According to social contract theorists, acts are ethically right to the extent that they agree with certain (actual or hypothetical, explicit or implicit) agreements or contracts between persons. Acts are ethically wrong to the extent that they violate those agreements. For example, employees of a certain company may have agreed to obey a set of rules of conduct specified by the company, and may therefore have an obligation to obey those rules.

**Hobbes: the State of Nature and Social Contracts**

Thomas Hobbes describes the emergence of social contracts from the “state of nature.”

In the state of nature:

- Resources (e.g., food, water) are limited
- People are roughly equal in ability (close enough to being equal that no individual dominates, and all can compete for resources)
- People have roughly the same needs
- Everyone acts from self-interested motives (Hobbes was a psychological egoist)
- Everyone has complete liberty (unrestricted by legal or moral/ethical constraints)

Hobbes believes that in these conditions, human life would be a “war of all against all,” and would be “nasty, brutish, and short.” Fortunately, though, people not only have the desire for a better life, but also have reason – by means of which they understand how to achieve a better life.

The social contract is a “tool” that rational human beings use to escape the state of nature and build a better life. When people make contracts of this kind, they freely agree to give up some of their liberty, on the condition that other people do the same (e.g., people agree to give up their liberty to kill others, as long as others give up that liberty too). In order to make sure that contracts are generally kept rather than violated, the members of society agree to give up some of their liberty to a governing individual or body (a Leviathan), that will have the power necessary to keep the peace.

According to Hobbes, the terms “right” and “wrong,” “justice” and “injustice,” have no place in the state of nature. It is only when social contracts are in place that acts become right or wrong, just or unjust – depending on whether they are in accordance with or in violation of those contracts.

**Rawls: Justice and the Veil of Ignorance**

Justice is generally understood as being concerned with fairness: with treating people the way they deserve to be treated (giving them what is due to them), and not treating them in undeserved ways.

While Hobbes may have been correct in his view that justice, as well as the notions of right and wrong, have no place in a state of nature prior to the creation of social contracts, not all social contracts are just ones. For example, a social contract that permits slavery or genocide is obviously unjust.
One way of deciding what sorts of social contracts, policies, or principles are just or fair, is to make use of the notion (developed by John Rawls, one of the most well-known social contract theorists) of the *veil of ignorance*. Here is a rough account of the notion and use of the veil of ignorance:

Suppose that the (rational, free, and largely self-interested) members of a society are trying to decide what rules or principles of conduct to adopt as a society (i.e., they are trying to develop a social contract). In order to ensure that the rules of conduct they choose will be *just* or fair, they go behind a veil of ignorance while choosing them. In other words, each of them *pretends that she/he is ignorant of various facts about herself/himself: her talents or abilities, her occupation, her status or place in society, etc.* Since each individual is behind this veil of ignorance, they cannot choose rules that are biased in their own favor: they must be *impartial*. The rules or principles adopted behind the veil of ignorance will therefore be just.

*Application of the notion of the veil of ignorance*

In order to apply the concept of the veil to a principle, rule, or policy, *ask yourself whether persons behind the veil of ignorance would adopt it*. Individuals behind the veil would not adopt a rule allowing slavery for example, since they would be ignorant of their own place in society (they themselves could be slaves, for all they know). In other words, they would not adopt a rule allowing slavery because (as rational and largely self-interested persons) they would not freely agree to a principle that places them at risk of being enslaved.

**Principles of Distributive Justice**

*Distributive* justice is one type of justice, that consists of fairness in the distribution of benefits and burdens to people (e.g., fairly distributing benefits such as health care, welfare, or educational resources; or burdens such as taxes).

Many principles of distributive justice have been proposed. They provide us with guidelines for deciding what is a fair or just way of dividing up various benefits and burdens. A few well-known, commonly-used kinds of principles of distributive justice are listed below.

*Equality* principles (known as egalitarian principles): give to each person an equal share of benefits or burdens (random distribution methods such as lotteries are generally regarded as egalitarian, since they distribute opportunity equally)

*Need* principles: give to each person according to her/his individual needs

*Merit* principles: given to each person according to the extent to which they merit the benefit or burden (e.g., according to their ability, achievement, experience, etc.)

*Utilitarian* principles: give to each person in the way that will produce the best balance of benefits over harms for everyone affected