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Critically evaluate Hume's criticism of social contract theory

Hume claims that the social contract ideology is flawed because people accept the duty of abiding by the laws of government only when they have consented or promised for that. His central argument is that states are not developed or sustained through a social contract. He criticizes the contract theory by examining the nature of the original contract. He presented his argument in "Of the Original Contract" by putting forth the proposition that social contract lacks historical evidence. By considering the history of western civilization and ancient Greeks he comes to the point that there was no social contract between the government and the people. As history lacked social contract, the relationship between state and citizens’ was the product of coercion. The governments used the brutal forces for maintaining authority that also reflects the role of strong political willpower.

Leaders have always used excessive force for implementing laws that make social contract theory unrealistic. People who were governed lacked the power to challenge the rulers. There has always been a clear division between the leaders and the public. Due to the absence of power the governed had no other choice but to follow the orders of the state. Hume relates this ideology with blind obedience. The wider claim of Hume means that there was no implicit and explicit agreement between the people and the government. The agreement between the two parties lacked conscious. He claims, “the most men never make an inquiry about its origin or cause any more than about the principle of gravity” (Hume). People never made any conscious investigation about the rules that were imposed by the government. This reflects their weaker state that convinced them to accept the orders without knowing its outcomes. The argument also indicates that the government is the single most powerful entity, having the right of controlling people.

Because the people are born to a system where the government is holding superior power, they cannot challenge the laws. Their entry into such a system gives longevity to it, resulting in the favour of the state. This indicates that the most simple choice for an individual is to stay in the position where once his father and forefathers lived. Following the old system of power is the easy thing because it doesn’t involve any changes or challenges. He mentions, "they learn that they themselves and their ancestors have for several ages, or from time immemorial, been subject to such a form of government or such a family they immediately acquiesce and acknowledge the obligation to allegiance" (Hume). This confirms that the choice of people to stay dutiful to the government is due to their connectivity with their ancestors. They are ready to take the same roles as taken by their forefathers. This reflects that the people continue to follow the old system of power division in which no agreement is required between the governed and the state. The role of the state has never been challenged by anyone.

Coercion is the single most powerful element that rejects the theory of social contract. Hume mentions that people possess knowledge of what was done to the people who challenged the state. He claims, "all governments have been founded originally, either on usurpation or conquest or both, without any presence of a fair consent or voluntary subjection of the people" (Hume). This encourages people to accept the rules and reject their idea of protesting against the laws or governing principles that they find unfair. When people look backwards they are more willing to accept the roles taken by their father and ancestors (Buckle and Castiglione). They believe that protests have not occurred in the past so they must also fit in the same system. This undermines their capacity to question the integrity of the laws formulated by the governments. This also reflects Hume’s idea that the chances of better tomorrow are oblique or non-existence due to this habit of backward looking.

The flaws in the election system also reject the philosophy of social contract. The philosopher claims that the power of election always rests with the small group that is capable of deciding and imposing laws. Even after revolutions that occurred throughout the history the system of the election remains unchanged. A small percentage of men are holding supreme power that allows them to control the larger population. Hume has criticized that ancient Athens failed to provide any real democracy to the people. This was the central reason for the existence of their power (Murphy). This same tradition is followed by the leaders of every age because they bring the public to a position where they follow orders of the rulers. People lack choice in every situation according to Hume. He relates this idea with the restrictions faced by people in leaving their native land (Brownsey). He claims that a poor artisan or a peasant cannot leave his country when he is unaware of the foreign culture and language. Even if he manages to leave his land he will have to submit himself to the powers of the state in a foreign land. Hume makes an argument that the obligations of the people never ends.

Moral duties are stronger that contract theory. The philosophe claims that people follow the governments’ because they are convinced by their obligatory duties. He distinguishes between the natural duties and the obligatory kind. The natural duty means one's responsibility towards his family and children while the obligatory kind means duties required for living in the civil society. By this philosophy, it is the obligatory duty of the citizens to follow the authorities. Hume states, “when we assert, that all lawful government arises from the consent of the people, we certainly do them a great deal more honor than they deserve, or even expect and desire from us” (Hume). In reality, people are not honoring states more than they desire because they are aware of their manipulative nature. Obligatory duty is learned through experience because people observe the response of their elders to the government and leaders.

The absence of natural state rejects the social contract theory. A fair agreement can occur between the state and citizens only when they are allowed to make a free choice. But in reality, people are lacking a free choice. People believe that "we are bound to obey our sovereign, at least in a government that rules by a very strong authoritarian hand" (Hume). The philosophy of Hume reflects that he believes in absolute monarch in which public lacks any kind of power. People have a duty to obey the leaders but they have never been put in a conscious state of making a contract. This according to him is essential for the existence of the society because without rulers or laws there will be no governing body and people will engage in more injustice.

The overall analysis of Hume's philosophy depicts that he has rejected the theory of social contract. He believes that there is no conscious or implicit agreement between the people and the government. The only reason that convinces people to follow rules in their obligatory duty towards the sovereign authority.

Work Cited

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