

political philosophy

Encyclopædia Britannica Article

The history of political philosophy in the West to the end of the 19th century → The 16th to the 18th centuries → Hobbes

The 17th-century English political philosopher Thomas Hobbes, who spent his life as a tutor and companion to great noblemen, was a writer of genius with a greater power of phrase than any other English political philosopher. He was not, as he is sometimes misrepresented, a prophet of "bourgeois" individualism, advocating free competition in a capitalistic free market. On the contrary, he was writing in a preindustrial, if increasingly commercial, society and did not much admire wealth as such but rather "honours." He was socially conservative and anxious to give a new philosophical sanction to a hierarchical, if businesslike, commonwealth in which family authority was most important.

Philosophically, Hobbes was influenced by nominalist scholastic philosophy, which had discarded Thomist metaphysics and had accepted a strict limitation of mind. He therefore based his conclusions on the rudimentary mathematical physics and psychology of his day and aimed at practical objectives—order and stability. He believed that the fundamental physical law of life was motion and that the predominant human impulses were fear and, among those above the poverty level, pride and vanity. Men, Hobbes argued, are strictly conditioned and limited by these laws, and he tried to create a science of politics that would reflect them. "The skill of making, and maintaining Common-wealths," therefore, "consisteth in certain Rules, as doth Arithmetique and Geometry; not (as Tennis play) on Practise onely: which Rules, neither poor men have the leisure, nor men that have had the leisure, have hitherto had the curiosity, or the method to find out."

Hobbes ignores the classical and Thomist concepts of a transcendent law of nature, itself reflecting divine law, and of a "chain of being" whereby the universe is held harmoniously together and, following Descartes's practical method of investigation, states plainly that power creates law, not law power. For law is law only if it can be enforced, and the price of security is one supreme sovereign public power. For, without it, such is the competitive nature of men, that once more than subsistence has been achieved they are actuated by vanity and ambition, and there is a war of all against all. The true law of nature is self-preservation, he argues, which can be achieved only if the citizens make a compact among themselves to transfer their individual power to the "leviathan" (ruler), who alone can preserve them in security. Such a commonwealth has no intrinsic supernatural or moral sanction: it derives its original authority from the people and can command loyalty only so long as it succeeds in keeping the peace. He thus uses both the old concepts of natural law and contract, often invoked to justify resistance to authority, as a sanction for it.

Hobbes, like Machiavelli, starts from an assumption of basic human folly, competitiveness, and depravity, and contradicts Aristotle's assumption that man is by nature a "political animal." On the contrary, he is naturally antisocial; and, even when men meet for business and profit, only "a certain market-fellowship" is engendered. All society is only for gain or glory, and the only true equality among men is their power to kill each other. Hobbes sees and desires no other equality. Indeed, he specifically discouraged "men of low degree from a saucy behaviour

