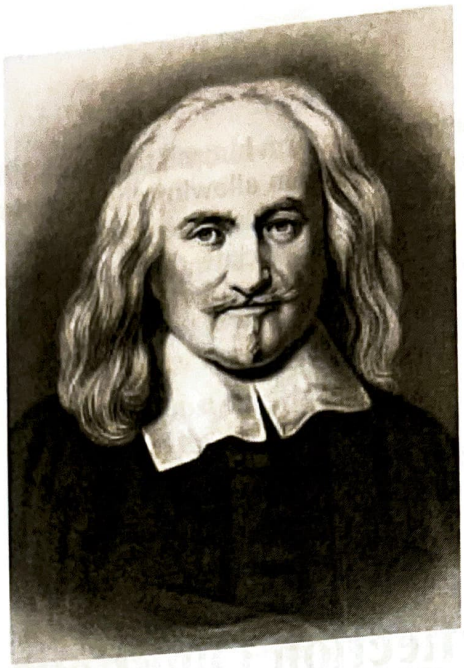

# Thomas Hobbes
## *The Leviathan*

Thomas Hobbes was born in Malmesbury, England in 1588 to a family of very modest means. Orphaned at a young age, he received an education under the auspices of a wealthy uncle that his family could not have afforded. On graduating from Magdalen College, Oxford in 1608, he took a position as tutor in the house of the Earl of Devonshire, a position that included traveling with the family and access to a large library. He became acquainted with Bacon in the early 1620's, helping him with several Latin translations and finding in him an educated man who shared his distrust of scholasticism. Sometime in the 1630's, Hobbes realized that the reasoning used in geometry—sound definitions and a series of propositions moving with certainty from the self-evident to the complex and seemingly improbable—provided a model for certainty in philosophical thinking as well. At about the same time, he met Galileo and was captivated by the idea of motion as the natural state of matter. In 1640 he introduced the "science" of politics in his Elements of Law, Natural and Politic. Hobbes continued to develop his political thinking over the next ten years, publishing and revising it in a work called De Cive. A vocal supporter of the English monarchy, he fled to France when the conflict between the king and parliament put his life in jeopardy. He lived there for ten years before he received the amnesty that allowed him to return to England. While Hobbes was in France, he went on to write the Leviathan, which was published in 1651. Although it was, as he says at the end, "occasioned by the disorders of the present time" and used to justify the rule of both Cromwell and Charles II, it managed to offend both sides and remained highly controversial. Hobbes himself was accepted by Cromwell and honored by Charles II when he ascended the throne, but he maintained a much lower political profile for the remaining years of his life. He died in 1679.

**CONTEXT**

In 1531, impatient of receiving an answer from Pope Clement VII regarding his suit to annul his marriage so he could wed Anne Boleyn, Henry VIII took matters into his own hands and forced an assembly of English clergy to recognize him as head of the English Church. In 1534, Henry gave official political sanction to the Protestant movement by passing the Act

of Supremacy. This Act made him "supreme head" of the Church of England with "authority to redress all errors, heresies, and abuses." Thomas More lost his head for refusing to acknowledge the Act and sign a petition declaring his support for Henry. The Act intensified the gathering religious divisions forming in England. Catholics solidified around their disenfranchisement; the Anglican Church was established, and Puritan sects were forming everywhere for the sake of trying to realize a holier kingdom on earth. In the early part of his reign, James I (1603-1625) supported an established episcopal form of church government. He believed the power to appoint bishops insured his political power, and hence his famous motto, "No bishop, no king." The Puritans on the other hand saw the bishops as a threat to their reforms and wanted them gone and James' power removed. Charles I (1625¬-1649) suspended Parliament when it refused to give taxes in support of his war with France. Presbyterianism was flourishing in Scot-land, and the Scots rose up against Charles not only because of the legal and financial policies he was pursuing but because the religious practices he was supporting seemed more in accord with Catholicism, which they believed was heretical, than with the Calvinism they embraced. The Puritans meanwhile controlled Parliament, and resentful of the powers that had been growing since Henry passed the Act of Supremacy, they refused to give the crown any tax support, killed the first minister, and abolished the prerogative courts whose arbitrary powers had spread since the time of Henry VIII.

