A Brief Account of Hobbes' Political Ideas

Thomas Hobbes was born in Westport (now part of Malmesbury) Wiltshire, England, on April 5, 1588, the second son of Thomas Hobbes, vicar of Westport and Charlton. His father disappeared at a very early age, abandoning his three children to the care of his brother, a well-to-do glover in Malmesbury. At the age of four, Hobbes was sent to the church school at Westport, then to a private school kept by Robert Latimer; and finally, at fifteen, to Magdalen Hall, Oxford. On graduating in 1608, he became private tutor to William Cavendish, afterwards 2nd earl of Devonshire, and so began a lifelong connection with the Cavendish family.

In 1610, Hobbes visited France and Italy with his pupil. There he probably found that the Aristotelian
philosophy, which he had been taught at Oxford, was beginning to crumble before the discoveries of Galileo and Kepler. On returning home, he decided to make himself a classical scholar, and this phase of his life lasted until he published, in 1629, a translation of Thucydides (English Works, viii-ix), in order to instruct his countrymen in the dangers of democracy.

In 1629, Hobbes was abroad again, accompanying the son of a certain Sir Gervase Clifton to Paris, Orleans, and possibly Venice. About the time of this trip, he became impressed with geometry, as a result of reading Pythagoras' theorem. Its method of demonstrating conclusions by clear steps from equally indubitable premises seemed to him thereafter the only possible one for science and philosophy.

In his prose autobiography (Latin Works, i), Hobbes relates how he was in a gathering of learned men when the question was asked, "What is sense?" No one appeared to know the answer, but on consideration, it occurred to
Hobbes that if material things and all their parts were always at rest or in uniform motion, there could be no distinction of anything and consequently, no perception, and he concluded that the cause of all things must be sought in diversity of motion. Hobbes became obsessed with the idea of motion. He decided that the basic reality was matter in motion, and he aimed to deduce from this, by strict demonstrative arguments (as in geometry), the nature of everything else. Thus he planned a philosophical trilogy:—

I. *De Corpore* ("Concerning Body") was to show that physical phenomena were explicable in terms of motion;

II. *De Homine* ("Concerning Man") was to show what specific bodily motions were involved in human cognition and appetition, and

III. *De Cive* ("Concerning Citizenship") was to deduce from what had already been established the proper organisation of men in society.

In 1637, Hobbes returned to England to find the
country in the political ferment that preceded the Civil War. He was deeply interested in the civil disorders of his time, which led him, in turn, to reflect at length on the fundamental principles of political organisation. It is necessary, therefore, for the purposes of this study, to briefly outline certain political developments pertinent to that period. Incidentally, the year of Hobbes's birth was the year of the defeat of the Spanish Armada—England's naval victory over Spain—an event which greatly enhanced the confidence of the emerging British capitalist classes. In time, however, the growing capitalist order gradually found themselves working at cross-purposes with the traditional, orthodox monarchial rule. The great Puritan Revolution, which began in 1640, was mainly inspired by the drive of the British bourgeoisie to install a state apparatus compatible with their burgeoning economic interests. In the initial phase of the Puritan Revolution, the leading role was played by the Presbyterians, comprising of the big bourgeoisie and
representing the rightist wing of the revolutionaries.

The Independents, the other important group in parliament led by Oliver Cromwell—which was, in fact, the party of the lesser bourgeoisie—represented the centrist section of the revolutionaries. The radical force of the revolution was represented by the relatively new group of Levellers. After the final defeat of the king, Charles I, the Army assumed power and soon removed the Presbyterians from parliament. Now, the Independents remaining in parliament, perceiving themselves to be under threat, adopted certain drastic measures that included among others the execution of Charles I. Hereafter, Cromwell, as the Lord Protector of the English Commonwealth, succeeded in stabilizing the rather difficult situation for quite some time by holding in check both the conservative and the radical elements. After the death of Cromwell, however, the balance could no longer be maintained and the bourgeoisie, under the looming fear of a new wave of revolution involving the broad masses of
the people, had no choice but to restore monarchy in 1660, when Charles II was installed as the new monarch of England.

