

Biographical Briefing on Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes was born in England in 1588. This was a time of much social unrest in England, and Hobbes later wrote that "fear and I were born twins." Hobbes' father was a clergyman, and Hobbes was educated in the classics at Oxford University. He traveled many times to meet writers, philosophers, and scientists of other European countries and to study different forms of government. The English Civil War prompted Hobbes to flee to Paris and to become a political philosopher. In 1651 Hobbes wrote his most famous work *Leviathan*. In it, he argued that people are naturally wicked and cannot be trusted to govern. Therefore, Hobbes believed that an absolute monarchy—a government that gives all power to a king or queen—is best.

- **What was happening in England when Hobbes was born?**
- **Where did Hobbes go to study government?**
- **What was the topic of Hobbes' book *Leviathan*?**

Hobbes' political philosophy is based on his idea that humans are essentially selfish creatures. He believed that all people are equal, and that this equality leads to competition and violence. In *Leviathan* Hobbes wrote that humans are driven by a "perpetual and restless desire [for] power...that ceases only in death," and that the natural condition of humankind is a situation of "a war of every man against every man." Because he thought that people act in their own selfish interests if they are left alone, Hobbes did not believe that people should be trusted to make their own decisions. He also felt that nations, like people, are selfishly motivated and in a constant battle for power and wealth. To further prove his point, Hobbes wrote, "If men are not naturally in a state of war, why do they always carry arms and why do they have keys to lock their doors?"

- **What did Hobbes believe to be humankind's main characteristics?**
- **According to Hobbes, why should people not be trusted to make decisions?**
- **What evidence did Hobbes use to prove his point that countries are in a battle for wealth and power?**

Governments were created, according to Hobbes, to protect people from their own selfishness and evil. He believed that it is not possible for people to have both freedom and peace, since the state of freedom is a state of unlimited greed and war. Joining together to form societies is thus humankind's only possibility for peace. The best government is one that has the great power of a *leviathan*, or sea monster. Hobbes believed in the rule of a king or queen because he felt a country needs an authority figure to provide direction and leadership. Because the people are only interested in promoting their own interests, Hobbes believed that democracy-allowing citizens to vote for government leaders-would never work. Hobbes believed that without a strong government, people experience "continual fear and danger of violent death" and lives that are "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

- **For what purpose did Hobbes think governments were created?**
- **Why did Hobbes believe in the rule of a king or queen?**
- **Why would democracy not work, according to Hobbes?**

Hobbes reasoned that all people should voluntarily choose to relinquish (give up) their rights to the leviathan, who then would protect people from one another and ensure peace. This idea was not the same as divine right-the belief that monarchs are chosen by God and thus people do not have the right to question their rule. Instead, Hobbes believed that a ruler's absolute power comes not from God, but from people rationally deciding that this is in their best interests. Hobbes considered that the ruler could abuse his or her absolute power and become cruel and unfair. However, this problem could be lessened, Hobbes believed, by appointing a diverse group of representatives to present the problems of the common people to the leviathan. These representatives would only have the power to present opinions, since all final decisions would be made by the leviathan.

- **For Hobbes, what was the proper role in government for the people?**
- **Where does the leviathan get his or her power?**
- **How did Hobbes propose to lessen the possibility that the leviathan might abuse his or her power?**