

Social Contract Theory

Humans beings are social by nature. This is the key to understanding morality.

[Thomas Hobbes](#) believed that we lived together through what he called a "social contract." Hobbes believed that without a "social contract," human beings would be living in a constant state of violent conflict over scarce resources.

The answer was to band together in a state of cooperation in which:

- labor would be divided, and
- the amount of essential goods would increase and be equitably distributed.

First, 2 things must happen:

- There must be a guarantee that people will not harm one another.
 - No fear of attack, theft, or treachery.
- People must rely on each other to keep their agreements.
 - Each person can be counted on to do his/her part.

In other words, people must agree to establishment of rules to govern their relations with one another, and form an agency (the government) with the power to enforce those rules.

Cooperation as morality

Cooperation can be the only solution to many social dilemmas.

These are situations in which:

- people's interests are affected not only by what they do but by what other people do as well.
- everyone will end up worse off if they individually pursue their own interests than if they simultaneously do what is not in their own individual interests.

In living together with other people, you could adopt either of two strategies:

- You could pursue your own self interests exclusively, or
- you could be concerned with other people's welfare as well as your own.

There are 4 possibilities:

- You could be an egoist while other people are benevolent, ("free ride")
- Others could be egoists while you are benevolent, (sucker)
- Everyone could be egoistic, (Hobbes "state of nature")
- Everyone could be benevolent. (ordinary "morality")

This sort of dilemma results in pursuing your own best interests.

- Either people will respect your interests or they won't.
- If they do, you will be better off not respecting theirs.
- If they do not, then it would be foolish for you to respect theirs.
- Therefore, regardless of what other people do, you are better off not respecting their interests

The catch is that if everyone else reasons the same way you do, we end up in Hobbes' "state of nature."

The answer is mutual cooperation, or Hobbes' "social contract."

Participation in the Social Contract

Moral Responsibility:

A sphere of duty or obligation assigned to a person by the nature of that person's position, function, or work.

Rights:

A claim or a sphere of decision that is, or ought to be, respected by other individuals and protected by society.

Moral Responsibility versus Moral Accountability

Moral Accountability:

Blaming or praising someone for an action

- Just because a person is responsible doesn't mean that person is accountable.
- Complex organizational structures lead to "moral buck passing."

Under what conditions do we normally excuse people (hold them blameless)?

- Excusable ignorance of consequences
- Constraints
- Uncontrollable circumstances
- Lack of alternatives

[Top of Page](#)