Hobbes's preoccupation with the disturbing political events of his time led him to publish the last part of his planned philosophy first. *The Elements of Law*, part i on Man, part ii on Citizenship, was circulated in manuscript in 1640, and *De Corpore Politico* in 1650. This work argues that men can only live together in peace if they agree to subject themselves to an absolute political sovereign, and it contains most of the political and psychological doctrines for which Hobbes is famous and which reappear in *Leviathan*. Unfortunately, Hobbes antagonized both parties in the current constitutional struggle; the believers in the divine right of kings were irritated by his attempt to base sovereignty on a social contract; the parliamentarians by his advocacy of absolute monarchy. As a result, when the struggle became acute in 1640, Hobbes feared for his safety and retired.
to Paris. In 1647, a second edition of *De Cive* appeared at Amsterdam. In 1651, it was reissued in an English translation and this was followed in the same year by Hobbes's masterpiece, *Leviathan*, in the first two parts of which, "Of Man" and "Of Commonwealth", he reworked the ground already covered in the earlier treatises; in the last two, "Of A Christian Commonwealth" and "Of The Kingdom Of Darkness", he embarked upon a discussion of scripture and made a vigorous attack on the attempts of papists and presbyterians to challenge the right of the sovereign.

At the restoration of 1660, Hobbes was received into favour by Charles II, whom he had tutored in mathematics for a brief period in 1646. In his last years, he amused himself by returning to the classical studies of his youth. He died at Hardwick Hall in Derbyshire on December 4 of 1679 and was buried in the neighbouring church of

In appearance, Hobbes was tall and erect in figure.
He lived a temperate life. Socially, he was genial and courteous, though he lost his temper often. Intellectually bold in the extreme, he claimed to have read little and boasted that he would have known as little as other men if he had read as much. He is said to have had an illegitimate daughter for whom he made generous provisions.

There is no isolated connection between Hobbes's life and thought; he seems to have been a highly integrated man. He believed himself to be the first revealer of important truths in an area where man's passions made the discovery of truth peculiarly difficult and hazardous. It is hardly surprising that he lived the latter part of his life on the very edge of public tolerance, partly under the protection of his equally cynical monarch, Charles II. Hostility to his work did not surprise Hobbes; indeed, being of a combative nature, part of him actively enjoyed it.

If now, three centuries after the appearance of the
Leviathan, we take notice of what Hobbes neglected, some of his explanations cannot but seem simple-minded and superficial to us. Yet, this is not so. By the standards of his day, he was an extraordinarily subtle and close reasoner.

Hobbes was more than a clear thinker. He was also the maker of a new type of theory. Man, as Hobbes sees him, is neither a political animal in the Aristotelian sense, nor a creature marked from birth by sin and to be saved only by the grace of God. His method is, at bottom, the same as that of Hume and the Utilitarians. Hobbes seeks first to determine the strongest and most recurrent of men's appetites and passions; he then considers their situation and their needs as creatures who cannot avoid contact with one another and who have to compete for the wherewithal to satisfy their appetites, and finally seeks to explain the rules they observe and their institutions as arising from their appetites and passions, their situation and their needs of living at peace together. As
the pioneer of a utilitarian concept of government based upon a philosophy of radical scepticism, Hobbes is universally accorded a prominent place in the history of political thought. His starting point is that of liberal individualism, the rights of the individual and his demand for security, but he thinks this can only be achieved by creating a sovereign whose power and authority will remain absolute and undivided, whether the sovereignty is vested in a single individual or in an oligarchy or in a democratic assembly. The paradox of Hobbes's political philosophy lies in the fact that he is a political absolutist who is also one of the founders of liberalism.

It would be appropriate to begin an account of Hobbes's political ideas with his conception of philosophy. Philosophical thinking begins with analysis of the conceptions (i.e., the natures or notions of things, not the things themselves), given in sense experience, into their constituent notions and the first
part of philosophy will consist in defining or otherwise elucidating them. These elucidations must, however, be generative i.e., contain a reference to the cause or means of generating the thing elucidated. In *De Corpore*, Hobbes argues that a man may know the nature of a thing from the knowledge of its generation.

Hobbes seems to have held that the cause of anything is a form of motion which both generates that thing and enters into its definition and which can be discovered and specified a priori. It is necessary to consider the properties and effects of uniform motion, and of the combination of such motions (this is simply geometry applied to motion), and the laws of the action and reaction of moving bodies (Physics). All this is completely abstract and possesses demonstrative certainty. But in passing from geometry to physics, it becomes necessary to account for the operation of our senses and to explain observable phenomena such as the movement of the stars and the tides. To do this, it is
necessary to bring in new evidence or conjecture that, in conjunction with the abstract principles one already possesses, will enable one to reach conclusions that can now be only plausible because the new principles with which it is necessary to deal are no longer fabricated in definitions but incorporated in the things themselves.

After Physics comes Moral Philosophy, "the motions of the mind" such as appetite, aversion, fear etc., which have to be treated after Physics because they have their causes in sense and imagination. Lastly, Civil Philosophy may either be deduced by synthesis from what has gone before, or pursued independently by the analytic method. In the latter case, political phenomena are traced back to their causes in human nature, i.e., to the passions which are known to every man by introspection.

