

*Non est potestas Super Terram quae Comparetur ei. Job. 41. 24.*



Thomas Hobbes  
The Commonwealth  
& The Body Politic

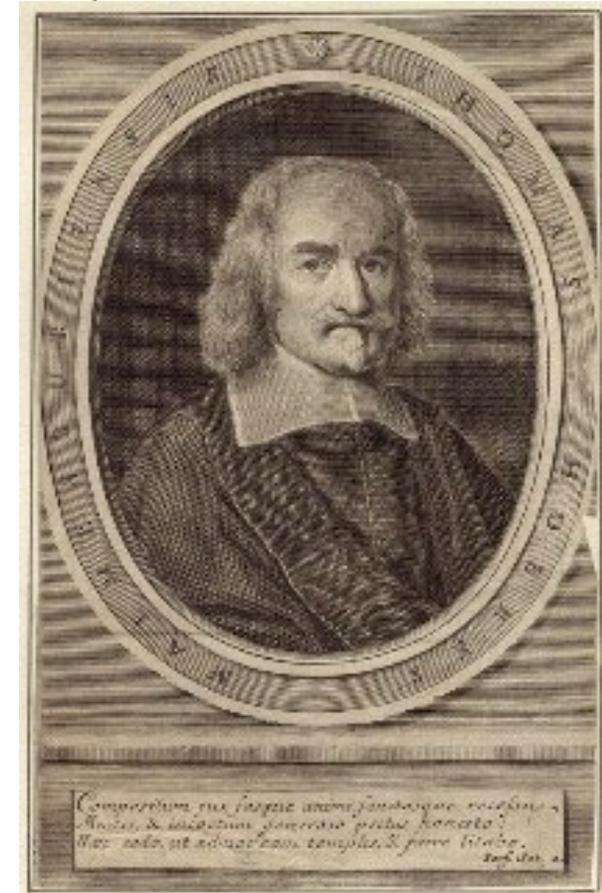
Stephanie Spoto  
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# Thomas Hobbes

(1588-1679)

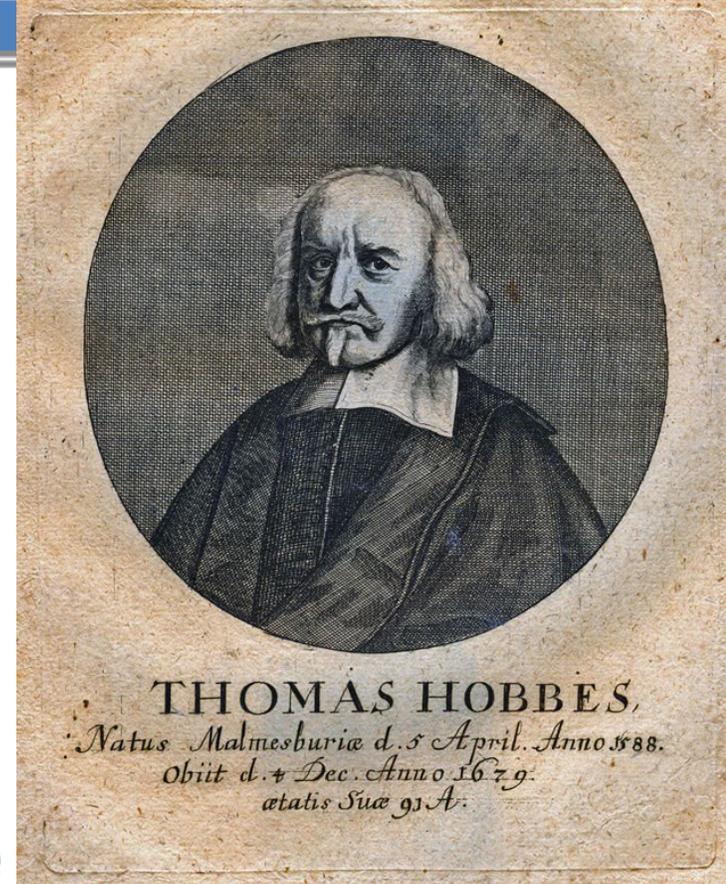


- Philosopher and royalist; Educated at Oxford
- Spent time living near Paris and traveled Europe
- Meeting artists, scientists, and philosophers and engaged with their thought expanded his education
- Employed as a tutor for nobility, and didn't start working seriously on his own philosophical projects until in his 40s
- Prolific writer who contributed to many fields



