

Thomas Hobbes

Encyclopedia of World Biography, December 12, 1998

Born: April 05, 1588 in Westport, United Kingdom

Died: December 04, 1679 in Hardwick Hall, United Kingdom

Nationality: English

Occupation: Political philosopher

The English philosopher and political theorist Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was one of the central figures of British empiricism. His major work, "Leviathan," published in 1651, expressed his principle of materialism and his concept of a social contract forming the basis of society.

Born prematurely on April 5, 1588, when his mother heard of the impending invasion of the Spanish Armada, Thomas Hobbes later reported that "my mother gave birth to twins, myself and fear." His father was the vicar of Westport near Malmesbury in Gloucestershire. He abandoned his family to escape punishment for fighting with another clergyman "at the church door." Thereafter Thomas was raised and educated by an uncle. At local schools he became a proficient classicist, translating a Greek tragedy into Latin iambics by the time he was 14. From 1603 to 1608 he studied at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he was bored by the prevailing philosophy of Aristotelianism.

The 20-year-old future philosopher became a tutor to the Cavendish family. This virtually lifelong association with the successive earls of Devonshire provided him with an extensive private library, foreign travel, and introductions to influential people. Hobbes, however, was slow in developing his thought; his first work a translation of Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian Wars*, did not appear until 1629. Thucydides held that knowledge of the past was useful for determining correct action, and Hobbes said that he offered the translation during a period of civil unrest as a reminder that the ancients believed democracy to be the least effective form of government.

According to his own estimate the crucial intellectual event of Hobbes's life occurred when he was 40. While waiting for a friend he wandered into a library and chanced to find a copy of Euclid's geometry. Opening the book, he read a random proposition and exclaimed, "By God that is impossible!" Fascinated by the interconnections between axioms, postulates, and premises, he adopted the ideal of demonstrating certainty by way of deductive reasoning. His interest in mathematics is reflected in his second work, *A Short Treatise on First Principles*, which presents a mechanical interpretation of sensation, as well as in his brief stint as mathematics tutor to Charles II. His generally royalist sympathy as expressed in *The Elements of Law* (1640) caused Hobbes to leave England during the "Long Parliament." This was the first of many trips back and forth between England and the Continent during periods of civil strife since he was, in his own words, "the first of all that fled." For the rest of his long life Hobbes traveled extensively and published prolifically. In France he met René Descartes and the anti-Cartesian Pierre Gassendi. In 1640 he wrote one of the sets of objections to Descartes's *Meditations*.

Although born into the Elizabethan Age, Hobbes out-lived all of the major 17th-century thinkers. He became a sort of English institution and continued writing, offering new translations of Homer in his 80s because he had "nothing else to do." When he was past 90, he became embroiled in controversies with the Royal Society. He invited friends to suggest appropriate epitaphs and favored one that read "this is the true philosopher's stone." He died on December 4, 1679, at the age of 91.

His Philosophy

The diverse intellectual currents of the 17th century, which are generically called modern classical philosophy, began with a unanimous repudiation of the authorities of the past, especially Aristotle and the scholastic tradition. Descartes, who founded the rationalist tradition, and his contemporary Sir Francis Bacon, who is considered the originator of modern empiricism, both sought new methodologies for achieving scientific knowledge and a systematic conception of reality. Hobbes knew both of these thinkers, and his system encompassed the

advantages of both rationalism and empiricism. As a logician, he believed too strongly in the power of deductive reasoning from definitions to share Bacon's exclusive enthusiasm for inductive generalizations from experience. Yet Hobbes was a more consistent empiricist and nominalist, and his attacks on the misuse of language exceed even those of Bacon. And unlike Descartes, Hobbes viewed reason as summation of consequences rather than an innate, originative source of new knowledge.

Psychology, as the mechanics of knowing, rather than epistemology is the source of Hobbes's singularity. He was fascinated by the problem of sense perception, and he extended Galileo's mechanical physics into an explanation of human cognition. The origin of all thought is sensation which consists of mental images produced by the pressure of motion of external objects. Thus Hobbes anticipates later thought by distinguishing between the external object and the internal image. These sense images are extended by the power of memory and imagination. Understanding and reason, which distinguish men from other animals, consist entirely in the ability to use speech.

