

# Why do we have government?

An introduction to Social  
Contract Theory

# What would life be like with no government?

Take **3 minutes** to draw a sketch of how you envision a society with no government.

Would it be...

Peaceful?

Free?

Violent?

Restrictive?

Orderly?

Happy?

Chaotic?

Depressed?

# Human nature and the “state of nature”

Your version of life without government says a lot about your take on human nature.

Without the rules and structure of government, we would revert to our “natural state.”

Are humans naturally good or naturally bad?

What does any of this have to do with the Enlightenment?

# What did the Philosophes have to say about this?

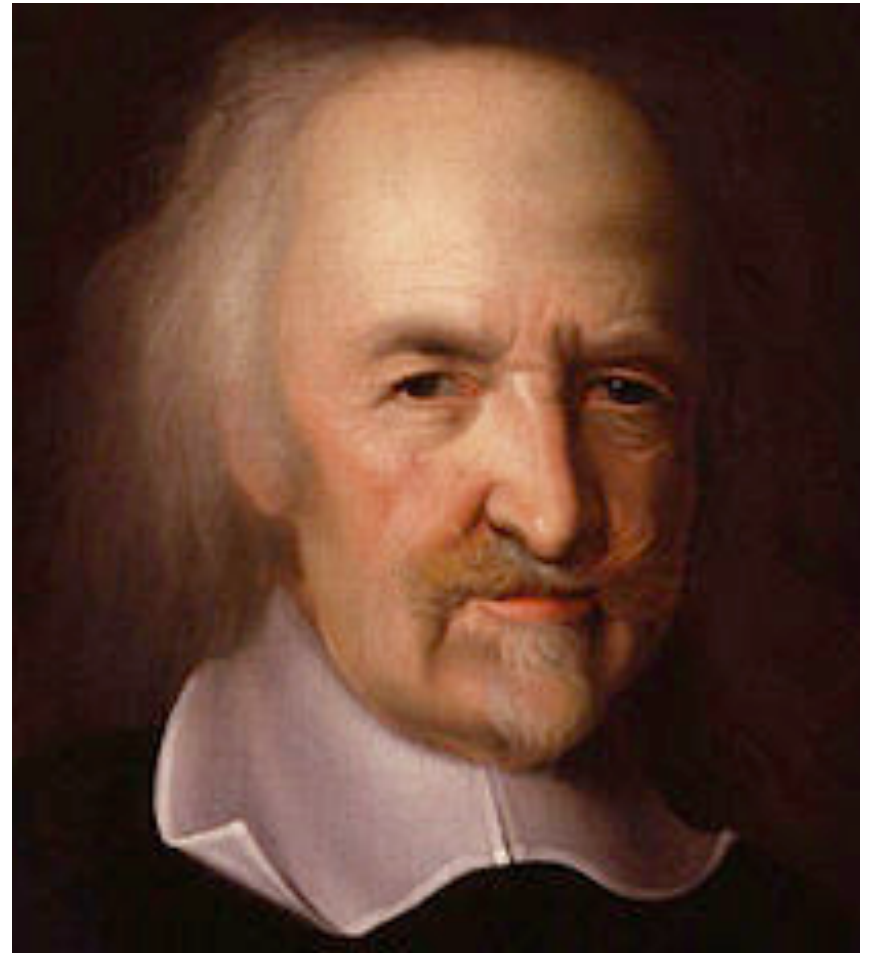
- Enlightenment thinkers generally agreed that humans possessed natural rights – that is, all people were born with a certain set of liberties that should not be denied.
- They also believed that strong, structured governments were necessary.
- But don't governments naturally *restrict* our freedom? → CONTRADICTION

# Government = Liberty...Contradiction?

- Not necessarily. During the Enlightenment, political philosophers developed the theory of the **Social Contract**:
- We enter into an unspoken arrangement in human society, where we agree to give up complete freedom in exchange for having a government that can protect our natural rights.
- But what type of government can do this best?

