

Hobbes

Historical Background: A World in Chaos

Let's dive into the **world that shaped Hobbes**—a time of **chaos, war, and revolution**, where **fear wasn't just a feeling, it was a way of life**. Hobbes himself once said, "*Fear and I were born together,*" and trust me, he meant every word of it.

Imagine England in the 1600s. The **Spanish Armada** had threatened invasion, **The Reformation** had shaken the foundations of faith, and the **Puritan Revolution of 1648** had torn the country apart. The old world of kings and churches was crumbling, and people didn't know who to trust anymore.

The **Reformation**, led by **Martin Luther**, challenged the **authority of the Roman Catholic Church**. No longer was the Pope the unquestioned gatekeeper of God. Luther said: *read the scriptures yourself, find your own connection with the divine.*

This **split Christianity** into **Catholic and Protestant camps**, fueling political and religious unrest across Europe.

Now zoom into **post-Reformation England**. The country was divided:

- On one side, you had the **Royalists—mainline Protestants** who supported **absolute monarchy**. This is where **Hobbes stood**. He believed that only a **strong, undivided authority**—a Leviathan—could save society from tearing itself apart.
- On the other side were the **Puritans**, the radicals. They supported **limited monarchy, parliamentary authority**, and even the **right to resist** a ruler who broke the social contract. They were the voices of **rebellion and revolution**.

So, Hobbes wasn't just writing in theory—he was responding to a world **on fire**. And for him, **fear**

wasn't weakness. It was a survival instinct—and the very foundation of order.

Influence of Scientific Revolution

Now let's talk about **how the Scientific Revolution lit a fire in Hobbes's mind**—a shift so profound that it transformed the way he saw not just science, but **human nature** and **politics** itself.

The world was moving away from the **Renaissance belief** that **wisdom lies in ancient texts**, in the authority of Aristotle or the Church. Hobbes **rejected that idea completely**. He didn't want to blindly follow what old books or priests said—he wanted **proof, logic, and clarity**.

Who inspired him? Think of **St. Thomas Aquinas**, who tried to reconcile faith and reason—and then, even more importantly, **Galileo**.

Galileo had shown something revolutionary:

That **the universe could be understood through observation**, not through theology.

That **we don't need teleology** (the idea that everything has a divine purpose) to explain nature.

This blew Hobbes's mind. If **planets** could be explained through **motion and matter**, why not **people and politics**?

And that's what Hobbes did—he built a **mechanistic view of humans and society**. He saw humans as **bodies in motion**, driven not by souls or divine goals, but by **appetites and aversions**, by **fear and desire**, just like machines.

So the **Scientific Revolution** didn't just give **Hobbes a method—it gave him a worldview**. He wanted to build a **science of politics**, grounded in **observation**, like physics—**not in theology**, not in morality, but in **cold, clear logic**.

In short: Hobbes wanted to be the **Galileo of politics**.

Human Nature: Pleasure and Pain

This is where Hobbes becomes truly fascinating—**his view of human nature**, built like a scientist, but interpreted like a philosopher of power and survival!

Imagine, Hobbes looks at a human being not as a divine soul or a moral creature, but as a **material body in motion**—just like a billiard ball on a table. And what moves us? Just **two basic forces**:

- **Pleasure**, which causes **attraction**
- **Pain**, which causes **aversion**

That's it. That's our engine.

We are constantly **seeking what brings us pleasure** and **avoiding what causes pain**—whether it's food, safety, respect, or power. This is not a moral failure, Hobbes insists—it's **natural**.

Now here's the kicker: Hobbes says **every human is self-regarding**.

You don't know what's in someone else's heart. You can't feel their pain or share their happiness. So you assume they are just like you—**self-interested**, always chasing their own good.

That's why Hobbes calls humans **utilitarian** (we calculate gain and loss) and **possessive individuals** (we cling to what's ours and want more).

You might ask, "Is this selfishness wrong?"

Hobbes says, **No!** It's not sin—it's **science**. This is how nature has built us. We're not angels, we're animals in motion.

And our ultimate goal? **Felicity**—not a spiritual bliss, but a **constant seeking of pleasure**, a chase that never truly ends.