In order to discover the causes of a well-ordered Commonwealth, man must break it down by analysis into its constituent parts. These are the matter, generation and form of civil government, and Hobbes starts by
considering its matter, which is the condition of man in
the state of nature. According to Hobbes, the natural
tendency of any organism is to preserve its own life. In
a state of nature, a man desires self-preservation and
will do anything that seems to him necessary for self-
preservation. The desire for self-preservation gives rise
to a desire for pleasure, since pleasure is the
appearance in consciousness of what conduces to life.
Conversely, there is an aversion from pain, pain being
the mental appearance of what conduces to death.
According to Hobbes, man’s desire for continued
preservation leads him to desire not only pleasure now,
but a store of pleasure for the future as well. This is
possible only by the acquisition of power. Power is the
means to satisfy man’s desires. Therefore, every man
naturally desires power and more power, “a perpetual and
restless desire of power after power that ceaseth only in
If one person had powers so great that no one could resist him, he would be master of all. This is the position of God. God is irresistible, in consequence of which he has the right of dominion. But among men in a natural state, none has the ability to attain for himself powers so great that he can have dominion over all. Yet, all men are equal in their capacity to acquire power. As such, they must have equal hope of attaining their ends, and so, if any two desire the same thing, they must become enemies and distrust one another. In the face of this mutual distrust, the only reasonable way to secure oneself is by anticipation, so as to get power over others. Some men would be content with a moderate power, but unfortunately, others are not, and so a man "cannot assure the power and means to live well which he hath"

1 Leviathan, or the Matter, Form and Power of Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical and Civil; by Thomas Hobbes; edited by C. B. Macpherson. Harmondsworth: Penguin (Pelican Books), 1968 (originally published 1651); Ch.XI, p.49.
present, without the acquisition of more". The result
is that as long as men lack a common power to keep them
all in awe, they must remain "in a state of war of every
man against every man and in this state, there is no
possibility of progress or civilization, but only
continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life
of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short".3

Thus, Hobbes supposes men to be necessarily
competitors. If men's powers be opposed, one must admit
the necessity of struggle and enmity among them. If the
state of nature were a state of plenty, then men might
refrain from hostility. But given that a man, in order to
survive, may need some object which is also needed by his
fellows, then competition necessarily follows. Enmity
arising out of competition leads to enmity arising out of
diffidence.

It is in the interest of potential competitors to

2 Ibid., Ch.XI, p.50.
3 Ibid., Ch.XIII, p.65.
forestall one another from the outset...."and this is no more than his own conservation requireth, and is generally allowed".\(^4\) This explains the conversion of limited enmity into unlimited enmity. A further source of conflict is found in the desire for glory, whereby man must assure himself of his ability to maintain himself, and convince others of this ability. Thus, there are three principal causes of quarrels among men: competition for the means of satisfying their appetites, diffidence or mistrust which moves them to attack others for fear of being attacked by them, and glory which makes them attack for the sake of reputation.

This, then, is the state of nature. It is not, of course, a historical hypothesis, but an inference from men's passions to illustrate how they would behave if the restraint of government were absent. The state of nature is a thought-experiment in the Paduan tradition. Here,

\(^4\) Ibid., Ch.XIII, p.64.
then, is the state of anarchy into which human society tends to drift if left to take its natural course. In *De Cive*, Hobbes argues that since a man can no more help in trying to avoid death than a stone can help falling, it is not against reason to avoid death, and so every man has a 'natural right' or 'blameless liberty' of doing whatever he judges necessary for his preservation.⁵ In the *Leviathan*, the 'right of nature' is simply defined as follows: "The Right of Nature, which writers commonly call jus naturale is the liberty each man hath, to use his own power as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life; and consequently, of doing anything, which in his own judgement and reason, he shall conceive to be the aptest means thereunto".⁶


⁶ *Leviathan*; op.cit., Ch.XIV, p.66.
The right of nature is not, however, a claim which must, or ought, to be recognised by others. The right of nature entails no correlative duties. In other words, no one has the duty to allow one what he considers necessary to his preservation. The right of nature is what men are at liberty to do in order to preserve their lives.