# Thomas Hobbes

- England
- 1588-1679
- Wrote his book *Leviathan* during the English Civil War
- First to describe “social contract theory”
- Gov’t should be based on reason, not the “divine right”



# What was Hobbes' view of the “social contract”?



- Described life without government (the “state of nature”) as “nasty, brutish, and short.”
  - Without strong gov’t, we would all kill each other and take each others’ property
- In order to **protect our natural rights**, Hobbes said we agree to be ruled by an **absolute ruler** (a “Leviathan”) who can keep us all in line

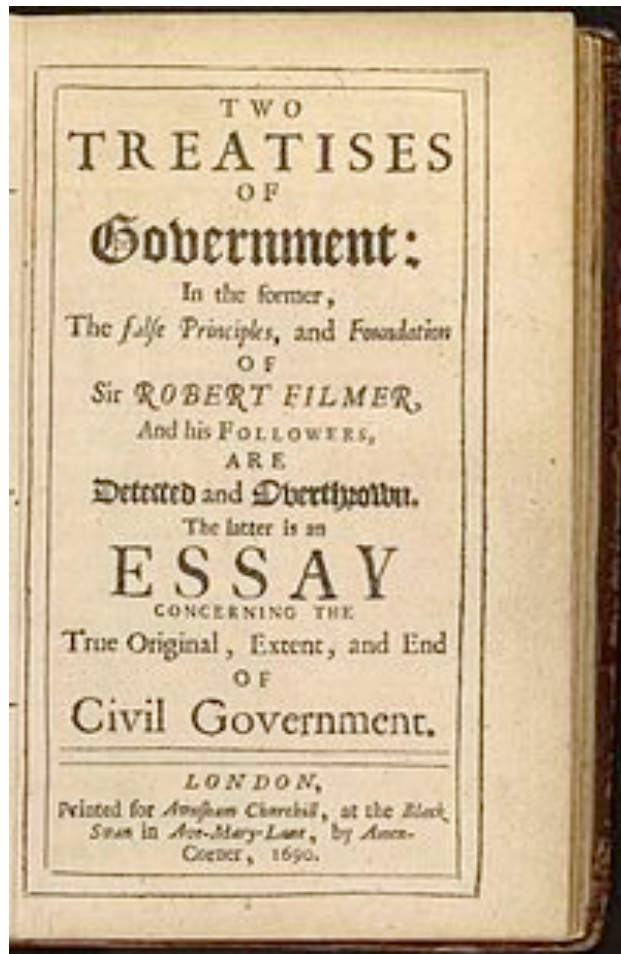
# John Locke

- England
- 1632-1704
- Wrote *Two Treatises of Government*
- Defined the natural rights that we expect gov't to protect as “life, liberty, and property”
  - Locke was a well-off property owner in England  
→ self-interest?





# What was Locke's view of the “social contract”?



- More optimistic about human nature than Hobbes
- Didn't think an absolute ruler was necessary in order to guarantee the protection of our rights
- He favored being governed by **Parliament**, a group of elected leaders representing the upper class in England

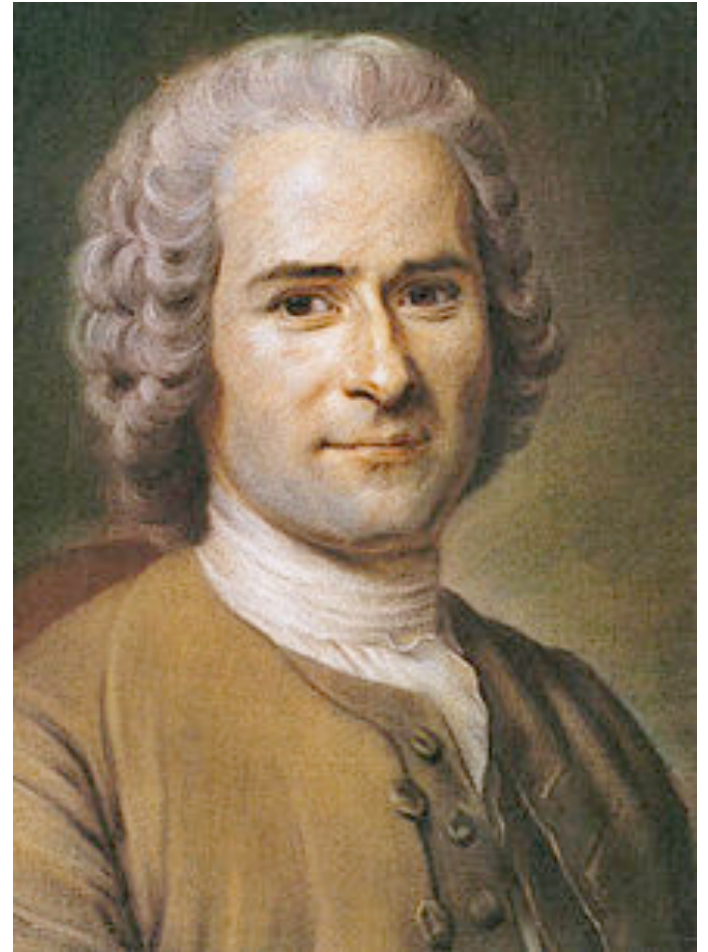
# What if the “contract” is broken?

