

Hume on Consent

Hume's first argument

Should it be said, that, by living under the dominion of a prince, which one might leave, every individual has given a tacit consent to his authority, and promised him obedience; it may be answered, that (1) such an implied consent can only have place, where a man imagines, that the matter depends on his choice. But (2) where he thinks (as all mankind do who are born under established governments) that by his birth he owes allegiance to a certain prince or certain form of government; it would be absurd to infer a consent or choice, which he expressly, in this case, renounces and disclaims. (Numbers added) (Hume [1748] 1987, 475.)

Hume's second argument: the poor peasant

(2) Can we seriously say, that a poor peasant or artizan has a free choice to leave his country, when he knows no foreign language or manners, and lives from day to day, by the small wages which he acquires? (1) We may as well assert, that a man, by remaining in a vessel, freely consents to the dominion of the master; though he was carried on board while asleep, and must leap into the ocean, and perish, the moment he leaves her. (Numbers added) (Hume [1748] 1987, 475.)

An objection: doctor vs. robber

We may draw the same conclusion concerning the origin of promises, from the *force* which is supposed to invalidate all contracts, and to free us from their obligation. Such a principle is a proof that promises have no natural obligation, and are mere artificial contrivances for the convenience and advantage of society. If we consider aright of the matter, force is not essentially different from any other motive of hope or fear, which may induce us to engage our word, and lay ourselves under any obligation. A man, dangerously wounded, who promises a competent sum to a surgeon to cure him, would certainly be bound to performance; though the case be not so much different from that of one who promises a sum to a robber, as to produce so great a difference in our sentiments of morality, if these sentiments were not built entirely on public interest and convenience. (the source is on the back of the page)

The doctor vs. robber passage was written by none other than David Hume (Hume [1740] 2000, bk. 3, Part 2, Sect. 5, Par. 15).

References

Hume, David. (1748) 1987. "Of the Original Contract." In *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, edited by Eugene F. Miller, Revised edition, 466-87. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund.

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