So in Hobbes's world, **individualism is not a curse—it's a condition**.

We don't choose it—we are **born into it**, driven by the gears of **pleasure and pain**, just like all other matter in motion.

Social Contract: From Chaos to Order

the **heart of Hobbes's political theory**—his **Social Contract**—which transforms raw chaos into civil order. And it all starts with *individualism*.

Hobbes was writing in a time when a new class was rising—the **bourgeoisie**, the **middle class**—merchants, traders, lawyers, thinkers. These weren't nobles or clergy, but **self-made individuals**, hungry for property, stability, and freedom from feudal chaos.

And Hobbes? He **understood them perfectly**.

He said: *The individual is central*. The **part comes before the whole**—a classic idea from the **sophists**, those early Greek thinkers who argued that **morality begins with the self**.

No wonder the political theorist **Sabine** called Hobbes "*the greatest of all individualists*."

Hobbes wasn't interested in kingdoms or gods. He was interested in *you*. And *me*. Each person as an **atom of self-interest**, pleasure-seeking, pain-fearing.

But here's the problem: If every person is chasing their own good, what do we get?

Chaos. War. Fear.

Hobbes described this as the **State of Nature**—a condition of constant conflict.

And in that world, there's no security, no art, no science, no civilization.

As he famously put it, life is "**solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short**."

So, what's the way out?

Hobbes imagines a brilliant idea—the **Social Contract**.

Each individual says: "*I will give up some of my freedom if others do too. Let's appoint a ruler—not because he's divine—but because we choose him to give us peace.*"

And here's the twist.

CB MacPherson, a 20th-century theorist, points out this irony:

Hobbes **starts as an individualist**, celebrating personal liberty and self-interest...

...but he **ends as an absolutist**, giving **total power** to the sovereign. Why?

Because for Hobbes, only an **absolute authority**—a **Leviathan**—can **hold the selfish chaos in check**.

The king or government becomes the artificial soul of society, keeping us from tearing each other apart.

So, in Hobbes's passionate logic:

Freedom isn't found in total liberty—it's found in a strong order that keeps liberty possible.

We choose **authority not to oppress us, but to save us from ourselves.**

That's the beauty—and the paradox—of Hobbes:

He begins with **individual liberty**, and ends by making the **strongest case for absolute power**, all in the name of peace.

State of Nature: Brutal and Fearful

the **dark and stormy core** of Hobbes's political thought—his unforgettable vision of the **State of Nature**.

Imagine a world with **no government**, no police, no laws.

In this world, every human being enjoys **absolute liberty**—you can do whatever you want.

And not just that, you also have **absolute equality**—no one is naturally more powerful than another.

Sounds like freedom, right? Like a utopia?

But here's where Hobbes jolts us awake.

He says: *"This is not paradise. This is hell."*

Why? Because when everyone is absolutely free **and** equally dangerous,

everyone becomes a threat to everyone else.

There's no trust, no safety, no justice—just **suspicion, competition, and constant fear.**

This, Hobbes says, is the **state of war**—not necessarily bullets flying, but something worse:

A condition of "every man against every man."

And what kind of life exists in such a world?

He answers with five devastating words:

"Nasty, poor, brutish, and short."

Let's unpack that:

- **Nasty** – because there's no kindness or compassion when survival is at stake.
- **Poor** – because there's no time to create wealth or culture or science.
- **Brutish** – because we act like animals, ruled by fear and appetite.
- **Short** – because no life is safe, no future secure.

Why does it turn so ugly?

Because of what Hobbes calls a **security dilemma**:

If I build a fence to feel safe, you feel threatened and build a wall.

If I carry a stick, you carry a sword.

What gives **pleasure** to one becomes the **pain** of another.

Peace becomes impossible when survival is the only goal.

In Hobbes's world, this isn't evil—it's **natural**.

He doesn't blame human beings for being selfish—he says that **self-interest is our default setting**.

But **without a common power to keep us in awe**, we spiral into violence and fear.

So what's his solution?

That's where the **social contract** and the **Leviathan** come in—but we'll get to that next.

