

Zero Two

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Drinking the Kool-Aid

The social contract is the idea that there is an agreement between the state and the people living under that state where an individual gives up certain rights in order to maintain a social order and continue living there peacefully. While there is no defined set of rules for the social contract and each philosopher's idea of it varies, the social contract is generally an implicit agreement made simply by a person choosing to live where they live. Socrates (470-399 BC) is one of the first documented philosophers to have a social contract theory. His social contract is based on the idea that since the state enables a person to live, and literally come into existence, anyone who chooses not to move needs to respect and obey the state (or else it falls apart) (Plato 1-9). The problem with his social contract is that it leaves no room for exceptions and lends itself towards a supreme authority and totalitarian governance, leaving the state rife to all the problems that come along with it. And while this is not the only understanding of the social contract, it's also not the only one with this problem. Despite being almost two millennia apart, both the 17th century English philosopher Thomas Hobbes and the 5th century BC Greek philosopher Socrates have a social contract that argues for the absolute authority of state over the people, no matter that Socrates would not have agreed.

In Plato's *Crito* both Socrates and Crito are discussing in Socrates' prison cell why or why not Socrates should remain and accept his punishment from the state; the death penalty. Socrates' main argument, and what is later known as the social contract, is that because the state

has enabled him to live and he has not chosen to leave up until now that he is obligated to obey the state as his choosing to stay means he has agreed to a social contract (to obey) with the state. After arguing out that a good man should only listen to the singular wise person (and not the unwise majority) and that to do any injustice or evil is wrong (no matter what), he acts out the part of the state in a devil's advocate. He ignores the fact that he was put on trial and sentenced because the general (and unwise) populace was annoyed at him, and sets up the direction for the rest of the argument by asking the following of Crito.

“But if this is true, what is the application? In leaving the prison against the will of the Athenians, do I wrong any? Or rather do I not wrong those whom I ought least to wrong?

Do I not desert the principles which were acknowledged by us to be just?” (Plato 5)

He then acts as the state and makes the overdramatic point that his running away and disobeying the state in his punishment is effectively dismantling the state and therefore injuring it. Which is wrong. Why is it wrong? Not only because injuring someone is always wrong, but also because the states' existence allows a person's parents to marry, conceive children, educate those children, and then enable those grown children to live. By the law of Lots of Backtracking, that means double and thrice the disobedience because it might as well be the disobeying of parents. Since Socrates has chosen to live in Athens, and not moved away, he is then implicitly agreeing to this concept and so must offer complete compliance with the state as if they were his parents (Plato 1-9).

Hobbes' based his social contract off his understanding of human nature, if humans were living in a base world with no rules. In his mind, humans are inherently self-centered and everything they do is focused on themselves and their own desires rather than the community as a whole. In a world where there are no rules, what is to prevent people from robbing and killing

each other? The constant fear generated from such a life would be a living hell, but there is hope because he says that, although self-centered, humans can be reasonable. He believes that in order to serve their own self-interests for an easier life, people can reason out the need to form a contract with one another. The agreement would be made of two parts; “establish society by collectively and reciprocally renouncing the rights they had against one another in the State of Nature” and “imbue some one person or assembly of persons with the authority and power to enforce the initial contract” (Friend p. 12). Hobbes’ social contract is a give and take of people agreeing only to serve themselves.

Socrates’ social contract, on the other hand, is about serving the state because it is the right thing to do. It seems as if they are opposing ideals. This is even reinforced with Glaucon’s social contract in Plato’s Republic. He uses the social contract as an answer to the question “what is justice?” by using similar points later made in Hobbes’s contract. Glaucon states that, “What men would most want is to be able to commit injustices against others without the fear of reprisal, and what they most want to avoid is being treated unjustly by others without being able to do injustice in return.” (Friend p. 3) Glaucon then states that justice is simply the outcome of men making “laws and covenants” in their best interest to avoid such events. However, Socrates rejects this theory as he believes that justice is of value on its own, something good men want, not just as the check and balance Glaucon presents it as. (McPherran 65-73)

Considering Glaucon and Hobbes have such similar ideals, regarding the social contract as a system agreed to in order to keep people from wrong doing, it could be safe to say that Socrates would also have rejected Hobbes’ social contract for the same reasons he rejected Glaucon’s. However, that might make Socrates a hypocrite because, even though he disagrees about the value of justice, his social contract is actually not all that different from Hobbes (and

Glaucón's). All three social contracts might have different reasoning overall, but the end point is the same; ceding total control over to a single authority that upholds the social contract.

Socrates's argument stems from likening the state to one's parents and Hobbes' from human self-interest, but the bottom line is the same. Does the journey particularly matter when the destination is the same?

In his conversation with Crito, Socrates says in opposition to his sentence, “. . . the State has injured us and given an unjust sentence . . .,” (Plato 6) which is a valid argument in his case (the death penalty for annoying the people of Athens is a little extreme no matter how they tried to color the charges), but he immediately counters it again in his personification of the state. He says that agreeing to the contract puts him under the states' control and makes him lesser than it. As someone who is unequal, what right does he have to go against the state which is both his master and father? He basically gaslights himself into believing that the state is like his parent, is above him, and must be obeyed always no matter what injustice it might cause him. Socrates believes that by living here, and therefore agreeing to this contract, that the state should be given absolute authority over the people living under it (Plato 1-9). Hobbes, while giving a different reasoning for it, is much in agreement on this point.

Since, according to Hobbes, natural human behavior without regulation is self-serving interests, people actually need the regulation to hold them to the contract. He believes that without something forcing people to adhere to the contract it would fall apart, “. . . the Sovereign must have absolute authority in order for the contract to be successful . . . And, no matter how much we may object to how poorly a Sovereign manages the affairs of the state and regulates our own lives, we are never justified in resisting his power because it is the only thing which stands between us and what we most want to avoid, the State of Nature.” (Friend p. 12)

Hobbes' social contract is an argument for what is essentially a dictatorship, and Socrates is no different. Despite Socrates very possibly disagreeing with Hobbes's version of the social contract, the reasoning behind the two contracts don't matter in the end as they both come to the same conclusion of giving total authority to the state.

Hobbes and Socrates both have a different stance on obeying the state. Socrates' point of view seems mostly to come from his own loyalty to the state of Athens. He really doesn't want to leave his home, no matter that it means accepting the death penalty, so he reasons his way towards why obeying such a sentence is just. From this, the social contract of obeying the state like one obeys their parents is formed as a way of good men doing what is just because it is right. Hobbes's social contract, on the other hand, stems from humanity's greed and self-interest. This forms the social contract of civility for survival, doing what is just because it benefits the individual and not because it's what is right. Socrates clearly rejects the idea of justice not being of value all on its own and he rejected Glaucon's social contract for this very reason. Being that Glaucon and Hobbes have similar reasoning behind their contracts, it suffices to say that Socrates would then reject Hobbes as well. But if he is rejecting the social contract as a whole based on its underlying reasoning, then he might as well reject his own. Socrates calls for loyalty and Hobbes for survival, but the justification meets the end and both conclude with an exaggerated push for a state with total and unquestioned loyalty.

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