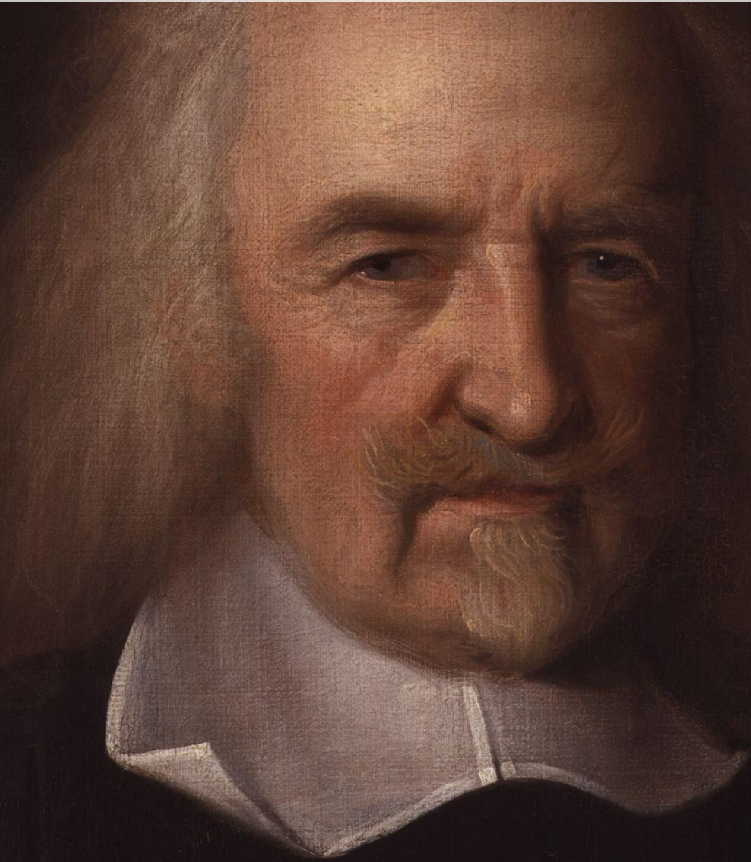




The BIG Thinkers

Leaving Certificate Politics and Society



Key Concepts: Power and Decision-Making, the Role of the State, the Rights and Freedoms of Individuals.

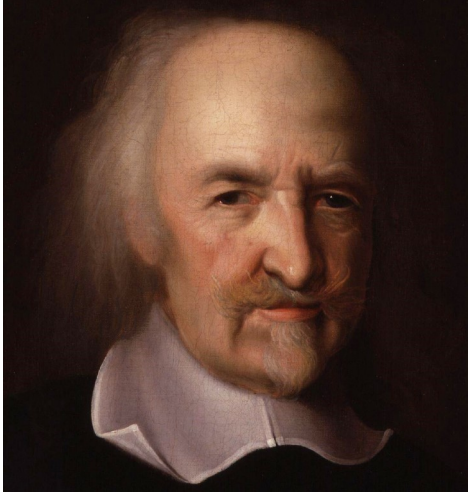


Influential Work: *Leviathan* (1651)

Hobbes, Thomas

Thomas HOBBES

(1588 to 1679)



Hobbes in Context

Thomas Hobbes, born 5th April 1588, is probably the most famous English political philosopher. His ideas and writings cannot be separated from the times he lived in – a time of civil war, violence and disorder.

