

# CS 4873: Computing, Society & Professionalism

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Week 4: Social Contract Theory  
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Context: Removal of Saddam Hussain's government in Iraq in 2003

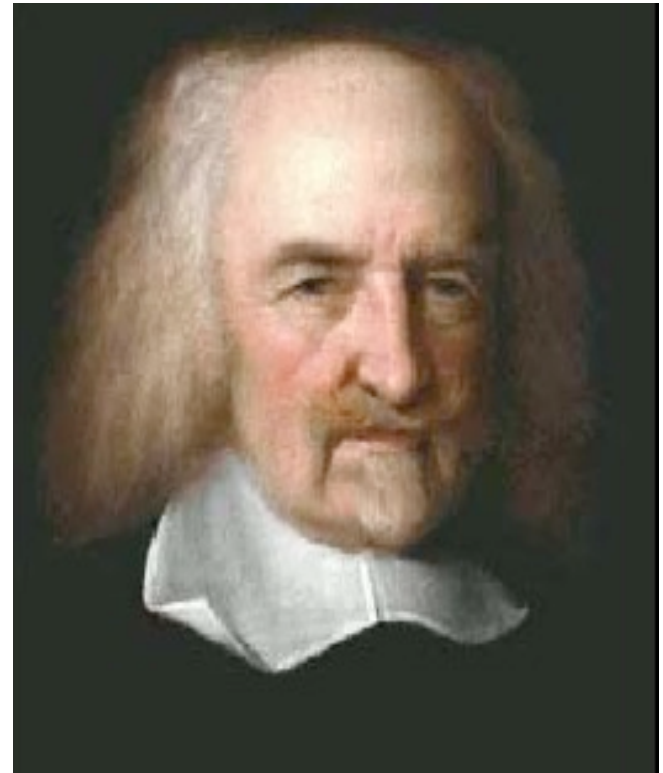
Question: Was the response of the Iraqi people typical given a lack of governmental authority and control?

# Social Contract Theory

## Thomas Hobbes

Social Contract Theory

Lived during the English civil war era and saw the consequences of social anarchy



# \* History

- Before society we were in the State of Nature.
- An individual dictated what he/she could/could not do.
- Survival of the Fittest

# Life in a State of Nature


No laws or government.

No rules of morality.

Everyone for themselves.

Anyone has the ability to kill anyone.

Hobbes calls this a “state of WAR”.



# Why the state of nature is bad

No industry

No society

No agriculture

No pleasure

No seafaring

Continual Fear



## **\* Why does this occur?**

There is equality of need.

There is scarcity of resources.

There is essential equality of human power.

There is limited altruism.

# \* Contract Law and Morality

Enter into a covenant with other people.

This is the basis of and reason for acting morally.

Explains the foundations of contracts: you both agree to give up some liberties.

In a state of nature, “upon any reasonable suspicion” the contract is void. (*Leviathan*, 1.14.18)





# \* The Social Contract


Morality is the set of rules that rational people will agree to obey, for their mutual benefit, provided that other people will obey them as well.

# \* Position of SCT


- “ . . . parties do not know their conception of the good or their special psychological propensities . . . ”  
.
- The terms of the social contact are chosen behind a veil of ignorance.
  - This ensures that no one is advantaged or disadvantaged in the choice of principles or rules by the outcome of natural chance or the contingency of social circumstances

# \* Jean-Jacques Rousseau


- Believed that humans are born inherently good. He coined the term “Noble Savage”.
- However, once the idea of private property was introduced mankind experienced a “fall from grace”.
- Individuals with many possessions saw that it would be in their best interest to create a government to protect their possessions.




\* Why does social contract theory work? – Example of Bill wanting to evade taxes




\* Which laws/moral rules  
are legitimate?



\* When is it permissible to  
break the rules/laws?



\* When is it permissible to break the rules/laws?



**\*\* Class Discussion: Contrast  
with Kantianism?**

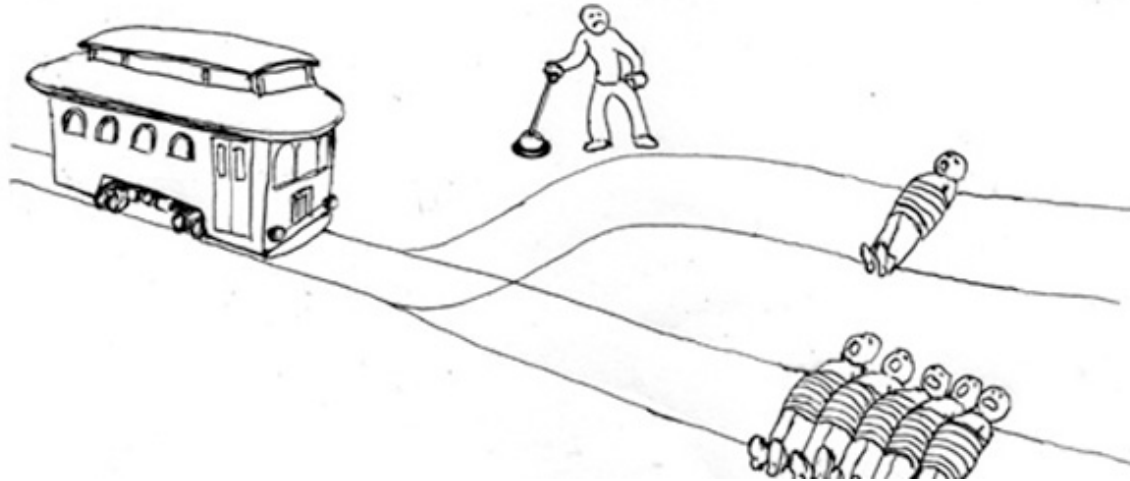




**\*\* Class Discussion:**  
**Contrast with utilitarianism?**

# Class Discussion: SCT and the Trolley Problem

- Trolley problem at the Good Place
- Contrast with utilitarianism and Kantianism



# \* Two Objections to the Social Contract Theory

- **One: The social contract is a fiction both historically and currently**
  - I did not agree to obey any rules
- What is your response? Yes/No? Why?

# \* Two Objections to the Social Contract Theory

- Two: The problem of duties to being that can't be part of the contract and can't reciprocate
  - If moral obligations between individuals arise (are created by) agreeing to obey moral rules on the conditions that others do
  - Then for those who do not (or cannot agree) no moral obligations exist (they have none to us and we none toward them).
  - So animals and people with mental or physical health impairments are not owed any duties on the social contract view.

# Social Contract Theory

- The Case For:
  - It is framed in the language of rights
  - It is based on a solid understanding of human nature, recognizing that rational people act out of self-interest in the absence of a common agreement
  - It explains why under certain circumstances civil disobedience can be a morally right decision

# Social Contract Theory

- The Case Against:
  - None of us signed the contract
  - Some actions can be characterized in multiple ways
  - It does not explain how to solve a moral problem when the analysis reveals conflicting rights
  - It may be unjust to those people who are incapable of upholding their side of the contract

# Rawl's Principles of Justice

- [E.g., Liberty] Each person may claim a “fully adequate” number of basic rights and liberties such as freedom of thought and speech, freedom of association, the right to be safe from harm, and the right to own property, so long as these claims are consistent with everyone else having a claim to the same rights and liberties

# Rawl's Principles of Justice

- [E.g., Fairness/Wealth] Any social and economic inequalities must satisfy two conditions: first they are associated with positions in society that everyone has a fair and equal opportunity to assume; and second, they are “to be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of the society” (the difference principle)