- Locke said that if government doesn't protect these rights, it has broken its end of the contract
- In such a case, we can break our end of the contract – Revolution!
- Major influence for Jefferson's *Declaration of Independence*



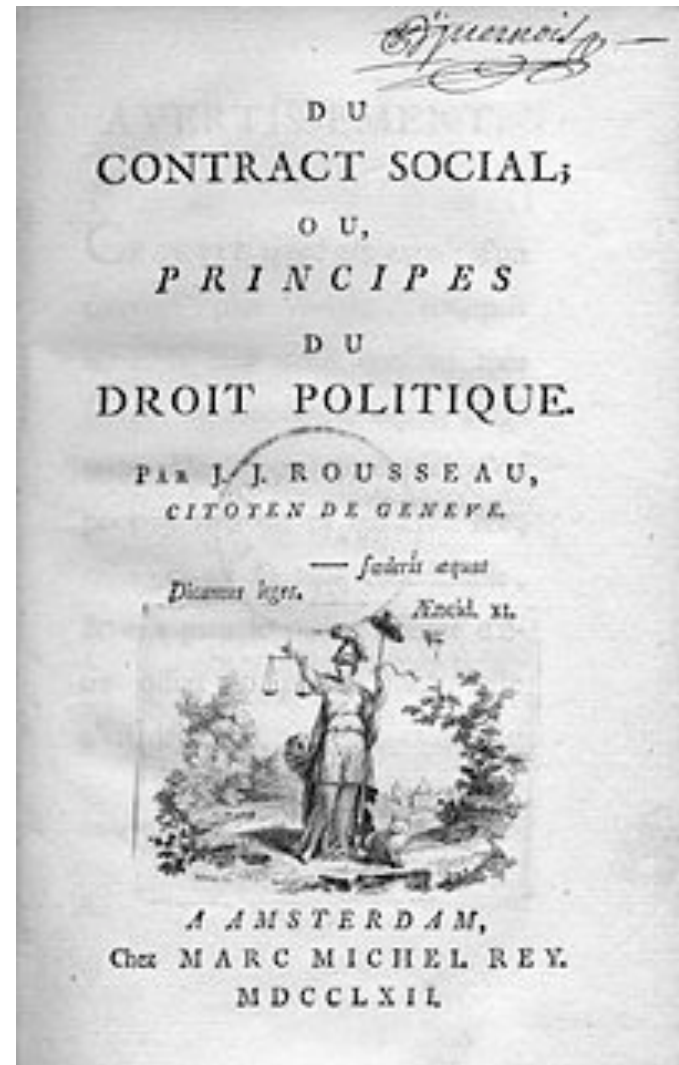
# Jean-Jacques Rousseau

- Switzerland, then France
- Also lived in England when he had to flee for his views on religious toleration
- 1712-1778
- Believed a “state of nature” had actually existed, and that humans had lived in peace and freedom



# Rousseau's "Social Contract"

- Thought gov't's had taken away this natural freedom:
  - “Man is born free, but everywhere is in chains”
- The only legitimate government is one where all people enter into the social contract together – we all agree to give up total freedom in exchange for living under a set of laws





# What would Rousseau's gov't be like?

- **Direct Democracy:** The government should follow the will of the majority of the people
- If the government is not acting in the interest of the “common good,” it should not be obeyed
- Rousseau was a major influence behind the French Revolution



# Implications of the Social Contract

- All three versions of the contract call for us to give up *some* amount of liberty in exchange for *some* amount of protection.
- How much of your liberty are you willing to give up in exchange for safety?
- Benjamin Franklin: “*He who would sacrifice liberty for the sake of safety deserves neither.*”