For now, just remember:

Hobbes's state of nature is not a myth. It's a **mirror**—held up to any society that forgets the value of law, order, and common authority.

And he asks us: *"Do you want freedom that kills... or order that protects?"*

Fear and Authority

the **heart of Hobbes's solution**—how **fear**, especially the **fear of violent death**, becomes the **foundation of political authority**.

Imagine again the chaos of the **state of nature**—a world where **everyone is a threat**, and **life is nasty, brutish, and short**.

Now pause and ask:

What's the one thing every human fears above all?

Death. Violent death.

Because, for Hobbes, the **loss of life is the end of happiness**.

There is no heaven or moral afterlife in Hobbes's political theory—**this life is all we have**.

So naturally, when people are overwhelmed by this fear, they start to ask:

"Is there a way out of this madness?"

And Hobbes says: **Yes—through consent**.

People come together and **agree**—they **contract**—to surrender their natural liberty to a higher authority in exchange for one thing:

Security.

Thus, they create the **State**—a kind of **security agency** whose only job is to **maintain peace**, **prevent chaos**, and ensure **internal and external order**.

This fear-born consent gives birth to what Hobbes famously calls the **Leviathan**—a sovereign so powerful that everyone is too afraid to disobey.

But here's the fascinating twist—

This is **not a moral or religious state**.

Hobbes's **Leviathan is a police state**, but a **minimal state** in function.

It does **not interfere in your religion**, it **doesn't preach morality**, it **doesn't care who you worship** or what you believe.

Its only mission?

"To keep men from killing each other."

Think of it like this:

You're not giving up freedom for nothing—you're trading **anarchy for assurance, chaos for contract**.

And Hobbes tells us, bluntly:

"It's not love of peace that unites men, it's fear of violent death."

So, to sum it up like a passionate teacher would:

Fear is not weakness—it's wisdom.

It is this fear that **binds us, civilizes us**, and gives rise to **authority**.

The Leviathan is not your parent or priest—it is your **guardian** from the war of all against all.

And as long as it stays in its lane—ensuring safety and not meddling in your soul—it earns your obedience.

The Social Contract and the Leviathan

We've seen how Hobbes paints the **state of nature** as a terrifying jungle. In that chaos, every man is free—but that freedom is deadly. So, what do people do?

They **make a deal**. A **Social Contract**.

But Hobbes isn't naïve. He warns us:

"Covenants without swords are but words."

What does that mean?

Simple—a **contract without enforcement is useless**. Promises don't protect you; **power does**.

So, Hobbes says: **Let's create an enforcer. A power so mighty that no one would dare break the contract.**

Enter the **Leviathan**—his famous metaphor for the **sovereign state**.

Imagine a giant made of all the people's wills and fears, fused together into one supreme authority.

Now here's the shocking part—

In this contract, **man surrenders all rights, except one:**

The right to life—the right to protect oneself from death.

That, Hobbes says, **can never be surrendered**, because it's part of our natural instinct.

So what does the **state** get in return?

Absolute power.

Not just strong power—**absolute**.

It **makes the laws, judges disputes, commands armies, and ensures peace.**

There's **no separation of powers**, no checks and balances.

Why?

Because if the sovereign is weak, we fall back into the chaos of the state of nature.

For Hobbes, **anything is better than anarchy**—even authoritarianism.

So the Leviathan is not a tyrant for cruelty's sake—It's a **necessary monster**, born out of fear, kept alive by obedience, and justified by the single goal of **self-preservation**.

To put it like Hobbes might:

"Better one iron fist than a thousand daggers in the dark."

And that's the genius (and controversy) of Hobbes: He builds **authority not on divine right**, not on virtue—but on **fear, consent, and the logic of survival**.

That is the social contract. That is Leviathan.

Law vs Liberty:

Hobbes's world of **Law vs Liberty**—where words like *freedom* aren't romantic slogans, but cold calculations for survival.

Hobbes tells us something radical:

Liberty is where the law is silent.

This is what we now call **negative liberty**.

He's not talking about freedom *to do good* or *to fulfill your potential*.

