

# Thomas Hobbes

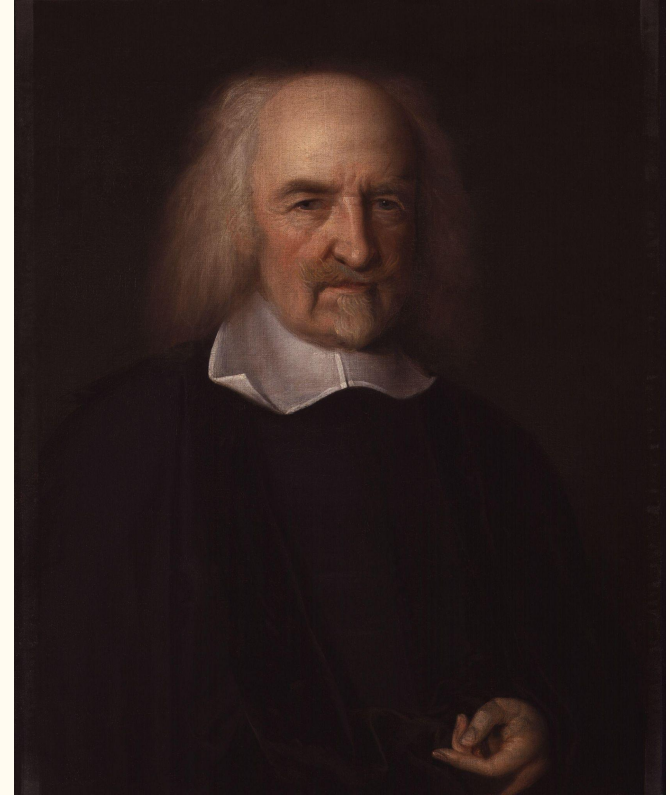
## *Leviathan*

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Gentrain  
Stephanie Spoto

# Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679)

- English philosopher, historian, theologian, wrote about ethics, jurisprudence, geometry → best known for *Leviathan* (1651)
- Considered one of the founders of modern political philosophy
- Attended Oxford and graduated from Cambridge 1608
- Tutor for the Cavendish family
- Travelled to France and returned in 1641 to see the violence and brutality of the English Civil War (1642-1651)
- De Cive (1642), De Corpore (1655), De Homine (1658), Behemoth (1681).



# *Leviathan* (1651)

- *Leviathan or The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil*
- Named after biblical Leviathan → sea monster
- Explores the nature and structure of legitimate government → early work of social contract theory
- Argues for social contract leading to absolute sovereign → the state of nature (“the war of all against all”) is only avoidable by absolute reign of strong government
- Written during the English Civil War (1642-1651)

# Frontispiece etching created by Parisian Abraham Bosse

Two main components:

- **Top:** Enormous crowned figure with sword and crosier; quote from Book of Job, "Non est potestas Super Terram quae Comparetur ei. Iob. 41 . 24" ("There is no power on earth to be compared to him) → monster Leviathan also in Job
- 300 figures make up the arms and torso of central figure → face away from the viewer
- **Bottom:** Triptych with wooden border has title with decorative curtain → sides reflecting the main figure's crosier (church power) and sword (earthly power)
- Each side has elements that relate to that power: castle, church; crown, mitre; cannon excommunication; weapons, logic; battlefield, church courts
- Represents the union of the religious and secular powers of the sovereign



# Man as Matter in Motion

- Begins with exposition on human nature → man as machine
- Matter in motion → a materialistic view of human nature → no need to turn to incorporeal or immaterial soul to understand human mind
- Compare with soul as the movement of the body (Aristotle); contrast with dualism of Plato

*Life is but a motion of limbs. For 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, such as was intended by the Artificer?*

- Life and ideas laid out unsentimentally → good/evil are only words to denote a person's appetites/desires → desire to move towards or away from something
- Hope: wanting a thing and believing it can be possessed
- Scholasticism: false philosophy which profits on confounding people and creating nonsense concepts using everyday words, e.g. "incorporeal substance"