His view of the Human Person and the State of Nature

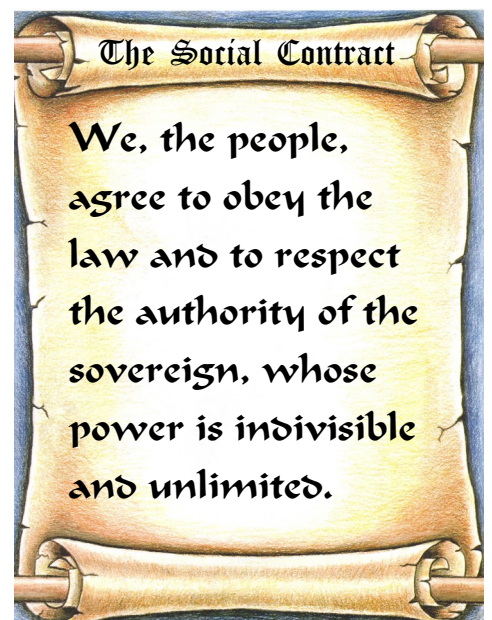
For Hobbes the question is - how can human beings live peacefully together? He argues that if peace and security are to reign then a powerful state with strong powers over individuals is needed. This conclusion derives from his view of the human condition as he saw it. He argues that by nature, people are fundamentally driven by self-interest and will increase their happiness by satisfying their own needs, even to the expense of others. Left to our own devices people are not naturally cooperative. Often we desire the same scarce resources – food, property, wealth – and because they are in short supply competition and conflict ensue. Life is one of continual fear and danger and for Hobbes *'the life of man [is] solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short'*.

The Social Contract

So what's the solution? While Hobbes argues the human person is driven by fear, Hobbes also sees the person has a rational being. As rational beings, humans have two principal choices in life - they can either live without government (the state of nature) or with a strong government.

Each person enters into a *'contract'* and agrees to hand over freedom and control in return for protection from a powerful state. However, in order to be effective, Hobbes argues that the state must be able to command obedience from every citizen and may even need to do this by striking fear into anyone who might be tempted to step out of line. The reason rational agents would surrender their freedom to a powerful state, was that life in the state of nature is one of savagery and chaos and giving up our freedom is the cost we pay for peace and security. For Hobbes, a social contract bestowing indivisible authority to a sovereign power was a necessary evil to avoid the cruel fate that awaited humans if left to their own devices. Unlike earlier thinkers who had argued for the divine right of kings to rule, Hobbes truly saw the relationship between the ruled and the ruler as contractual.

Hobbes's contractual view of the state also had an impact upon the duties of the state. Only so long as the state could protect their subjects were they bound by the social contract. However, Hobbes did not encourage popular revolutions, nor did he favour democratic rule. The main aim of government was stability and peace, not individual freedom.



For Hobbes, anyone arguing for individual freedoms and rights had not grasped that the basic security that civilised life took for granted would only endure as long as strong, centralised rule existed.

Leviathan

In his most famous work, *Leviathan*, Hobbes portrays humans as rational agents who seek to maximise power and act according to self-interest. Leviathan is the name of a monster in the biblical book of Job. For Hobbes the state is the great Leviathan. The state is thus a powerful and terrifying construct, but is necessary nonetheless for the sake of the protection of its citizens. The book was written during the English Civil War (1642-1651), and argues against challenges to royal authority.

Other Thinkers...

The logic behind Hobbes's version of the social contract was questioned by many thinkers. **John Locke** believed that authoritarian rule is just as dangerous as civil disorder. Locke argued that citizens had rights – including the right to civil disobedience and the right to rebel against an unjust government.

Others challenged Hobbes's pessimistic portrayal of humans as hungry for power and strife. **Jean-Jacques Rousseau** rejected the view of the human person as innately wicked and he saw the state of nature in a more romantic light, as a life of innocence and simplicity. Therefore, one should not try to escape from the state of nature, rather it should be re-created as best as possible. Rousseau also placed great importance on protecting the freedom of the individual without sacrificing the common good and develops the theory of the social contract which aims to balance the two.

In the 20th century, **John Rawls'** *A Theory of Justice* considered what made a stable society, He reintroduced 'contractualism' not to justify political authority but to argue for economic justice. He maintained that all rational individuals would want to live in a society where there was social justice and where their individual liberties were respected. Those in power should frame government policies under a 'veil of ignorance'. This means making decisions on the basis that he or she could be any person, not on the basis of a position of privilege.

Other thinkers, such as **Robert Nozick's** views on the role of the state, can also be compared and contrasted to Hobbes.

While most scholars today would consider Hobbes's view of the human condition to be pessimistic, he maintains a significant influence on political thought. The anarchical condition that Hobbes described in the state of nature is taken to be true for the international system today by many thinkers.



'And the life of man [is] solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short'.

Thomas Hobbes



'During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they [men] are in that condition called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man'.

Thomas Hobbes