

Thomas Hobbes

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

born April 5, 1588, Westport, Wiltshire, England
died December 4, 1679, Hardwick Hall, Derbyshire



Thomas Hobbes, detail of an oil painting by John Michael Wright; in the National Portrait Gallery, ...
Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London

English philosopher and political theorist, best known for his publications on individual security and the social contract, which are important statements of both the nascent ideas of liberalism and the long-standing assumptions of political absolutism characteristic of the times.

Early life

Hobbes's father, a vicar, was "a choleric man," and he disappeared after engaging in a brawl at his own church door and abandoned his three children to the care of his brother, a well-to-do glover in Malmesbury. When he was four years old Hobbes was sent to school at Westport, then to a private school, and finally, at 15, to Magdalen Hall in Oxford, where he devoted most of his time to books of travel and the study of maps. Upon his graduation in 1608, Hobbes became a private tutor to William Cavendish, afterward 2nd earl of Devonshire, and so began a lifelong connection with the Cavendish family. He grew very fond of his pupil, who was only a little younger than himself. In 1610 Hobbes visited France and Italy with his pupil. There he probably found that the Aristotelian foundations that he had been taught at Oxford were beginning to crumble before the discoveries of Galileo and of Johannes Kepler, who formulated the laws of planetary motion. On returning home he decided to make himself a classical scholar. The chief fruit of Hobbes's classical studies was his translation of Thucydides. Its publication in 1629 was inspired by the troubles of the time, for Hobbes saw in the fate of ancient Athens a salutary warning against democracy. It was also in that year that Hobbes went abroad again, as travelling companion to the son of Sir Gervase Clifton.

The Elements

The turning point in his intellectual history occurred at about this time, when, in Euclid's *Elements*, he traced the proofs back through proposition after proposition and was thus demonstratively convinced of their truth.

In 1630 Hobbes was recalled from Paris to teach the young earl of Devonshire, William Cavendish, son of his late patron. Hobbes himself related how he was in a

