the government's authority derived its legitimacy from the expression of the general will, which represented the shared interests of all individuals in the society.

If a government deviated from the general will and acted against the common interest, Rousseau considered it unjust and illegitimate. In such a scenario, citizens had the right and the duty to rebel against the government and seek to restore the legitimate expression of the general will. Rousseau believed that individuals should actively participate in shaping the laws and institutions that govern society, ensuring that the government remained in alignment with the collective interests of the community.

In conclusion, the three philosophers had differing views on the legitimacy of political authority and the conditions under which a government could be considered just. Hobbes believed that any form of government that provided order and security was legitimate, and citizens did not have the right to rebel against unjust rule. Locke argued that political authority was legitimate only when based on the consent of the governed, and citizens had the right to rebel against a government that violated their natural rights. Rousseau saw the legitimacy of political authority arising from the expression of the general will, and citizens had the right to rebel against a government that acted against the common interest. These perspectives shaped their views on governance and the extent of citizen participation in political decision - making.

#### **Influence and Contemporary Relevance:**

The social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau have left a profound and lasting impact on modern political thought. These philosophical frameworks have shaped the understanding of government legitimacy, individual rights, and the role of citizens in contemporary political systems. Despite being developed centuries ago, these theories remain relevant in the context of contemporary political issues and debates.

One of the key influences of these social contract theories on modern political thought is the concept of government legitimacy. The idea that political authority should be based on the consent of the governed has become a foundational principle in democratic societies. In modern democracies, governments derive their legitimacy from the will of the people, expressed through regular elections and the protection of individual rights. This notion of legitimacy also underpins the idea of accountability, where governments are expected to serve the interests of the people and can be held accountable through peaceful means if they fail to do so.

Furthermore, the debates around the extent of government power and the protection of individual rights can be traced back to the ideas of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau. Hobbes' advocacy for a strong sovereign and absolute authority has influenced discussions on the necessity of a strong state to maintain order and security, especially in times of crisis or emergencies. Locke's emphasis on natural rights and limited government has been instrumental in shaping modern conceptions of civil liberties and the need for checks and balances on state power. Rousseau's call for the general will and the importance of collective decision - making has inspired deliberative democracy and participatory governance approaches in contemporary political systems.

Moreover, the social contract theories have relevance in addressing contemporary political issues such as social justice, inequality, and the balance between individual freedom and collective well - being. Rousseau's emphasis on the general will and the common good highlights the importance of addressing societal challenges collectively, with a focus on the welfare of all members of the community. These ideas resonate with discussions around income inequality, access to basic services, and the role of government in ensuring a fair and just society.

Additionally, the concept of the social contract remains a relevant framework in addressing issues related to citizenship and social cohesion. As societies become more diverse and multicultural, questions of belonging, identity, and citizenship come to the forefront of political debates. The idea of a social contract that binds individuals together in a shared sense of community and responsibility can help navigate these complexities and foster inclusive and cohesive societies.

However, despite their enduring influence, the social contract theories also face criticisms and challenges in the contemporary context. Critics argue that these theories often neglect the complexities of real - world politics, the influence of power structures, and the unequal distribution of resources and opportunities. The assumption of rationality and consent in the social contract may not fully account for the influence of misinformation, propaganda, and manipulation in shaping public opinion.

In conclusion, the social contract theories of Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau offer valuable insights into the origins of the state and the rights and obligations of its citizens. Each theory, with its unique perspective on human nature, the state of nature, and the role of government, contributes to our understanding of political philosophy. However, these theories also present challenges and limitations that need to be addressed. Hobbes theory, while providing a realistic account of human nature, fails to justify the absolute power of the sovereign and the loss of individual liberty. Lockes theory offers a balanced view of human nature and government, but it does not adequately address the problem of consent and representation. Rousseaus theory proposes a radical vision of democracy and equality, but it overlooks the practical difficulties and dangers of his ideal society. Therefore, while the social contract theory is a useful framework for understanding the political order, it is not without its limitations and challenges.

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