

Possessive Individualism and the Social Contract

Work and the Human Condition: Fall 2008

I. What Is Possessive Individualism?

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I. What Is Possessive Individualism?

Individualism

*Individual is **prior** to society*

- An individual's *identity* is independent of society
- An individual can *exist* independently of society
- An individual's *actions* can be explained independently of society
- An individual's *purposes* are independent of society
- An individual has *rights* independently of society
- Society exists *for the sake of* the individuals within it; the individuals do not exist for the sake of society

Possessive Individualism

*Individuals **own** themselves*

- Individuals *have property in* their bodies
- Individuals *have property in* their activities
- Individuals' property is independent of society

II. Historical Background

Conjunction of Three Developments

- **Political Revolution**
- **Economic Transformation**
- **European Discovery of New World**

17th Century Political Revolutions

English Civil War – 1642-1649

- King vs. Parliament
- Trial & execution of Charles I, 1648-9

Radical Political Factions:

- Levellers – political egalitarians
- Diggers – economic egalitarians

A Theoretical Response:

Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1645)

“Glorious Revolution” of 1688

- Flight and overthrow of James II
- “Invasion” by William III of Orange
- Passage of Bill of Rights, 1689
- Established constitutional monarchy

A Theoretical Response:

Locke, *Second Treatise* (1690)

What justified overthrowing monarchy?

Economic Transformation

Gradual Change: 15th-17th Centuries

Feudal Economy

- Agrarian
- Largely no-monetary
- Exchanges based on tradition, political economic bonds

Growth of Market Economy

- Increased Production for Trade
- Rich needed resources -- Land
- Enclosure Movement
- Migration of peasants to cities
- Landless people w/o traditional bonds

Result: Change of Relationships

What justified these new relationships?

European Discovery of New World

English Settlements: 17th Century

Myth of the Wilderness Continent

- Native peoples decimated by disease
- Cultural and social disruption
- Differences in agriculture, economies

Result: Wholesale Misunderstanding of Native Americans

This misunderstanding fit well with the theoretical responses to the political and economic developments of the age.

III. Response: Social Contract Theory

Social Contract Theory = A theory that is intended to *justify* a particular sort of ethical or political relationships by appeal to an *original agreement* among people.

Three Stages:

I. The State of Nature. People all live independently of any organized political society. (Reports vary, but all agree that life could be better.)

II. The Social Contract. People find good reason to come together, negotiate a contract, and agree to abide by that contract in a political society.

III. How Things Now Are (or Should Be).
The resulting contract either justifies the government we ended up with, or it justifies us in changing it if it doesn't measure up.

Two Social Contract Theories

Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1645)

State of Nature:

- complete lawlessness
- everyone is out only for themselves
- life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short”

Contract:

- State of nature is so awful that anything would be better.
- People agree to live under an absolute monarch
- All are equal before the monarch.

Locke, *Second Treatise* (1690)

State of Nature:

- People live in families, have *natural rights*
- People can acquire *property rights*
- Central authority for protection is needed

Contract:

- People preserve pre-existing rights.
- Government is limited.
- People can change government if it infringes on pre-existing rights.

The Appeal of Social Contract Theory

- Apparently matched the “State of Nature” in the New World
- Justifies political relationships that aren’t founded on tradition or the divine
- (Lockean) Justifies limited government, as well as *changing* government when government exceeds its limits
- Makes voluntary, contractual agreements the central and fundamental basis for ethical and political obligations – all obligations are likened to commercial relations

Problems in Social Contract Theory

- Presumes individualism (Lockean: presumes possessive individualism) – cf. Carr, 36-7
- Historically highly suspect
- Are all obligations voluntary?
- Why should a (purportedly) historical agreement be obligatory *for us*?