No. Hobbes defines liberty simply as:

"The absence of external impediments to motion."

That means: if **no one is stopping you**, you are free.

So, if there's **no law** stopping you from speaking, walking, or traveling—then that's liberty.

But once **law enters**, liberty shrinks—**because the law limits action**.

Now here's the key:

Hobbes doesn't care about **internal blockages**—like disease, fear, addiction, or ignorance.

To him, if your legs are broken and you can't walk, that's tragic, but it's **not a loss of liberty**.

Why?

Because **no one else** is stopping you. It's not an *external obstacle*.

So when Hobbes talks about **freedom**, he's focused on things like:

- **Freedom of movement**
- **Freedom of settlement**
- **Freedom from interference**

Not because they sound nice—but because they're **essential to self-preservation**.

If you can't move, you can't escape danger. If you can't settle, you can't survive.

And here's the paradox:

Hobbes creates a **state with absolute power**, yet still values liberty—

But only where **law is silent**.

So, **law and liberty are not enemies**, but they must be carefully balanced.

Too much law, and you're a prisoner.

Too little law, and you're dead.

Hobbes would say:

"True liberty lives in the shadow of law, not in its absence."

That's his cold, brilliant realism.

Hobbes on Law and Society

Hobbes on Law and Society—where morality takes the back seat, and **order through reason** drives the engine.

First, Hobbes **doesn't trust natural law**—you know, those universal moral rules based on reason and ethics. Why?

Because **reason is weak** in the face of **human passions**—greed, fear, pride, anger.

He saw what those passions did during the English Civil War. He saw **chaos**, and he understood one truth:

"Only power can tame passion."

So Hobbes champions something else:

Positive Law — not what's "right," but what's *commanded by the state*.

Here's the formula for Hobbes:

Law = Command of the sovereign

Not of God.

Not of nature.

Not of morality.

But of the **state**.

This is revolutionary. Hobbes shifts the foundation of law from divine authority to **human agreement**—to a **contract**.

And that leads us to society itself.

For Hobbes, both **society and state are not natural**. We're not born into harmony with others.

In fact, left to our "natural" instincts, we'd be in constant war—"every man against every man."

So how do we escape this?

We **choose** order.

We make a **rational contract**—we give up some freedoms and create a **sovereign** with the power to

enforce peace.

This is the famous **Social Contract**.

Now, the **Constitution**—for Hobbes—is not a moral code.

It's not sacred.

It's simply a **symbol of our freedom of choice**.

We chose order. We chose authority.

And in doing so, we built society.

To Hobbes, the state isn't your priest or your philosopher.

It's a **security agency**.

An institution of **utility**, not of virtue.

And that's why:

The state gives law. Law gives order. Order gives peace. Peace gives life.

That's the Hobbesian chain.

No idealism. Just pure realism—with reason as the only candle in a dark, stormy world.

Hobbes and Modernity

the **crossroads of history**, where medieval authority begins to fade and modern political thought is just being born.

Picture a giant gate—the **Gate of Modernity**.

Standing just beside it, hesitating to step in, is **Jean Bodin**.

He's progressive for his time—yes.

He **believes in sovereignty**, and he tells us:

"The state governs only secular life."

Religion? That's still the Church's domain.

Bodin wants a **strong ruler**, but he won't cross the line into **religious authority**.

Now here comes **Machiavelli**, bold and razor-sharp.

He **rips apart the old medieval structure**, where authority was scattered between kings, popes, and feudal lords.

He **separates state and religion**, not out of atheism, but to make the state **effective, united**,

and powerful.

He says:

“Let religion serve politics—not the other way around.”

It's Machiavelli who first throws a **spotlight on secular power.**

But then...

Enter Hobbes.

Not standing beside the gate like Bodin.
Not just pulling religion away like Machiavelli.
Hobbes **marches through the gate into full modernity.**

He goes **further than both.**

For Hobbes, in a world torn by **religious wars**, the solution is **not balancing state and church**—but putting one **firmly under the other.**

He says:

“Let the Church be subject to the Sovereign.”
The **state controls religion**—because religion, like everything else, must not threaten **order.**

No room for divided loyalties.

