



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND GOVERNANCE

E-ISSN: 2664-603X

P-ISSN: 2664-6021

IJPSG 2024; 6(1): 173-176

[www.journalofpoliticalscience.com](http://www.journalofpoliticalscience.com)

Received: 08-01-2024

Accepted: 12-02-2024

**Dr. Vimlesh Kumar**

Guest Faculty in Political  
Science Laxman Prasad Baidh  
Government Girls College,  
Bemetara, Chhattisgarh, India

**Aashutosh Kumar Aahire**

Assistant Professor,  
Department of Political  
Science, Hidayatullah  
National Law University  
Raipur, Chhattisgarh, India

**Corresponding Author:**

**Dr. Vimlesh Kumar**

Guest Faculty in Political  
Science Laxman Prasad Baidh  
Government Girls College,  
Bemetara, Chhattisgarh, India

## Revisiting Rousseau's social contract theory through the lens of politico-moral philosophy

**Vimlesh Kumar and Aashutosh Kumar Aahire**

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2024.v6.i1c.319>

### Abstract

The relationship between social contract theory and political and moral philosophy is complicated and interconnected. Political theory aims to understand the origins and legitimacy of political authority, whereas politico-moral philosophy investigates the ethical foundations and principles of political institutions. Despite the fact that these two concepts are unique, they frequently cross and impact one another. Social contract theory, popularized by thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, maintains that individuals engage into a social contract freely in order to build a political society. Individuals agree to give up some of their natural rights and freedoms to a ruling authority in exchange for protection, stability, and the preservation of their remaining rights, according to this view. The social compact is seen as the foundation of political legitimacy since it justifies the state's control over its citizens. In contrast, political-moral philosophy is concerned with the moral principles and ideals that guide political systems and institutions. It investigates issues of justice and fairness, as well as the rights and obligations of individuals in a political society. Moral philosophers such as John Rawls and Immanuel Kant produced theories aimed at establishing a just and ethical framework for political government. This paper focuses especially on the social contract theory of Rousseau and its relationship with politico-moral philosophy.

**Keywords:** Social contract theory, politico-moral philosophy

### Introduction

The renowned philosopher of the 18th century known for his contributions to political and moral philosophy was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. His political-moral philosophy and social contract theory offer important new perspectives on politics, society, and morality (Westphalia KR, 2013) <sup>[12]</sup>. According to Rousseau's concept of the social contract, people voluntarily engage into social contracts with one another to create societies. Rousseau makes the claim that this social contract serves as the foundation for political obligation and the legitimacy of political authority in his well-known work "The Social Contract" (1762). In the state of nature, individuals are free and equal, but their freedom is constrained by their relationships with other people, according to Rousseau people band together and cooperate in order to resolve the problems that are innate in the state of nature (Bertram, C. 2004) <sup>[2]</sup>. Rousseau places a strong emphasis on the significance of the collective will, which ought to direct governmental decisions and acts. The general will, which symbolises the collective thought and consent of citizens, is not merely the sum of individual wills. According to Rousseau, when people participate in the making of laws and policies through direct democracy, they are actually exercising their sovereignty. The politico-moral philosophy of Rousseau includes moral as well as political matters. He held that society ought to be set up in a way that supports people's freedom and well-being. Individuals are free at birth, but society and its institutions taint their inherent goodness, according to Rousseau. He highlights the significance of living in harmony with nature and going back to. Additionally, Rousseau emphasizes the value of education and how it shapes both individuals and societies. He is an advocate for a system of education that encourages the growth of morally upright and upright citizens. Rousseau also underlines the importance of education and how it influences both people and societies. He supports an educational system that fosters the development of morally honest and law-abiding persons.

### Objectives of the paper

This paper focuses especially on the social contract theory of Rousseau and its relationship with the politico-moral philosophy. Another objective of this article is to discuss and analyse the different dimensions of social contract theory and politico-moral philosophy.

### Methodology

The statements used in the study and the data used in the study are purely based on secondary based sources. Researchers have consulted research papers articles, books, reports and other online and offline resources to write this endeavor. Conceptual analysis is done for discussion and conclusion.

### Arguments of Rousseau on associated concepts of social contract

In the state of nature, where people are free and equal, Rousseau contends that there is neither justice nor morality. However, individuals forge a grouping known as the "general will" through social contract. The general will is founded on the community's shared values and welfare and represents the shared objectives and interests of the entire society. In his writings, Rousseau makes a distinction between the "will of all" and the "general will." The general will stand for the common good and the collective interests of the community, whereas the will of everyone refers to the particular aspirations and interests of each person. According to Rousseau, the general will should always take precedence over the will of each individual since it captures the true spirit of a just and moral society. The social contract, in Rousseau's view, creates a legitimate political power based on the collective will. Laws that are in the community's best interests must be made and enforced by this authority. Because these laws are in line with the popular will and the greater good, citizens are obligated to uphold them morally and politically. Rousseau's social contract theory had a significant influence on political philosophy and other theorists like Immanuel Kant and John Rawls were affected by it (Boucher D, & Kelly P 2003)<sup>[1]</sup>. Discussions of democracy, justice, and the moral pillars of society have been influenced by his focus on the general will and the common good as the basis of political authority. However, Rousseau's theories have also drawn criticism and controversy, notably in regards to the difficulty of putting the general will into practice and the conflict between personal freedom and the needs of the society.

