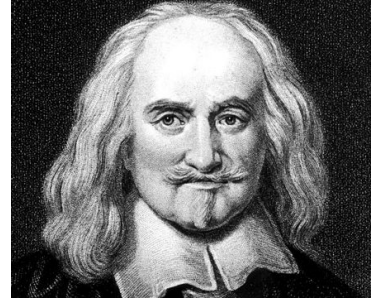


Hobbes: The Defender of Absolutism

Starting in the 1600s, European philosophers began debating the question of who should govern a nation. While some accepted the absolute rule of kings, many Enlightenment philosophers argued for different forms of democracy.



In 1649, a civil war broke out over who would rule England—King Charles I or the popularly elected Parliament. The war ended with the beheading of the king. Shortly after Charles was executed, an English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), wrote *Leviathan*, a defense of the absolute power of kings. The title of the book referred to a leviathan, a mythological, whale-like sea monster that devoured whole ships. Hobbes compared the leviathan to government, a powerful state created to impose order.

Hobbes began *Leviathan* by describing the “state of nature” where all individuals were naturally equal. Every person was free to do what he or she needed to do to survive. As a result, everyone suffered from “continued fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man [was] solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” In the state of nature, there were no laws or anyone to enforce them. The only way out of this situation, Hobbes said, was for individuals to create some supreme power to impose peace on everyone.

Hobbes borrowed a concept from English contract law: an implied agreement. Hobbes asserted that the people agreed among themselves to “lay down” their natural rights of equality and freedom and give absolute power to a sovereign. The sovereign, created by the people, might be a person or a group. The sovereign would make and enforce the laws to secure a peaceful society, making life, liberty, and property possible. Hobbes called this agreement the “social contract.”

Hobbes believed that a government headed by a king was the best form that the sovereign could take. Placing all power in the hands of a king would provide a more consistent, firm exercise of political authority, Hobbes argued. Hobbes also maintained that the social contract was an agreement only among the people and not between them and their king. Once the people had given absolute power to the king, they had no right to revolt against him.

Hobbes warned against the church meddling with the king’s government. He feared religion could become a source of civil war. Thus, he advised that the church become a department of the king’s government, which would closely control all religious affairs. In any conflict between divine and royal law, Hobbes wrote, the individual should obey the king or choose death.

But the days of absolute kings were numbered. A new age with fresh ideas was emerging—the European Enlightenment. Enlightenment thinkers wanted to improve human conditions on earth rather than concern themselves with religion and the afterlife. These thinkers valued reason, science, religious tolerance, and what they called “natural rights”—life, liberty, and property.

Key Terms:

Absolutism (Absolute rule of kings, Absolute monarchy)-

Constitutional Monarchy: _____

Sovereign: _____

State of Nature: _____