# There is no greatest good

- There is no greatest/highest good → summum bonum is unnecessary (human desires are too diverse for it to exist)
- If this is the drive of human community, there will always be conflict because of conflicting ideas about what is good → results in civil war
- Not greatest good but greatest evil that should be focus → avoid the summum malum (fear of violent death)
- Natural state of man not in human community but in outside chaotic and brutal state of nature → war of all against all
- Neighbor could kill you to steal your property or for honor so we must always be on guard → might even preemptively attack to avoid being a victim

*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.*

# The “laws” of nature

- Center of political argument/reasoning is avoiding this summum malum (violent death) → want to avoid the state of nature as the place where this summum malum occurs
- Puts forward the laws of nature, but then quickly says that there is no one to enforce them so therefore they are not real laws
- First law: Reason pushes us towards peace → if peace cannot be made/found then use all the power and advantages of war
  - Nothing right or wrong, just or unjust, in state of nature → each person has right to everything
- Second law: we must be willing to give up our rights to everything if others will do the same → leave the state of nature and create a commonwealth. We must give power to sovereign to take total power

# The Purpose of the Commonwealth

*The final cause, end, or design of men (who naturally love liberty, and dominion over others) in the introduction of that restraint upon themselves, in which we see them live in Commonwealths, is the foresight of their own preservation, and of a more contented life thereby; that is to say, of getting themselves out from that miserable condition of war which is necessarily consequent, as hath been shown, to the natural passions of men when there is no visible power to keep them in awe, and tie them by fear of punishment to the performance of their covenants...*

The commonwealth is instituted when all agree in the following manner: *I authorise and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or to this assembly of men, on this condition; that thou give up, thy right to him, and authorise all his actions in like manner.*



# Three types of government: Monarchy, Aristocracy, Democracy

## Monarchy the Best Government

*The difference between these three kinds of Commonwealth consisteth not in the difference of power, but in the difference of convenience or aptitude to produce the peace and security of the people; for which end they were instituted. And to compare monarchy with the other two, we may observe: first, that whosoever beareth the person of the people, or is one of that assembly that bears it, beareth also his own natural person. And though he be careful in his politic person to procure the common interest, yet he is more, or no less, careful to procure the private good of himself, his family, kindred and friends; and for the most part, if the public interest chance to cross the private, he prefers the private: for the passions of men are commonly more potent than their reason. From whence it follows that where the public and private interest are most closely united, there is the public most advanced. Now in monarchy the private interest is the same with the public. The riches, power, and honour of a monarch arise only from the riches, strength, and reputation of his subjects. For no king can be rich, nor glorious, nor secure, whose subjects are either poor, or contemptible, or too weak through want, or dissension, to maintain a war against their enemies; whereas in a democracy, or aristocracy, the public prosperity confers not so much to the private fortune of one that is corrupt, or ambitious, as doth many times a perfidious advice, a treacherous action, or a civil war.*

# On Religion

- Sovereign has total authority over all things and can assert their control over faith and religion and interpretation of religious doctrine
- Sovereign *must* do this or there will be discord and possibly war
- Hobbes has his own religious beliefs → but would gladly give up religious freedom for security if it is the will of the sovereign (when it was re-established)



- Has controversial view → no soul/body dualism and no ‘incorporeal substances’ meaning that even God was material
- It is possible that Hobbes was an atheist

# Compare with Rousseau

- *Discourse on the Origin of the Foundation of Inequality Among Mankind* (1754)
- We were once hunter-gatherers in small egalitarian groups living in childlike innocence
- Only after agrarian shift and rise of cities/civilization that hierarchies arose → led to ‘the state’
- This led to patriarchy, armies, war, executions, bureaucrats
- David Graeber, *Dawn of Everything*, says that in the west we are caught between these two interpretations of human nature: the Hobbesian and the Rousseauian

*It is basically a theological debate. Essentially the question is: are humans innately good or innately evil? But if you think about it, the question, framed in these terms, makes very little sense. ‘Good’ and ‘evil’ are purely human concepts. It would never occur to anyone to argue about whether a fish, or a tree, were good or evil, because ‘good’ and ‘evil’ are concepts humans made up in order to compare ourselves with one another. It follows that arguing about whether humans are fundamentally good or evil makes about as much sense as arguing about whether humans are fundamentally fat or thin.*