Fed up with the growing opposition, Charles decided to take Parliament head on with a show of force of his own. In 1642, he marched into the House of Commons intending to arrest some of its leaders. That act and the events that followed initiated the civil war. Charles was beheaded on January 30, 1649 and England briefly became a Common-wealth. Oliver Cromwell, who was a zealous Puritan, became impatient of reform, and sickened at the efforts of legislators to use the changing circumstances to advance their own interests, he marched a troop into Parliament and forced it to retire. The Common-wealth was brought to an end almost as quickly as it began. England became a Protectorate with Cromwell having nearly absolute powers as Lord Protector for Life. For a time, England became as despotic and arbitrary under its military rule as it had ever been under its kings. The period was one of tremendous intellectual unrest and political instability; people were left in a state of frenzied confusion because of the confusion created by mixing secular and religious domains of power. This was the world with which Hobbes was grappling.

But confusion and a thirst for reform weren't confined to spheres of religion and politics. All ancient traditions were being called into question. Like so many gifted men of his time, Hobbes turned towards science and philosophy for a certainty that the more traditional forms of discourse no longer seemed to offer. Influenced by Bacon, who distrusted classical philosophy and the scholasticism that had supported it, Hobbes claimed that traditional philosophy by its nature was unable to achieve certainty in its conclusions. He advanced his own theories based on the deductive reasoning model of geometric proofs. By beginning with propositions about human nature, society, and government that were self-evident and to which everyone would agree, Hobbes believed that his philosophy, like science, would lead to irrefutable conclusions and thus eliminate the conflicts that lead inevitably to civil unrest and war. Published two years after the beheading of Charles I, Leviathan was as controversial as Hobbes had expected it to be. His mechanistic view of the universe led to charges of atheism, the Royalists denounced his denial of the Divine Right of Kings, and the Parliamentarians were outraged that his system required the people to cede their rights to an absolute and perpetual sovereign authority. Philosophy, politics, and the new scientific methods all came together in Hobbes' theories of the universe in which

everything could be reduced to matter and motion with man's end being nothing more than his own self-preservation. Although he never realized the political reform he had hoped for, Hobbes remains a significant figure in the history of Western thought.

Introduction:
In this Introduction it is clear that Hobbes believes that life is nothing but the "motion of limbs," and automata (i.e., self-propelled engines or robotic machines), then, have an "artificial life". Hobbes' mechanism is the foundation of his Leviathan and all life; all natural and artificial phenomena can be explained according to a mechanical model. Notice that he labels God, the Creator, as "the Artificer," or one could say, the "Great Technologist". For Hobbes, "Art" means a human "making" in the sense of making a technology. The state, the commonwealth, is a leviathan, a behemoth, made by man as an artificial man, though greater in stature and strength than any natural man. The parts of the state correspond to the parts of a man, but there is nothing natural comprising the state. The state is the product of human invention and convention (the social contracts). The state is a type of technology.

**SUMMARY**

Part I: On Man
Part I sets out the philosophical basis for the creation of the Leviathan, a commonwealth established by men through a social contract which transfers their rights to power to a sovereign head in exchange for his securing peace. Following the model of the geometric proof, Hobbes begins with the most basic propositions about man and how he works. He takes Thomas' statement that there is no knowledge in man that does not begin in the senses and postulates a mechanistic theory by which an exterior object that stimulates motion in the senses is carried through the body by nerves, and eventually results in human action. Chapters I-IV deal with the five senses, imagination—memory, dreams, visions—trains of thought or mental discourse, and speech. Chapter V takes up reason, what it is based on, how it is used, and the distinction between prudence and science. Chapter VI is concerned with the passions, what Hobbes calls the impulsions—Appetites and Aversions. He asserts that all voluntary human actions are the result of reason—mental discourse—applied to an external stimulus which has created either an appetite for or an aversion to that stimulus; that is, a calculation that taking this action will move an individual either toward what he desires or away from what he fears. It is interesting to note here that Hobbes' views prefigure the stimulus/response reflex arc of what is called today, Classical Behaviorism, of which B. F. Skinner (1904-1990) was a principal proponent. This Behaviorism identified positive and negative reinforcements instead of Appetites and Aversions, and like Hobbes, it diminished or simply rejected the role of free will (genuine voluntary actions) in human behavior. Classical Behaviorism views man as an organic machine, which is programmed by environmental conditioning.