No bishop above the king.

No pope beyond the law.

Hobbes says the sovereign decides **what is lawful in the Church**—because only the **state** can preserve peace.

So while:

- **Bodin** protected religion from the state,
- **Machiavelli** separated the two,
- **Hobbes** united them—but **under one ruler.**

In this, Hobbes **didn't just knock at modernity's door—he built the road to it.**

And he did it with reason, fear, and one towering idea:

Peace needs power. Power needs unity. And unity needs the Church to obey the Crown.

Legacy of Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes is not just a philosopher—but a **revolutionary mind** whose shadow still stretches over how we understand politics today.

Modern Relevance

Let's now bring **Hobbes out of the 17th century** and walk him through the news headlines of the 21st century. You'll be surprised how many modern events **echo his core ideas**—fear, self-interest, social contracts, the need for a strong authority, and the trade-off between liberty and security.

Here are some **recent real-world events** that reflect Hobbesian thought:

1. COVID-19 Pandemic: Trade-off Between Liberty and Security

During the global pandemic, governments **imposed lockdowns, restricted movement, monitored personal data**, and even **curbed free speech** in some cases.

- Citizens **voluntarily surrendered liberties** (e.g., staying indoors, mandatory vaccinations) in exchange for **health and safety.**
- Hobbes would say:
“People feared death, so they obeyed authority—Leviathan did its job.”

2. Russia-Ukraine War: The Hobbesian World of International Relations

In the absence of a world government, states behave like individuals in the **state of nature**—**driven by power and fear.**

- Russia invaded Ukraine for strategic security, not moral reasons.
- The **international system is anarchic**—just like Hobbes described.
- NATO's actions are also guided by **collective security**, not idealism.

This is **classic Hobbesian Realism** in action:

"No one trusts anyone, so everyone arms themselves."

3. Rise of Authoritarianism Globally

In many countries—Turkey, China, Hungary, even some democratic states—we see:

- **Strongman leaders**
- **Weakening of democratic institutions**
- **Surveillance states**

Why? Because many people **prefer order and stability** over uncertain freedoms.

As Hobbes said:

"In the absence of order, men will trade liberty for life."

His fear-based political logic is still the **silent justification for modern autocracies**.

4. Mass Surveillance and Data Collection (China's Social Credit System, NSA, Pegasus)

Hobbes believed in a **powerful state that keeps order**, even through **monitoring**.

- China's **social credit system** tracks citizen behavior to maintain social harmony.
- The **Pegasus spyware** controversy in India and elsewhere shows how far states go to manage **internal threats**.

Hobbes would argue:

"Liberty must bend to peace and order."

In the face of rising digital threats, governments **justify surveillance** as necessary for the greater good—just as Hobbes envisioned.

5. Refugee Crisis and National Borders

The movement of refugees (Syria, Afghanistan, Sudan) has caused **tensions** in many countries.

- Local populations often **fear economic and cultural disruption**.

- Governments **tighten borders and migration policies**.

This reflects the **Hobbesian security dilemma**:

"When my pleasure (asylum) is your pain (economic fear), conflict follows unless there's a strong authority."

Conclusion

Hobbes's world may seem bleak—but **real**.

Wherever fear rules human hearts, and chaos threatens order, his ideas rise again.

His vision of **absolute authority, negative liberty, and security through power** remains disturbingly relevant—not because we want it, but because we keep proving him right.

As long as human beings fear each other more than they trust,

Hobbes will never be outdated.

Previous Year Questions

1. "State of Nature as State of War (Hobbes)." 2023, 10
2. "Individualism is inherent in Hobbes' absolutist ideology." Comment. 2022, 15
3. Comment on: Hobbesian notion of Political Obligation. 2017, 10
4. Comment on: "How would I and my fellow human beings behave if we were to find ourselves in a state of nature, and what does this behaviour tell us about our innate predispositions?" (Thomas Hobbes) 2016, 10
5. Comment on: "Covenants without swords are but words and of no strength to secure a man at all." (Hobbes). 2013, 10
6. Comment on: Hobbes as an individualist. 2011, 20