Thus man has a right to do anything which he thinks will conduce to his preservation; and this right has no limit, if he cannot trust others to live and let live. Thus, in the state of nature, every man has a right to all things. "It is consequent, also to the same condition, that there be no Propriety, no Dominion, no 'Mine' and 'Thine' distinct; but onely that to be every man's, that he can get; and for so long as he can keep it."7 As long as such a condition endures, "There can be no security to any man".8

7 Ibid., Ch.XIII, p.66.
8 Ibid., Ch.XIV, p.67.
The desire for self-preservation implies an aversion from death. But the state of war and anarchy into which men are led by their natural desires, is a condition where they are unlikely to avoid death for long. This motive, the fear of death, which arises in the state of nature is the most urgent of the passions which incline men to peace. Man, from his experience "of the war of all against all" comes to the rational conclusion that peace is the primary requisite for preservation. Since men can reason and can acquire knowledge of consequences, they can discover the means to peace; they can imagine rules whose general observance would give them peace. And because they desire the end, which is peace, they desire the means to that end; they desire that the rules be generally observed. Hobbes calls these rules "convenient articles of peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement".  

9 Ibid., Ch.XIII, p.66.
the means to secure our fundamental aim of self-preservation, Hobbes calls a 'precept' or 'general rule' or 'theorem' of reason. Hobbes calls them the "laws of nature".

Hobbes gives to the traditional language of the laws of nature a quite new sense. He treats the laws of nature as 'conclusions' which men reach about "what conduceth to the conservation and defence of themselves". If men, having the passions they do have, are to avoid the dangers which these passions create for them, they must be able to reach conclusions about what makes for their conservation; they must use their reason. Thus, the laws of nature are 'dictates of reason'—they are rules which only creatures capable of reasoning could think of or could want to see observed. These rules, therefore, are man-made; they are human solutions to human problems. A law of nature is defined as "a precept or general rule, \(^{10}\) or "

\(^{10}\) Ibid., Ch.XIV, p.66.

\(^{11}\) Ibid., Ch.XV, p.83.
found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life".\textsuperscript{12} In Kantian terms, Hobbes’s laws of nature are hypothetical assertoric imperatives, rules prescribing the means necessary to an end all men desire, viz, their preservation.

The first and fundamental law of nature is "that every man ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it" or more simply, it is "to seek peace, and follow it".\textsuperscript{13} The particular methods whereby we may carry out the first and fundamental law of nature, namely, to seek peace, are listed by Hobbes as further laws of nature; they are means of peace, which is itself a means to self-preservation. In order to achieve peace, the second law of nature declares that man must lay down his natural right to all things. This is done, in \textit{De Cive}, when each man makes a conditional donation of right.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., Ch.XIV, p.66.

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p.67.
to a third party: "I convey my right on this party, upon condition that you pass yours to the same".\textsuperscript{14} The result of this is that "each of them obligeth himself by contract to every one of the rest, not to resist the will of that one man, or council, to which he hath submitted himself".\textsuperscript{15} Therefore, if peace is to be achieved for purposes of self-preservation, everyone must divest himself of most of his natural rights. Since covenants are necessary to achieve peace, it follows that the third law of nature is "That men performe their Covenants made".\textsuperscript{18} The performing of a covenant is a just action, not performing is unjust.

In \textit{Leviathan}, it is added, by this covenant, each authorizes the third party so that each becomes the author of what the sovereign or representative does in his name. This Hobbes calls the origin of a Commonwealth

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{14} \textit{De Cive}; op.cit., Ch.VI, p.105.
\item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid., Ch.V, p.88.
\item \textsuperscript{18} \textit{Leviathan}; op.cit., Ch.XV, p.74.
\end{itemize}
by institution; in a Commonwealth by acquisition, those who are in the power of some other (eg. the victor in war) promise to obey him in order that he may spare their lives. But in both sorts of cases, the sovereign is a party to the covenant only in so far as he accepts the donation of right and trusts his subjects to obey him; strictly speaking, he does not make a covenant with them and so the covenant lays no obligation on him towards his subjects, and since injustice is defined as breach of covenant, he cannot treat them unjustly. He does have duties, falling under the laws of nature, to God, but as far as his subjects are concerned, his rights are absolute. Hobbes distinguishes sovereignty by acquisition from sovereignty by institution only to assimilate them to each other. The result— a sovereign—is the same regardless of the motivation of the subjects.

The makers of the covenant lay down their natural right in favour of the man or assembly chosen to rule over them. Now, it is for the sovereign alone to
interpret the laws of nature. This is the sense in which, for Hobbes, the laws of nature and the civil law contain one another. Subjects are committed by covenant to accept the sovereign's interpretation of natural law as alone valid.