Speech is the power to transform images into words or names. Words serve as the marks of remembrance, signification, conception, or self-expression. For example, to speak of a cause-and-effect relation is merely to impose names and define their connection. When two names are so joined that the definition of one contains the other, then the proposition is true. The implications of Hobbes's analysis are quite modern. First, there is an implicit distinction between objects and their appearance to man's senses. Consequently knowledge is discourse about appearances. Universals are merely names understood as class concepts, and they have no real status, for everything which appears "is individual and singular." Since "true and false are attributes of speech and not of things," scientific and philosophic thinking consists in using names correctly. Reason is calculation or "reckoning the consequences of general laws agreed upon for either marking or signifying." The power of the mind is the capacity to reduce consequences to general laws or theorems either by deducing consequences from principles or by inductively reasoning from particular perceptions to general principles. The privilege of mind is subject to unfortunate abuse because, in Hobbes's pithy phrase, men turn from summarizing the consequences of things "into a reckoning of the consequences of appellations," that is, using faulty definitions, inventing terms which stand for nothing, and assuming that universals are real.

The material and mechanical model of nature offered Hobbes a consistent analogy. Man is a conditioned part of nature, and reason is neither an innate faculty nor the summation of random experience but is acquired through slow cultivation and industry. Science is the cumulative knowledge of syllogistic reasoning which gradually reveals the dependence of one fact upon another. Such knowledge is conditionally valid and enables the mind to move progressively from abstract and simple to more particular and complex sciences: geometry, mechanics, physics, morals (the nature of mind and desire), politics.

Political Thought

Hobbes explains the connection between nature, man, and society through the law of inertia. A moving object continues to move until impeded by another force, and "trains of imagination" or speculation are abated only by logical demonstrations. So also man's liberty or desire to do what he wants is checked only by an equal and opposite need for security. A society or commonwealth "is but an artificial man" invented by man, and to understand polity one should merely read himself as part of nature.

Such a reading is cold comfort because presocial life is characterized by Hobbes, in a famous quotation, as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." The equality of human desire is matched by an economy of natural satisfactions. Men are addicted to power because its acquisition is the only guarantee of living well. Such men live in "a state of perpetual war" driven by competition and desire for the same goods. The important consequence of this view is man's natural right and liberty to seek self-preservation by any means. In this state of nature there is no value above self-interest because where there is no common, coercive power there is no law and no justice. But there is a second and derivative law of nature that men may surrender or transfer their individual will to the state.

This "social contract" binds the individual to treat others as he expects to be treated by them. Only a constituted civil power commands sufficient force to compel everyone to fulfill this original compact by which men exchange liberty for security.

In Hobbes's view the sovereign power of a commonwealth is absolute and not subject to the laws and obligations of citizens. Obedience remains as long as the sovereign fulfills the social compact by protecting the rights of the individual. Consequently rebellion is unjust, by definition, but should the cause of revolution prevail, a new absolute sovereignty is created.

Further Readings

- The standard edition is *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes*, edited by Sir William Molesworth (11 vols. 1839-1845). In addition see *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, edited by Ferdinand Tönnies (1928); *Body, Mind and Citizen*, edited by Richard S. Peters (1962); and *Leviathan*, edited by Michael Oakeshott (1962).
- There is a wealth of good secondary literature available. John Aubrey included a biography of his friend Hobbes in *Brief Lives*, edited by Oliver Lawson Dick (1950). Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and Genesis* (trans. 1936); Leslie Stephen, *Hobbes* (1904); and Richard Peters, *Hobbes* (1956), are excellent studies.
- Consult also John Larid, *Hobbes* (1934); Clarence DeWitt Thorpe, *The Aesthetic Theory of Thomas Hobbes* (1940); John Bowle, *Hobbes and His Critics: A Study in Seventeenth Century Constitutionalism* (1952); Samuel I. Mintz, *The Hunting of Leviathan: Seventeenth-century Reactions to the Materialism and Moral Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (1962); C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes of Locke* (1962); J. W. N. Watkins, *Hobbes's System of Ideas: A Study in the Political Significance of Philosophical Theories* (1965); and F. S. McNeilly, *The Anatomy of Leviathan* (1968).

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