### Reflections on different perspectives of Rousseau

Rousseau introduces his thesis with a description of the state of nature, a fictitious situation in which people dwell in a pre-social state. People are free and equal in this state, but they are also exposed to risks and conflicts brought on by their own self-interest. Politics and morality are absent in the natural world. Next is the Social Contract: According to Rousseau, people willingly enter into social contracts in order to leave the natural condition and create a civil society. By signing this agreement, parties commit to establishing a community with a common goal and set of ground rules. Third is General Will: Rousseau's philosophy is based on the idea of "general will." Instead of each person's individual will, the general will represents the group interests and common benefit of the society as a whole. It is seen as the ethically necessary and sensible will

that directs the community's rules and decisions. Fourth one is Democracy and Sovereignty: According to Rousseau, the people as a whole own sovereignty, not any particular person or group. Through direct democracy, the people express their sovereignty by taking part in the decision-making process and forming the laws that represent the collective will. The social contract hypothesis put forward by Rousseau seeks to balance individual freedom with the requirements of the community. Individuals are required under the social contract to give up some of their inherent freedom, but in exchange they are granted civil liberties and equality as citizens of a just society. When the individual will clashes with the common good, the general will serves as the justification for morally restricting freedom. Individuals are held to both moral and political obligations under the social contract, according to Rousseau. Morally, people are obligated to act in ways that advance the well of society as a whole. (Lloyd SA, & Sreedhar S 2002)<sup>[8]</sup>. In terms of politics, citizens are required to abide by the rules made by the legitimate government, so long as Politico-moral philosophy examines the connection between politics and morality. It is often referred to as political ethics or moral political theory. It aims to investigate the moral responsibility of persons and institutions in the political realm, the ethical ramifications of various political systems and policies, and the ethical principles and values that underpin political behavior.

### Politico-moral philosophy discusses issues like

1. What constitutes the moral foundation of political authority?
2. What ethical restraints apply to the use of political influence?
3. What duties and privileges do members of a political community have?
4. How ought political choices to be made and supported?
5. What function do justice and fairness serve in political structures?
6. How do we strike a balance between personal freedoms and the greater good?
7. What duties do political leaders have in terms of morality?

Within the field of political-moral philosophy, numerous political philosophers have put out a variety of theories and viewpoints. Several well-known methods include: 1. Liberalism: Places a strong emphasis on the preservation of individual rights, freedom, and liberties. Liberal political ethics have been influenced by writers like John Locke and John Stuart Mill. Focuses on the significance of shared ideals, social cohesiveness, and the common good. Alasdair Macintyre and Charles Taylor are two communitarian thinkers who contend that moral principles and personal identity are shaped by the community. According to utilitarianism, political decisions should be made with the goal of maximizing everyone's happiness or well-being. Policy decisions should be assessed in light of their effects, according to utilitarian philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. 2. Socialism: Promotes racial and economic equality as well as a narrowing of the class gap. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, two prominent socialist theorists, advocated for the structuring of political and economic systems to advance social justice. By examining political power systems through the lens of gender,

feminism aims to combat gender-based injustice and inequality. Politics and gender have been examined by feminist intellectuals including Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler. 3. Libertarianism: Places a strong emphasis on respecting private property rights, limiting the size of the government, and promoting individual liberty. (Griswold CL, 2015) [6]. Thinkers who favour small government and voluntary relationships include Robert Nozick. These are but a few illustrations of the wide variety of theories found in political and moral philosophy. As philosophers engage in discussions and present fresh viewpoints on the ethical aspects of politics, the area continues to develop.

### **There are two ways to understand the relationship between social contract theory and politico-moral philosophy**

1. Social contract theory provides a moral and philosophical foundation for political authority. It explains why individuals are required to obey the laws and authorities of the state. It tackles the moral and ethical components of political power in this way. In contrast, politico-moral philosophy aims to discover the ideas and ideals that should guide political decision-making and government. It investigates issues of justice, equality, and individual rights, which can inform and shape the social contract's content.
2. Political and moral philosophy can analyze and critique the social contract itself. Philosophers may debate whether the social contract's provisions are fair, just, and beneficial to the well-being of all individuals. They may investigate distributive fairness, the balance between individual rights and collective obligations, and the inclusion or exclusion of specific groups from the social contract. Politico-moral philosophy contributes to the continual growth and improvement of social contract theory by critically evaluating it.

