**The Social Contract and Philosophy**

Written By:  [Brian Duignan](https://www.britannica.com/editor/Brian-Duignan/6469)

What, if anything, justifies the authority of the [state](https://www.britannica.com/topic/state-sovereign-political-entity)? What are the proper limits of state power? Under what circumstances, if any, is it morally right to overthrow a state? Within Western [political philosophy](https://www.britannica.com/topic/political-philosophy), one of the most influential approaches to such questions asserts that the state exists by, and its powers are generally defined or circumscribed by, the rational agreement of its citizens, as represented in an actual or a hypothetical [social contract](https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-contract) among themselves or between themselves and a ruler. The classic social-contract theorists of the 17th and 18th centuries—[Thomas Hobbes](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Thomas-Hobbes) (1588–1679), [John Locke](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Locke) (1632–1704), and [Jean-Jacques Rousseau](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Jean-Jacques-Rousseau) (1712–78)—held that the social contract is the means by which civilized society, including government, arises from a historically or logically preexisting condition of stateless anarchy, or a “[state of nature](https://www.britannica.com/topic/state-of-nature-political-theory).” Because the state of nature is in certain respects unhappy or unsatisfactory or undesirable, or because increasingly complex social relations eventually require it, each person agrees to surrender some (or all) of his or her originally expansive rights and freedoms to a central authority on the condition that every other person does the same. In exchange, each person receives the benefits that supposedly only such a central authority can provide, notably including domestic peace. \\

According to Hobbes, for example, in the state of nature, everyone has a right to everything, and there is no impartial power to prevent violent persons from taking what others may need to survive. The result is a “a war of all against all,” in which human life is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” The only salvation is a compact in which each person relinquishes his or her right to everything and submits to a central authority, or sovereign, with absolute power—the Leviathan—which in turn guarantees the safety and security of all. Individuals must obey the sovereign in all matters and may revolt against it only if it fails to ensure their safety.

In Locke’s version of the state of nature, persons have natural pre-social rights to life, liberty, and property, but a central authority, brought about through a social contract, is eventually necessary to better protect those rights. The power of the authority is limited to that which is necessary to guarantee the equal fundamental rights of all, and revolt against it is justified if it fails in that basic purpose. Locke’s political philosophy directly influenced the American [Declaration of Independence](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Declaration-of-Independence).

For Rousseau, the state of nature is relatively peaceful, but a social contract becomes necessary to overcome conflicts that inevitably arise as society grows and individuals become dependent on others to meet their needs. However, uniquely in Rousseau’s account, the authority of the state is not inherently in conflict with the free will of individuals, because it represents the collective will (the “general will”), of which the individual will is a part, provided that the individual is moral.

In the 20th century the notion of the social contract was the basis of two influential theories of justice, those of [John Rawls](https://www.britannica.com/biography/John-Rawls) (1921–2002) and [Robert Nozick](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Robert-Nozick) (1938–2002). Rawls argued for a set of basic principles of distributive justice (justice in the distribution of goods and benefits) as those that would be endorsed in a hypothetical agreement among rational individuals who have been made ignorant of their social and economic circumstances and their personal characteristics (the “veil of ignorance”). Rawls’s approach was generally interpreted as a justification of the capitalist [welfare state](https://www.britannica.com/topic/welfare-state). Nozick, in contrast, argued that any distribution of goods and benefits—even a highly unequal one—is just if it could have come about from a just distribution through transactions that did not violate anyone’s natural rights to life, liberty, and property. Because such transactions in a state of nature would have given rise to a “minimal state” (whose powers are limited to those necessary to prevent violence, theft, and fraud), only the minimal state is justified, according to Nozick.

The notion of a social contract also plays a more or less direct role in various approaches to ethical theory developed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Some philosophers have held, for example, that conventional moral principles are justified by the fact that rational, self-interested persons would agree to observe them (because each such person would gain more for himself or herself in a situation of general cooperation than in a situation of general noncooperation). Others have argued that correct moral principles are those that no one could reasonably reject as a basis for justifying his or her actions to others.