

An Introduction to the Key Themes of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651)



Who was Thomas Hobbes?

- Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) was a philosopher and royalist, educated at Oxford University
- Initially, he worked as a tutor to the noble and wealthy, but not until his 40s did he start working in earnest on his own philosophical theories
- Hobbes wrote many books and contributed to many academic fields, but his 1651 book *Leviathan* is the one he is best remembered for
- In *Leviathan*, Hobbes proposed that the natural basic state of humankind is one of anarchy, with the strong dominating the weak
- Life for most people, he said, was 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short' – therefore, our one natural right is of self-preservation
- In order to remove that basic fear between individuals or groups, Hobbes suggested that people should 'contract' with a protector as their sovereign
- Under this social contract, individuals give up all rights, while those of the protector are absolute ('unlimited sovereignty')
- Hobbes' key point was that any protector was there by specific agreement with their subjects.
- Now, we will consider three key macro themes in Hobbes' *Leviathan*:
 - 1) The 'State of Nature'
 - 2) Getting out of the 'State of Nature'
 - 3) Unlimited Sovereignty

Part 1 – The ‘State of Nature’



What is the ‘State of Nature’?

- For Hobbes, the ‘State of Nature’ is the natural condition of man, in which there exists no state (i.e. governing body)
- Without government, and the settled social living that government makes possible, men would all be roughly equal
- According to Hobbes, no man is much stronger than another, and as such, each man could be killed by stealth
- Because of this, men are constantly suspicious of one another and men would actively avoid each other in this ‘State of Nature’
- As such, security is the prime consideration. Each man would strive for security and thus dominion over others - but each being roughly equal in ability and strength, they would not be able to achieve this
- Life in the state of nature is miserable – there is little economic progress and little happiness

The State of Nature is a State of War

- Aggression would be compounded because one would never know what one had to do to preserve one's life
- One's right to preserve one's life - what Hobbes calls **the right of nature** - may involve killing another
- However, according to Hobbes, one has the right to do this so long as one feels that one's life is in danger
- The state of nature is a state of war, because life in the state of nature has the inevitable tendency to lead to war
- Although there are pauses in the fighting, this is still the state of war, as war is characterised by intervals in fighting.

Part 2 – Getting out of the ‘State of Nature’



Escaping the State of Nature

- Hobbesian men want and desire "glory" (wealth, deference, high position etc.), but at the same time are "diffident" about relations with other men
- Men also need law to live the kinds of lives that they want to lead
- However, diffidence makes it unlikely that they would ever come together spontaneously – in other words, the desire for glory and the desire for law are clearly not compatible in the state of nature
- However, the two are very important in helping to lift man from the undesirable and miserable state of nature
- A rational egoist will desire a law that everyone except him will follow
 - o However, the rational egoist will also realise that everyone else will wish for this
 - o Nevertheless, the state of nature is awful, and thus there will need to be some way of creating a system of law out of it
- Doing this presents a few problems. First, **who would enforce the law?** The rational egoist could try to enforce it himself, but this wouldn't work as all men are roughly equal
- The second problem is the question of **who would be the first to obey?** The first man to do this would be at an immediate disadvantage
 - o The answer to both of these questions, for Hobbes, lies in choosing a lawgiver and a law enforcer by agreement
 - o The choice of law-enforcer and lawgiver is the moment of contract – **it is then that political power is created**

Part 3 – Unlimited Sovereignty



What is unlimited sovereignty?

- Remarkably, for Hobbes, sovereignty is not created on terms - it is absolute and undivided
- The sovereign is not party to a social contract - he exists outside of a contract
- As such, there are no limits upon his power ('unlimited sovereignty')
- As such, there are only two possible forms in which society can exist - either a state of nature, or civil society, the latter in which the sovereign rules without limit

According to Hobbes, why do we need unlimited sovereignty?

- For Hobbes, it is simply impossible for the sovereign to make a contract with his subjects without unlimited sovereignty because:
 - 1) **If he had to make a contract, he would have to make it with each individual.** This is clearly impossible.
 - 2) **Contracts made in the state of nature are not binding.** After all, there is no one to enforce them.
 - 3) **A sovereign who would make a contract would be misunderstanding the nature of sovereignty.** In Civil Society, the sovereign is placed in the condition that every rational egoist in the state of nature desired. The sovereign is the beneficiary of the contract, rather than a party to it. He would be foolish to bargain away some of his power.
 - 4) **If the sovereign was to be judged to have violated the terms of a contract, then this would lead to civil war.** If people were ever in a position to judge whether the sovereign had broken the terms of a contract, they would have to find another sovereign to represent them.

Conclusion – Summary of Hobbes' Argument in *Leviathan*

- Hobbes' political philosophy is a solution to his ethical relativism
- In the state of nature, men are their own judges of what is a threat to them
- As such, there is no clear objective truth about who presents a threat and to whom
- Thus, men in a state of nature will come to see that the law of nature obliges them to renounce their right of private judgement over what is to count as dangerous in dubious cases, and accept a common authority over them
- In *Leviathan*, the common authority is created when everyone agrees "to submit their wills, everyone to his will, and their judgements, to his judgement".