Hobbes proceeds to a long list of definitions of human qualities, actions, and emotions in terms of their relationship to Appetite and Aversion. Chapter VII addresses Discourse and looks at both reason based on facts and uses of authority and faith. Chapter VIII addresses the Intellectual Virtues and their defects, and Chapter IX looks at Knowledge, reiterating the distinction between knowledge of facts (absolute knowledge), which belongs to sense and memory, and knowledge of consequences (conditional knowledge), which makes up the sciences.

Chapter X covers the concepts of Power, Worth, and Honor. Hobbes defines these in terms of man in relationship with other men. Applying Galileo's theory that motion is the natural

state of matter to the psychology of men, Hobbes asserts in Chapter XI that all men are possessed by a desire for power so that they can attain what they desire and avoid what they fear. Religion, its causes in man, its changes, and its use of power, is the subject of Chapter XII. In Chapter XIII, Hobbes sets out the line of reasoning that pro-vides the basis of political life. He begins with the natural equality of all men and goes on to the inevitable conflict between these men when they have no one ruling them whose power is greater than their own. In this natural condition, men exist in a state of war. Each individual is a rival and a threat to all others, and in this state, there is no time or resource left for industry, trade, the arts, or science—no sense of justice or injustice. In short, there is no society. The only possibility for coming out of this state of war lies in man's Aversion to pain and death, which gives him an Appetite for peace. Chapter XIV carries on with this same line of reasoning, stating that each man has a natural right to everything, and since every man has the same right, no one can be secure from another. Hobbes declares it a fundamental law of nature that man should seek peace insofar as he is able to obtain it without sacrificing his own security. He argues that men are willing to give up their right to everything if other men are willing to do the same. He distinguishes between renouncing and transferring a right and goes on to discuss the terms of obligation that pertain to the person transferring the right and to the person receiving it. The legalities of a covenant between the two parties are laid out, including those rights that cannot be transferred, that is, that are inalienable. Chapter XV covers other laws of nature that address such issues as justice, gratitude, revenge, pardon, pride, etc. as they relate to man in society, and Chapter XVI ends Part I with a discussion of the definitions of author, authority, actor, and representative in order to set out the grounds for entering into a covenant.

Part II: Of Commonwealth

Part II sets out in detail the process of establishing the commonwealth that Hobbes calls the Leviathan. Chapter XVII reviews the need for a commonwealth and defines sovereign and subject. Chapter XVIII delineates the rights and powers of the sovereign, claiming that life with a sovereign who has absolute power is not as burdensome as the state of war that must exist without him. Chapter IXX examines the possible forms of sovereignty (monarchy, democracy, and aristocracy) and the orderly succession of power. In Chapter XX Hobbes first discusses the difference between Paternal Dominion, in which dominion is granted by consent of the governed, and Despotic Dominion, which is the result of conquest, and then goes on to discuss the rights of the sovereign and sup-ports those rights with passages from scripture. The liberty of the subjects in a common-wealth is covered in Chapter XXI. And in Chapter XXVI Hobbes treats the whole range of Civil laws, making two important distinctions, the first between Civil Law and Natural Law, and the second between Civil Law and both unwritten laws and those forms of usage given the force of law. He discusses the interpretation of laws and the qualifications of a judge and differentiates the divisions of the law.

A Review and Conclusion: In this brief conclusion, Hobbes details the different circumstances under which a man or a soldier may lawfully submit to a conqueror, distinguishing between being overcome and being conquered, and identifies attitudes of both the conqueror and the conquered that are seeds of destruction for the commonwealth. He reviews some of the scriptural references to God as the Sovereign King of the Jews, addressing in particular God's communications to Moses, the judging of a capital crime, and the execution of judgment. He concludes with an explanation of why he has not quoted ancient poets and philosophers and the expressed hope that his work will be profitable to all who read it and taught in the Universities.