In conclusion, social contract theory and politico-moral philosophy are intertwined, with social contract theory serving as a foundation for political authority and politico-moral philosophy providing ethical analysis and critique of the social contract. They contribute to our knowledge of society's moral and political elements, as well as to arguments on the ideas and values that support political systems.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Social contract theory and politico-moral theory are two important frameworks that provide valuable insights into the ethical foundations of political systems. Social contract theory, popularized by philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, proposes that political authority and legitimacy emerge from a hypothetical agreement or contract between individuals in a society. It serves as a foundation for understanding the moral obligations of political systems. You're right. (Boucher, D., & Kelly, P. 2003) [3]. According to social contract theory, individuals deliberately engage into a social contract to form a political community in which they give up some rights and liberties in exchange for the protection and advantages of a functioning society. It gives a moral framework for understanding the legitimacy of political authority as well as people' rights and obligations. I believe that social contract theory emphasizes the idea that political

power should be wielded with the consent of the governed. Individual consent, rather than power coming from force or supernatural authority, is emphasized as the foundation for democratic legitimacy. This concept of consent is fundamental to politico-moral theory because it establishes moral constraints on the exercise of political authority. Without a doubt. By analysing the ethical components of political behavioural and decision-making, politico-moral theory expands on social contract theory. It delves into issues of justice, fairness, and the moral responsibilities of individuals and political institutions. It assists us in determining if political activities and policies are morally justifiable and promote the general good. Politico-moral theory raises crucial questions concerning the role and moral responsibility of political leaders. It examines how leaders should wield authority, what ethical responsibilities they have to their constituents, and how they should make decisions that influence the lives of many people. It establishes a framework for evaluating leaders' ethical behavior and holding them accountable for their actions. One of the most important contributions of politico-moral theory, in my opinion, is its emphasis on the balance between individual rights and the common good. It acknowledges that political institutions must preserve individual liberties and rights while simultaneously addressing society's collective needs and well-being. It invites us to analyse how policies and political acts might be both ethically just and beneficial to society. Yes, and the balance between individual rights and collective good is frequently a source of contention. Different political theories within politico-moral philosophy give different viewpoints on how to strike this balance. Liberal theories, for example, place a premium on individual rights and liberties, whereas communitarian theories place a premium on communal ideals and social cohesion. That is correct. Political philosophers have also looked at how politico-moral theory intersects with other ethical frameworks, such as feminism and environmental ethics. They investigate how to incorporate gender equality, environmental sustainability, and other moral concerns into political systems. In general, both social contract theory and politico-moral theory offer useful tools for analyzing and assessing political institutions. They invite us to evaluate the moral basis of politics, the legitimacy of political authority, and citizens' and leaders' ethical obligations. We can strive for more just, fair, and ethical political institutions by engaging in conversations and debates within this paradigm (Gilbert, DU, & Behnam M, 2009) [5].

### **References**

1. Boucher D, Kelly P. The social contract from Hobbes to Rawls. Routledge; c2003.
2. Bertram C. Routledge philosophy guidebook to Rousseau and the social contract. Routledge; 2004.
3. Boucher D, Kelly P. The social contract and its critics. In: The social contract from Hobbes to Rawls. Routledge; 2003. p. 11-44.
4. Collingwood RG. The New Leviathan: Or Man, Society, Civilization, and Barbarism Goodness, Rightness, Utility' and What Civilization Means; c1992.
5. Gilbert DU, Behnam M. Advancing integrative social contracts theory: A Habermasian perspective. J Bus Ethics. 2009;89:215-234.
6. Griswold CL. Liberty and Compulsory Civil Religion

- in Rousseau's Social Contract. *J Hist Philos.* 2015;53(2):271-300.
7. Hardwick NA. Rousseau and the social contract tradition. Royal Holloway, University of London; 2011.
  8. Lloyd SA, Sreedhar S. Hobbes's moral and political philosophy; c2002.
  9. Mansell SF. Capitalism, corporations and the social contract: A critique of stakeholder theory. Cambridge University Press; c2013.
  10. Nbeta AD, Greene ND. Politico-Ethical Appraisal of the Nigerian State as the Actuality of Concrete Freedom: A Kantian Perspective.
  11. Rousseau JJ. The major political writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau: The two discourses and the social contract. University of Chicago Press; c2012.
  12. Westphal KR. Natural law, social contract and moral objectivity: Rousseau's natural law constructivism. *Jurisprudence.* 2013;4(1):48-75.
  13. Ulrich P. Towards an ethically-based conception of socio-economic rationality. From the social contract theory to discourse ethics as the Normative Foundation of Political Economy; c1998.