- *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*—commonly referred to as *Leviathan* (1651, Revised Latin Edition 1668)

- Book named after biblical Leviathan, a serpent
- Influential work on legitimate government and social structures
- Regarded as one of the earliest works on **social contract theory**: the idea the individuals consent to relinquishing their freedoms to sovereign or ruler in exchange for security
- *Leviathan* argues for social contract and an absolute sovereign
- Considered a classic work in “statecraft”
- Composed during the English Civil War (1642–1651)
- Civil war and the brutal situation of a state of nature (“the war of all against all”) only avoidable by powerful and united government.



# Leviathan and the English Civil War

*“To this war of every man against every man, this also in consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law, where no law, no injustice. Force, and fraud, are in war the cardinal virtues.”*

- The English Civil War (1642-1651) was a series of civil wars and political battles between Parliamentarians and Royalists principally over the manner of England's governance (whether to be a republic or a monarchy, or instance).
- At beginning of conflict, Hobbes fled to Paris → but had already conceived of many of the ideas in *Leviathan*
- Issues discussed were in contentious debate at the time
  - Conflict between Westminster and Charles I → should there be a formal constitution to protect the rights of individuals?
  - At first, debate centered on voting rights (who could vote)
  - Agreement of the People 1649: raised questions about freedom of worship, fairness in trials/punishment, and legal equality

# Title

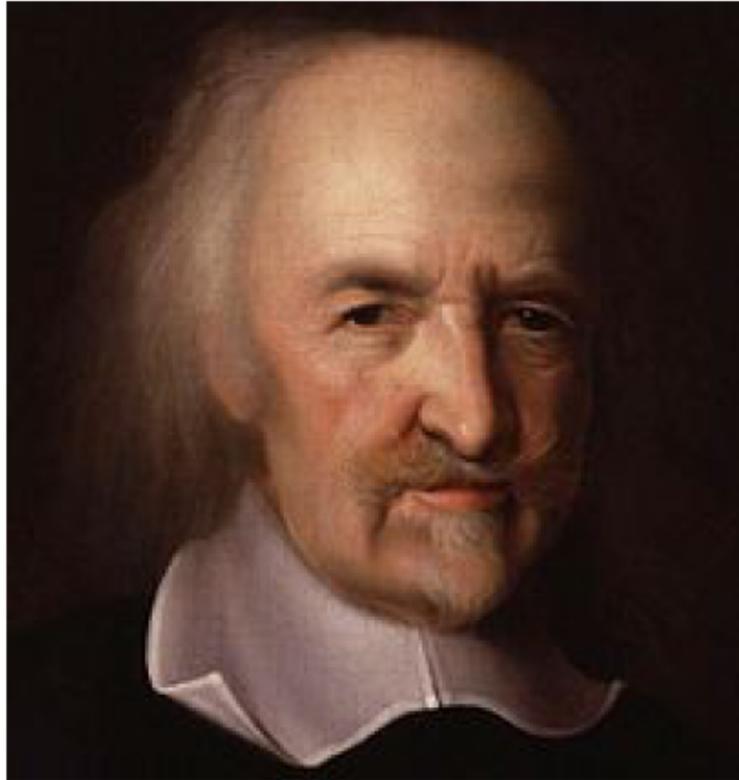
## *The Joined Serpent*



- Allusion to *The Book of Job*
- More poetic title than usually giving political treatises
  - For example: Locke's *Two Treatises of Government* or Hobbes's *The Elements of Law*
- Hobbes's contemporaries believed "leviathan" related to two Hebrew words: "lavah" (join, connect) and "thannin" (serpent or dragon)
- Westminster's Assembly's (council of theologians and politicians meeting to restructure the Church of England) annotations of the Bible: this creature given this name because "because by his bignesse he seemes not one single creature, but a coupling of divers together; or because his scales are closed, or straitly compacted together."
- Samuel Mintz: "Leviathan and Hobbes's sovereign are unities compacted out of separate individuals; they are omnipotent; they cannot be destroyed or divided; they inspire fear in men; they do not make pacts with men; theirs is the dominion of power."

