

THE SOCIAL CONTRACT:

by William H. Bennett

A Lincoln Douglas Debate Introduction

The "social contract" is a label for philosophical explanations of what individuals and governments owe to each other. It begins with the question "why do we have or create a government at all?" And once we have a government what does the government owe to its citizens? What should citizens give to the government, what debt does a person rightly owe to the government?

Social contract theories attempt to explain why we should, most of the time, obey governmental laws and authority. They attempt to explain when we should not obey government, when change or even rebellion or revolt is justified. Many (though not all) social contract theories start with the premise that people lived in "a state of nature" before governments were formed. And that in this state of nature conditions were savage and brutish, with the strong harshly dominating or killing the weak. These conditions lead most people to band together to defend themselves, to form simple governments. In exchange for the help of the government (in defense initially, and then education and other benefits) the individual gave up some liberties (e.g. agreeing to pay taxes or serve in the military).

There are many different versions of the social contract theory. **Plato** set up one and then attacked it in book 2 of *Republic*. **Hobbes** described a monarch centered version in *Leviathan*. The two most famous are **Locke's** (in his *Second Treatise of Civil Government*; it had a major impact on the leader's of the American Revolution), and **Rousseau's**. **Rand's** individualism and **Rawls'** call for government to err on the side of the weak or oppressed also contain notable assumptions about the proper relationship between individual and government.

Critics of social contract theory attack with great success at the starting point,

or a key premise. They correctly point out that no "state of nature" ever existed for people. Homosapiens have always been social creatures. From the beginning cooperation dominated over individualism, sharing over raw individual force. Peter Laslett, of Cambridge University, wrote in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Volume 7, page 467): "Nevertheless, since contract proceeds by abstracting the individual from society, and then by reassembling individuals again as society although they are by definition a social abstractions, the general contractual social and political scheme seems incurably faulty, quite apart from the empirical objections to it on the part of contemporary social scientists."

Where most critics have failed is in identifying an alternative explanation for why governments exist and what the proper trade-off is between personal freedom and responsibility, or payment, to the government for its services.

Most Lincoln Douglas debate topics involve social contract issues. Look, for example, at the 2001 NFL L/D BALLOT published in the September, 2000 issue of *Rostrum* (on page 4). The first topic includes the phrase "a nation's right to limit immigration". To know what rights a nation has we can begin with the questions "what is the social contract that establishes nations? Do these contracts give nations the right to close their borders?"

The fifth topic talks about "the right to privacy of candidates for public office". But does such a "right" even exist. If government is created because of a social contract don't the citizens have "a right" to know anything they want about their government? Or at least about the people who run it?

The sixth possible topic is "On balance, violent revolution is a just response

to oppression". This is a question at the core of Locke's writings. And it is discussed in every contract theory, when if ever can the social contract be nullified or changed. The seventh possible topic addresses justifying "governmental infringement of a patent right". To know when government is and is not entitled to do something don't we first need to agree upon the powers and functions of government? To do that a Lincoln Douglas debate case needs to identify the best relationship between the person and the political power structure, an issue directly addressed by social contract theorists.

One of the most American of Lincoln Douglas debate topics is number eight: "Decentralized governmental power ought to be a fundamental goal of democratic society". This topic reads like a line on social contract theory from Hume, Locke, Jefferson, and Madison. It is an enjoyable and deceptively simple topic question that has challenged political philosophers for centuries. In team debate it reoccurs on almost every topic under the label of "the federalism disadvantage". Which side you take depends almost certainly upon your view of the social contract.

If you want to learn more about social contract theory the standard account is J. W. Gough, *The Social Contract* (revised edition, 1957). Ernest Barker is succinct in the World Classic series *Social Contract: Essays by Locke, Hume, and Rousseau* (Oxford, 1948). And there is a major section on the issue in *Core Reading in Lincoln Douglas Debate* (CDE, 2000).

(William H. Bennett is Chairperson of the CDE National Lincoln Douglas debate camp. This article is copyrighted by William Bennett.)