# Things to Think About

1. As with all earlier political philosophers, it is important to ask here: Is Hobbes' view of man high or low? According to Hobbes, each man is born into a state of nature in which he is basically at war with all other men because they pose a threat to his security and wellbeing. He can only come out of this violent state when he as well as everyone else relinquishes his rights. All of them having performed this first act of surrender, they can then and only then go on to enjoy the peace that comes from the absolute power of their sovereign. What are some of the implications of this view, particularly with respect to its totalitarian aspects?
2. How important are fear, self-interest, pride, and the threat of violence to Hobbes' theory of the social contract? In regard to fear, Hobbes once said, "Fear and I were born twins," because he was born prematurely when his mother was terrified by news of the approaching Spanish Armada. Fear is a major ingredient in Hobbes' thought. He believed that "Fear is the passion which inclines men to peace." Fear is the reason why men enter into social contracts for the sake of self-preservation, and such contracts establish the commonwealth. What are the implications of his theory for all of the relationships of men? How will it affect the way they regard their sovereign? How will it affect the way husbands regard wives, wives their husbands? How will it affect parents and the way they raise their children?
3. As you read the Leviathan, keep active the question, which concepts have been incorporated into our own legal system and form of government? Where do we find Hobbes' theories in operation today? Identify these in our constitutions, our laws, our daily practices. The spirit behind the social contract is basically, "I'll do this for you if you do this for me." It is a ledger-keeping. Reflect on the ways in which this spirit has permeated Western consciousness, even to the point of entering into our marriages and the raising of children.
4. Hobbes also believed that "the human condition is a war of everyman against everyman," and "to this war, this is also consequent, nothing can be unjust." For Hobbes there is no real right or wrong, nothing really just or unjust. What is "right" or "just" is whatever serves our power. He believed that all men have a natural right to expand their power and eliminate any thing which impedes them. As he states, "our natural right is the liberty each man has to use his power as he wills to preserve himself and thereby continue his power." So, for example, if someone murders another who is impeding his power, the murderer is not really unjust. And if the murderer were to be caught and convicted in a court of law, he again would not be really unjust but merely stupid for getting caught and facing the loss of his power due to imprisonment or execution.
5. Hobbes was a thoroughgoing materialist: matter is all that matters, and there is nothing spiritual or immaterial in the universe. For him, the term "incorporeal substance" is an oxymoron. All things in the universe are composed of material atoms (he was an atomist), which operate in mechanistic ways.

6. In Plato's Republic, Socrates attempts to distinguish between conventions and nature, the actual nature of man, his soul, justice, etc., and those social conventions that men construct in order to live. The fact that he distinguishes between them makes it possible for us to ask whether the conventions men make are really in tune with man's "nature" or not. If there is a certain nature to the soul, then theoretically, those regimes making conventions more in tune with man's nature would be more just. If the social contract theory of Hobbes is a reflection of man's nature, what, according to Hobbes, is man's "nature"? Does his social con-tract adequately reflect and so accommodate man—is it responsive to all aspects of his nature? Which aspects seem to accord with man's nature? Which not? Are any of its aspects antagonistic to man? Be ready to defend your positions from your reading.

7. Aristotle held that man could not understand a thing if he did not grasp its form, its nature. In the Politics, he argued that the nature or whole of the polis is prior to and greater than its parts. As a mechanist, where is Hobbes on this question? Does man begin and end with parts or can he grasp wholes? According to Hobbes, what is it that we know, when we finally do know, and how do we know?

8. Hobbes published his first work in 1628, a translation of Thucydides. This work was obviously important to him and his thinking. Are there similarities to the views of the two men? What are they? Can we find anything in Thucydides that helps us understand Hobbes?

# Study Questions

1. Hobbes does not believe that our thoughts are disconnected or random. How does he describe the thought process by which we get from one thought to another that is apparently unconnected (I, 3)?

2. What is the importance of definitions in Hobbes' understanding (I, 4)? Does his understanding of their importance differ from traditional philosophers?

3. What is Hobbes' definition of science (I, 5)?

4. When Hobbes turns to the examination of men in relationship, he must concern himself with the concept of power. How does he define a man's power (I, 10)?

5. What are the four primary causes of religion according to Hobbes (I, 12)?

6. What are the two rights that Hobbes identifies as inalienable (I, 14)?

7. Hobbes acknowledges that there are creatures other than man that are able to live together in society without the need of a sovereign head. What are the reasons he gives for man's inability to do that (II, 17)?

8. To what does Hobbes refer in the phrase "the silence of the law" (II, 22)?

9. What reasons does Hobbes give for not quoting the ancient poets, scholars, and philosophers (Review and Conclusion)?