They must never use the laws of nature as an excuse for not obeying the civil laws. For them to make such use of it is unreasonable because it frustrates their very purpose in instituting a sovereign or submitting to one. That purpose was to achieve peace, and the condition of peace is that there should be only one interpreter, maker and enforcer of law. Thus, though the sovereign is obliged to observe the laws of nature, the subjects have no recourse to that law against the sovereign.

The sovereign must have all the authority he needs to carry out his office, which is to maintain peace; and must, therefore, have a monopoly of it, for if anyone else has any, he may use it against the sovereign and so disturb the peace. Nothing binds him if it curtails the
He says the sovereign is authorised from below, from those he is to govern, i.e. he is given the 'right' to act in their behalf in order to secure peace and security. Then he says he must also be given the means, the 'power', to exercise, to put into practice, his authority. Sovereignty is the full reach of power needed to keep the peace. There must be no sharing of supreme authority among several, and no appeal to old customs or fundamental laws of the Commonwealth against the sovereign.

Law is the command of the sovereign, who is, therefore, not subject to it, and whose present will is the sole source of its validity, as his intention in framing it is the sole criterion for its interpretation. The liberty of citizens within the Commonwealth consists simply (a) in retaining certain rights that are inalienable (to resist death, bodily harm and imprisonment) and (b) in the silence of the law i.e., being free to do those acts that the sovereign has not forbidden.

A Christian Church and a Christian State are one and the same body; of that body the sovereign is the head. The sovereign has, therefore, the right to interpret scripture, to decide religious disputes, and to determine the form of public worship. Thus there is to be no
possibility of conflict between the demands of God and the political sovereign.

Hobbes is unmistakeably emphatic on the point that the sovereign shall declare what shall be right for his subjects. The sovereign, if he is to maintain the peace, must have authority to forbid the teaching and publishing of dangerous beliefs and to require the teaching of beliefs conducive to order, and it is for him alone or those authorised by him to decide what those beliefs are.

The right of resistance is confined by Hobbes to the right of self-defence. But this right of self-defence in no way abridges the right of the sovereign to kill, wound or imprison a subject who has deserved punishment, nor the obligation of other subjects to assist the sovereign in carrying out his sentence.

Thus, for all intents and purposes, the sovereign is the soul, the person, the representative, the will, the conscience of the Commonwealth; i.e., the sovereign is the Commonwealth.
It is no wonder that the common opinion of Hobbes among many 19th century political writers is that of a crude materialist presenting an apology for a deplorably absolutist government. The *Leviathan* has often been dismissed as a book written to justify a particular and temporal purpose—to defend Stuart absolutism. His enemies accused him of writing it "to flatter Oliver". Both accusations are unjust. Hobbes pleased neither party, for his purpose was to carry out what he calls "the first and fundamental Law of Nature, which is to seek peace and follow it". His account of the state was meant to be essentially scientific, deduced from the eternal nature of the individual human being, depending upon immutable laws of nature. His principles were for urgent immediate application, only because they had been so lamentably neglected. They were as true of the states of Greece and Rome as of the modern nation state. The

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17 *Leviathan*; op.cit., Ch.XIV, p.67.
main argument of the *Leviathan* is meant to be of universal validity.

Hobbes's political philosophy is designed to meet a problem of real life. Hobbes's problem is to discover how to maintain a stable ordered society and how to avoid disorder or civil war. To deal with the problem scientifically, he must find the causes of each of these situations. The cause of ordered society is the desire for security; the main causes of disorder are competition, distrust and 'glory' (enjoyment of power). Perhaps the most significant part of Hobbes's political theory is his belief that all human societies are problematic, rocked by continual threats of instability and dissolution. Hobbes seeks to demonstrate how the individual, along with his fellows, seeks to build and uplift this social order in his own perceived interest as well as in the collective interest of the human community.

Hobbes, despite his advocacy of absolute state
control, does not belittle the role of the individual in political society, nor is he antagonistic towards the human individual. The passions which Hobbes ascribes to individuals in the state of nature may be treated as destructive passions which are strong in them in all societies. It is these destructive passions which need to be kept in check by law and government. The state is that condition of human affairs which enables men to overcome the obstacles to their security which make their natural condition one of permanent war. Hobbes is not concerned about reforming particular laws and institutions. Rather, he is concerned about convincing us that if individuals are to have full security, if it is to be made possible for them to observe the basic rules for peace, they must live in communities where all authority belongs to one person or assembly of persons. Ultimately, he seeks to direct how the individual can best live with his fellow-beings in peace and security, since he cannot live alone, in danger and insecurity. Therefore, Hobbes's prime
concern was the individual and his security. The subsequent pages seek to explore this aspect of his political thought in greater detail.