

Thomas Hobbes

What powers should the state have?

Key Concepts: Social Contract Theory, Philosophical Absolutism, State of Nature
Key Work: *Leviathan* (1651)

(A) Strong enough to withstand any threat? (B) Command the obedience of its subjects? (C) Be considered a 'necessary evil'?

“...the life of man [is] solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short”

(Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*)

State of Nature: a 'rational' (or intellectual/reasoned) reconstruction of the hypothetical situation of how life would be without any order in the form of government. "During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man."

The 'Social Contract': If we suppose that through either need or greed people will eventually end up then conflict then some form of 'collective action' must be taken to maintain order. What results is a *tacit* or *overt* agreement between individual members of a society that they surrender some of their rights for the protection of a 'Sovereign'/ruler. i.e. they invest power in the Sovereign in exchange for safety and the rule of law.

Philosophical Absolutism: power (sovereignty) is not subject to control by internal or external influence. For Hobbes Sovereign authority was undivided and unlimited. If all decisions were subject to another 'higher power' (such as church authority) that would inevitably lead to the collapse of government, and the breakdown of order.

Disobedience: Hobbes argues that subjects keep the ability to disobey the commands of the sovereign in limited circumstances, such as when their lives are in danger. (Interestingly, he also allow for disobedience when the honour of family and friends is at stake – something that feels quite old fashioned now!)

Why Hobbes's METHOD is important:

By METHOD, we mean that in some ways, it wasn't as much *what* Hobbes said that is important, but also *how* he came to his conclusions that you should care about!

Hobbes wanted to try and figure out the principles for building a society (a civil polity) that would not collapse in on itself by ending in a civil war and a breakdown in order. Like other Enlightenment thinkers, he believed that by analysing human instincts and behaviours, he could design a state that would promote positive human traits and mitigate (counteract) our basest (bad) behaviour.

To do this, he adopted a **Rationalist** approach (i.e. he relied on logic and reason). Having established important arguments from 'first principles' he continued the thoughts through to their logical conclusion. In doing so, many would argue that Hobbes was the father of "Political Science".

What can I do to help get my head around some of these ideas?

One great way to broaden your understanding of the topic is to listen to Episode 2 of 'The Pol Soc Podcast' (www.polsocpodcast.com). There you'll find lots of useful resources and suggestions, including a 'Listen Along Worksheet' that will help you to focus the mind on the task ahead.

Big ideas like these can be hard to process out of context. One of the main contributions of Hobbes is the fact that he elicits (provokes) such strong reactions from other key thinkers. When you move on to look at the ideas of John Locke or Robert Nozick, be conscious of the fact that they are building upon and/or opposing ideas that have gone before...

Sidebar: Hobbes presents some interesting perspectives on 'Gender'. He was one of the first philosophers to consider women as 'persons' when devising a social contract between those 'persons'. All people, no matter how physically strong, are vulnerable to attack and domination when asleep. This great human weakness is truly **egalitarian!!!** That said, elsewhere Hobbes used very 'Patriarchal' language, particularly in the shift from the 'state of nature' to civil society. This tension is a source of active debate amongst academics...

How do the ideas of Thomas Hobbes help you to think (and write) about the world around you?

Thinking on a GLOBAL scale...

Are there situations around the world where humankind might be considered to have reverted (returned) to a “state of nature”? There are many concepts from our subject specification that might be relevant here?

Are ‘non-democratic’ or *authoritarian* states a good example of the kind of absolute control that Hobbes discusses? If so what current (or historical) examples could you identify?

Think about the aftermath of natural disasters such as mass flooding, drought, or earthquakes? How do humans behave in those situations?

What about unstable political scenarios, such as race riots, or revolutions, apartheid, or even genocide? How would Hobbes react to those situations? Do events like these prove that he was right to be so pessimistic about human nature?

What about the concept of ‘corruption’? What level of political of corruption should you be prepared to tolerate if the final outcome of those practices didn’t actually threaten your safety? “The cost of doing business...”

Think about Sustainable Development Goal 16: “Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions”. What contribution have the ideas of Thomas Hobbes made to that idea? How do those three aspects of the goal clash against each other? (Are they sympathetic to each other, or possibly ‘mutually exclusive’)

Thinking on a LOCAL /PERSONAL scale...

Have you experienced situations in school where you felt that you really wanted some external force (a teacher or principal) to intervene (step in) to address a situation that was getting out of hand?

Think about any sport you are knowledgeable about? What impact does the quality of the referee have on how the game is played? Are there benefits to a game that is only lightly refereed, compared with a game where the referee is very obviously intruding on the ‘flow’ of the game?

Are there times in life when a more ‘paternalistic’ approach is needed? Does this vary between early childhood, adolescence, adulthood and old age?

When you are at the bus stop, do you queue patiently? If a queue is in place do you join it? What happens when a small number of people abandon the queue? How do you feel about people who skip queues?

What about in the classroom? Are you the kind of student who likes a very ordered classroom with clear rules and punishments for those who transgress? Or, alternatively, do you prefer classes to have a more ‘organic’ feel, with free-flowing discussion and lots of freedom?

Thinker's Background

- Hobbes was born (prematurely) in the year of the Spanish Armada (1588) when England was almost invaded by Spain
- Educated at Oxford, he worked as a tutor to the Earl of Devonshire, and was very familiar with **Aristocracy** and **Monarchy**
- During his European travels he was influenced by **Enlightenment** science and corresponded with (wrote to) many other contemporary philosophers and mathematicians such as René Descartes
- During the English Civil War he spent a decade in exile in Paris where he wrote *Leviathan*. The **secularist** tendencies of the book angered the exiled **Royalists**, leaving him no choice but to appeal to the revolutionary English government for protection
- His shifting loyalties show his **pragmatism**
- After the war he returned to England. From the 1660s onwards he was protected by the **Restoration** King Charles II, whom he had briefly tutored in Paris in 1647
- He died in 1679 at the **prodigious** age of 91 – an exceptional age for that time!

Look up the meaning of the words highlighted in **bold** type above:
'**Secularist**' – not connected with religious or spiritual matters/not bound by religious rules.
'**Restoration**' -

Personal Response

(A.) What aspects of other LC subjects might this be relevant? (Which specific aspects of History, Geography, Religion, English....?)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

(B.) To what aspects of your daily life might the ideas of Thomas Hobbes be relevant?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Reading Tip: If you do try and dip into reading *Leviathan* you can read it in 17th Century English, but there are plenty of modernized versions where the old spellings are updated and which contain relevant footnotes to explain the context of some of the main ideas.

Links to other aspects of the course

List different aspects of the course to which you think Hobbes might be relevant. (can you list 3-4)
This list will not be *definitive*, but can be added to over time...!

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Favourite Moment: Speaking of his birth, Hobbes said that his mother gave birth to twins “myself and fear” – this parallels much of his pessimism that we can identify in *Leviathan*. His dying words are said to have been “A great leap in the dark” – does this indicate a more deeply felt **Atheism** than he could safely admit in the open?