# Politics & Society

- Natural state of humans is chaos, strong dominating the weak
- Life in 'state of nature': "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish and short"
- Our only natural right is self-preservation
- To remove fear between groups or individuals → "contract" with sovereign protector
- Individuals relinquish all rights to the protector, whose rights are absolute (though not divine)
  - Ruler/sovereign exists by agreement with subjects



# Cover illustration

- *Leviathan* granted an enduring powerful image with the famous frontispiece engraving
- Giant holding sword (earthly power) and a crosier (Church power)
- Body made up of over 300 human figures - people represented by contracted ruler who is made strong by this collective contract
- "Non est potestas Super Terram quae Comparetur ei": ('There is no power on earth to be compared with him')



*Non est potestas Super Terram quae Comparetur ei Iob. 41. 24.*



# On Man

## *First section of treatise*

- Begins with description of human nature → Man is matter in motion
- Everything about human life can be explored through material explanation → without relying on religious, spiritual, incorporeal examples, but also without relying on ideas that are external to the physical human mind
- Defines terms unsentimentally
  - ‘Good’ and ‘evil’ are merely ideas to refer to individual desires or aversions → these desires and aversions mere inclination to move towards or away from the object
  - ‘Hope’: mere desire for object coupled with belief that object can be possessed
- Scholasticism (dominant political philosophy) → succeeds because of confused definitions of common words such as “incorporeal substance” (for Hobbes an oxymoron)

*“What is the heart but a spring, and the nerves but so many strings, and the joints but so many wheels, giving motion to the whole body?”*

# Summum bonum/summum malum

- Hobbes does not rely on psychological concept of *summum bonum*, or the greatest good
- *Summum bonum* superfluous concept → and given changing nature of human desire there can be no such thing
- Therefore, political community seeking greatest good for individuals would find there would be competition in conceptions of what that is → Civil War
- BUT, there is *summum malum*, the greatest evil
  - This is the fear of violent death → political communities are often oriented around this fear and how to avoid it

# The Natural State of Man

- No *summum bonum* → natural state of man not found in political community that pursues this
- Outside of political community is an anarchic condition: variability of human desires, scrambling for scarce resources
- This anarchist condition is the State of nature: war of all against all
- Even if two individuals are not fighting there could still be violence over sense of honor, for example, so they must always be on guard against each other
  - It can be reasonable to attack your neighbor preemptively

**“In such condition there is no place for industry, because the fruit thereof is uncertain, and consequently no culture of the earth, no navigation nor the use of commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”**

# Avoiding the state of nature

- Political reasoning begins with the desire to avoid *summum malum* (violent death) → desire to avoid the state of nature
- Hobbes outlines some laws of nature, but points out they aren't really laws since no one can enforce them
- Reason first suggests to seek peace, but if impossible, to seek all advantages of war
- In the state of nature nothing is just or unjust → each individual has a right to all things
- Law of nature: person should be willing to give up one's rights, if others are also willing, to leave the state of nature and build strong government to command all things

# Hobbes and the Social Contract

- Hobbes's idea of a consensual contract between ruler and subjects (or between individuals as a society) was taken up by others:
  - Algernon Sidney (1623-1683): individuals have the right to choose their own government and have the power to dissolve that government if it becomes corrupt
  - John Locke (1632-1704): *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690) → interested in social contract theory, but believed human nature was founded on tolerance and reason
- Sigmund Freud (1856-1939): formulation of *id*, *ego*, and *superego*, with the *id* being our violent inner drives and the *superego* the controlling force that makes society possible
- *Leviathan* is an important work for understanding the development of Western political theory and developments of concepts of *human nature*

# The Body Politic

- “The universe, the whole mass of things that are, is corporeal, that is to say, body, and hath the dimensions of magnitude, length, breadth and depth. Every part of the universe is ‘body’ and that which is not ‘body’ is no part of the universe, and because the universe is all, that which is no part of it is nothing, and consequently nowhere.”
- the body politic “is a fictitious body” → contrasting it with a natural body.
- a central purpose of Hobbes’s political philosophy was to cast the fiction of the body politic upon the imaginations of his readers.
- Sought to transform the imagination of his readers:
  - Enlighten humankind from spiritual darkness → would efface the false ideas that lead to sedition
  - Replace religious imagery with the fiction of the body politic → transform the relation between people and the commonwealth