

Moral Systems, Ethical Concepts & Theories

SOCIAL CONTRACT THEORY

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Social contract ethical theory

Thomas Hobbes, argues that without rules and a means of enforcing them,

- people would **not bother to create anything of value**, because nobody could be sure of keeping what they created. Instead, people would be **consumed with taking what they needed** and **defending themselves** against the attacks of others.

Social contract ethical theory

Hobbes argues that everybody living in a civilized society has **implicitly agreed** that:

- the establishment of a set of moral **rules** to govern relations among citizens, and a **government** capable of **enforcing** these rules.

He calls this arrangement the **social contract**

Social contract ethical theory

Social Contract Theory is the view that persons' moral and/or political obligations are dependent upon a contract or agreement among them to form the society in which they live.

Social contract ethical theory

The **community will determine the rules** for its members, and each of its members will be obliged to obey the rules.

NO one is above the rules.

Similarities...

Between social contract theory and Deontology (Kantian Ethics)

- Both are based on the notion of universal moral rules.

Kantianism has the notion that it is right for me to act according to a moral rule if the rule can be universalized.

Social contract theory holds that it is right for me to act according to a moral rule if rational people would collectively accept it because of its benefits to the community.

Justice



Kinds of Rights

- **Negative right:** A right that another can guarantee by leaving you alone to exercise your right (*the right of free expression*)
- **Positive right:** A right obligating others to do something on your behalf (*free education*)

John Rawls's Principles of Justice

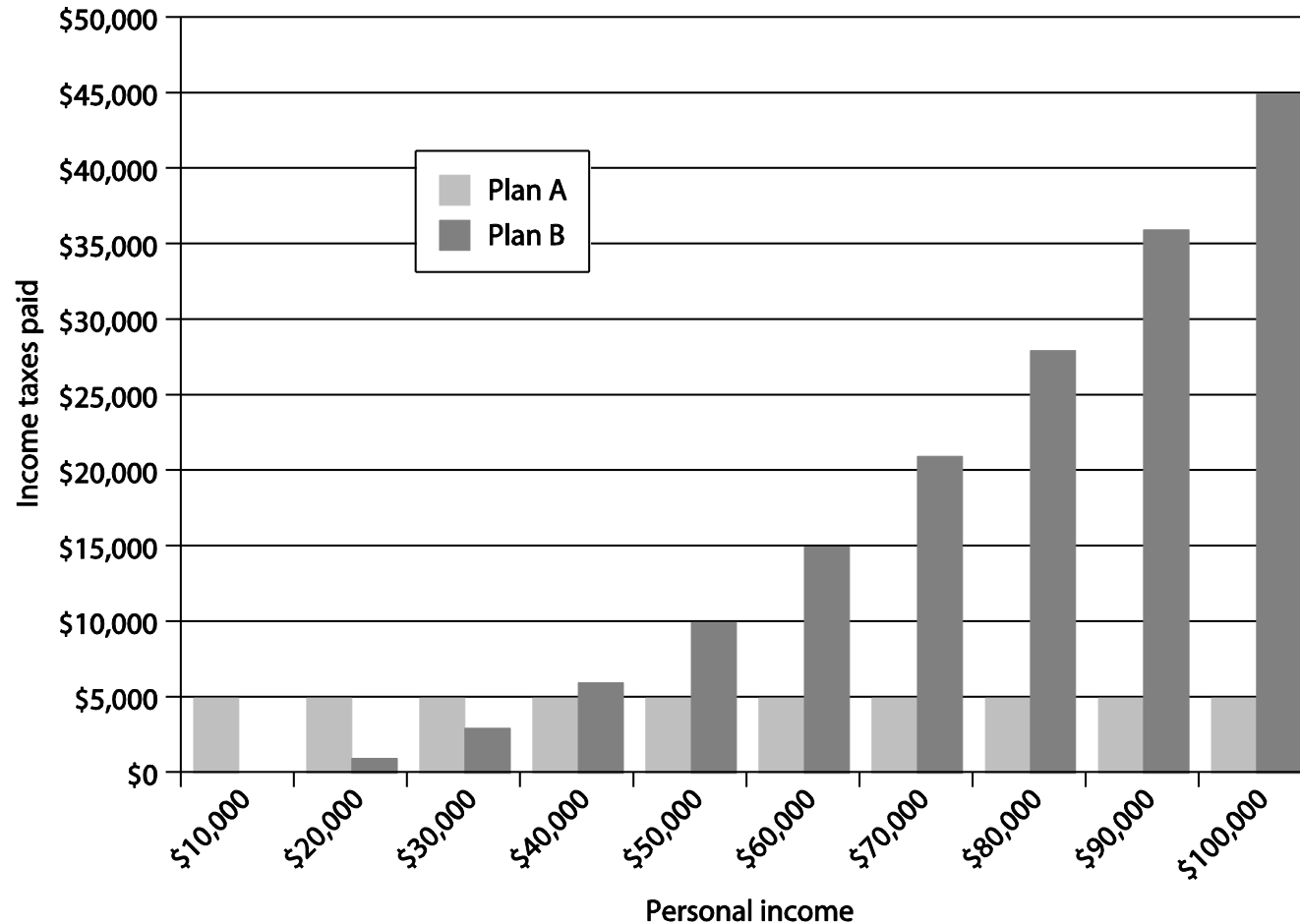
(Aligned with Social Contract Theory)

1st Principle: Each person may claim a “fully adequate” number of basic rights and liberties, as long as these claims are consistent with everyone else having a claim to the same rights and liberties

2nd Principle: Any social and economic inequalities must

- Be associated with positions that everyone has a fair and equal opportunity to achieve
- Be to the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged members of society (the difference principle)

John Rawls's Principles of Justice



DVD Rental Scenario

- Bill owns chain of DVD rental stores
- Collects information about rentals from customers
- Constructs profiles of customers
- Sells profiles to direct marketing firms
- Some customers happy to receive more mail order catalogs; others unhappy at increase in “junk mail”

Evaluation (SCT)

Consider rights of Bill, customers, and mail order companies.

Does customer have right to expect name, address to be kept confidential?

If customer rents DVD from bill, who owns information about transaction?

If Bill and customer have equal rights to information, Bill did nothing wrong to sell information.

If customers have right to expect name and address or transaction to be confidential without giving permission, then Bill was wrong to sell information without asking for permission.

Case for Social Contract Theory

1. Framed in **language of rights**
2. Explains why people act in **self-interest** without common agreement (*a city having a gasoline shortage, can be solved if every citizen uses public transportation two days a week, but they will not*)
3. Provides clear ethical analysis of certain citizen/government problems (**convincing people of punishment** of criminals by sending them to prison)
4. Everyone receives **certain benefits** in return for bearing **certain burdens**.
5. Workable ethical theory

Case Against Social Contract Theory

1. **No one signed** the social contract
2. Some actions have multiple characterizations (*many points of view*)
 - *Children must admit school at early age*
3. **Conflicting rights** problem (*debate of abortion: mother's right to privacy and fetus's right to life*)
4. May **unjustly treat people who cannot uphold contract** (*how to treat drug addicts, criminals or mentally ill people?*)
5. Despite weaknesses, a workable theory

Summary

Kantianism: Interactions with other people should respect them as rational beings

Utilitarians: You should consider the consequences of an action before deciding whether it's right or wrong

Social contract theory: We should promote collective rights, such as the rights to life, liberty, and property