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Born near Malmesbury, the early death of his father, an impoverished local vicar, brought young Thomas Hobbes under the care of his wealthy uncle. At the age of fourteen, he entered Magdalen College, Oxford, and took his B.A. five years later. In 1608, he acquired a post as a tutor to the son of William Cavendish, Earl of Devonshire. This gave him time to devote himself to the Classics. Disenchanted by Aristotelian acrobatics, Hobbes eagerly embraced the historian Thucydides (whose book he translated and published in 1628). After his first tour of Europe in 1610, he made the acquaintance of Francis Bacon. However, he only became converted to the scientific outlook in the 1630s, after being seduced by Euclid's Geometry and hobnobbing with European scientists (particularly, the circle of Abbé Mersenne) during a tour of the continent.

Hobbes was particularly entranced by Galileo's reverse vision of dynamics. Contrary to Buridan, Galileo claimed that the natural state of objects was one of motion, rather than rest. Things, he argued always moved unless something stopped them. After meeting Galileo in 1636, Hobbes sought to apply this idea to a comprehensive social philosophy. He envisioned this in three parts. In the first part, of Body, he would relate the general laws of motion; in the second, of Man, he would show how humans can be considered bodies in motion (motivated by sensations, desires, appetites, etc.) and how they are impacted by external motions; in the third part, of the Citizen, he would give the results of these dynamic human interactions on the body politic.

Given the escalation of events between King and Parliament in England, Hobbes decided to reverse the order of appearance of the books. In 1640, he published his Elements (1640), containing a sketch of the second and third parts. As his book seemed to support the King against the claims of Parliament, Hobbes began fearing for his welfare, and so, later that same year, departed for Paris, where he would remain in hiding for the next eleven years. Hobbes came into the orbit of Mersenne's circle once again and, for some of time, served as the mathematics tutor of a young, fugitive prince who would later become King Charles II.
Leviathan (1651) was clearly Hobbes’s masterpiece. Man is not naturally good, Hobbes claimed, but naturally a selfish hedonist -- "of the voluntary acts of every man, the object is some good to himself". As human motives were, in their natural state, guided by unenlightened self-interest, these could, if left unchecked, have highly destructive consequences. Left unrestrained, humans, propelled by their internal dynamics, would crash against each other. Hobbes tried to envision what society would be like in a “state of nature” -- before any civil state or rule of law. His conclusion was despiriting: life would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short", a "war of every man against every man".

Nonetheless, as all people are equal (in a physical not a moral sense), possessing a passionate love of survival (right of nature) and some degree of rationality (law of nature), Hobbes concluded that a viable, working society would arise as an equilibrium between these competing forces. The logic is simple. Any person's right of nature justifies violence against everybody else. Consequently, in the interests of personal survival, people will come around to agreeing that they should renounce their right to use violence. However, this yields up a tense and unstable equilibrium. The moment one party deviates from their promise, all will deviate and war restarts.

To keep society going with peace and confidence, then an artifice -- a Leviathan -- must be worked into the social contract. This Leviathan is the State -- whether in the form of an absolute monarch or a democratic parliament, it does not matter. The important point is that the State will be given a monopoly on violence and absolute authority. In return, the State promises to exercise its absolute power to maintain a state of peace (by punishing deviants, etc.) Realizing that its power depends wholly on the willingness of the citizenry to surrender theirs, the State itself will have an incentive not to abuse it. Of course, there is no guarantee that it won't. But when it does, it must brace itself for the consequences.

One of the interesting elements of Hobbes's story is that concepts like morality, liberty, justice, property, etc. have no natural, intrinsic or eternal meaning. They are pure social constructions. They are generated and imposed by the Leviathan, through his laws and institutions, to keep war and social disorder at bay. As history has shown, no set of values will last forever but will evolve as circumstances change.

Hobbes is particularly keen to note that law itself is completely dependent on power. A law without a credible and powerful authority behind it is just simply not a law in any meaningful sense. Hobbes is thus one of the progenitors of "legal positivism", i.e. that justice is whatever the law says it is. An "unjust law" is simply an oxymoron.

In the context of the age, Hobbes's theory seemed to argue that Parliament's rebellion was illegitimate as long as Charles was king. But once the head of King Charles I fell, then all rebellion against the Parliament becomes illegitimate. For Hobbes, power legitimates, power is justice. The State -- whatever its form -- is always, by definition, right, as long as it is capable of maintaining civil peace.

Accused of being a turncoat by royalist exiles in France, Hobbes returned to England soon after the publication of Leviathan and presented himself before the Council of State. Soon after, he published his other two other volumes of his philosophical trilogy -- De corpore (1655) and De homine (1657).

For the most part, Hobbes tried to live inconspicuously in London, but he was quickly drawn into a series of rather long-winded debates. His first was with John Bramall, bishop of Derry, on the issue of free will (see 1654, 1658, 1682). In 1655, Hobbes had claimed to be able to deduce the area of a circle by integration. The mathematician John Wallis repudiation his claims and Hobbes went on the counteract, publishing a series of tracts (1656, 1657) denouncing Wallis and the "new" methods of mathematical analysis. In 1661, he widened his attack to include Robert Boyle and the fledgling Royal Society. Hobbes called a truce with his Mr. Hobbes Considered (1662).
After the Restoration of 1660, King Charles II made Hobbes an intimate and granted him an pension. In the confusion after the Great Fire of 1666, the House of Commons placed Hobbes's Leviathan on a bill of proscribed books. Through the intervention of the king, the bill didn't pass through the Lords, but henceforth, the king asked that Hobbes vet his publications with him first. Hobbes complied and most of his remaining political works were published after his death. Two of them deserve special mention: his 1681 Dialogue attacking Common Law and defending royal prerogative and his 1682 Behemoth, a controversial history of the Long Parliament and the Civil War. His final years were spent in writing his autobiography and translating the Iliad and Odyssey of Homer.

Generally regarded as one of the most prominent "natural law" philosophers of the 17th Century, Hobbes had an enormous impact on subsequent British political, social and economic theory. Bentham's utilitarianism has elements of Hobbesian hedonism. Naturally, his idea of a social equilibrium between contradictory self-interests is strikingly obvious in the various aspects of Adam Smith (although Smith was less willing to grant the hedonistic motivation bit) and the rest of economics to the modern day. The last part about the endogenous emergence and evolution of morals and social norms was pinched by both Hume and Hayek.

Born prematurely on April 5, 1588, when his mother heard of the impending invasion of the Spanish Armada, Thomas Hobbes later reported that "my mother gave birth to twins, myself and fear." His father was the vicar of Westport near Malmesbury in Gloucestershire. He abandoned his family to escape punishment for fighting with another clergyman "at the church door." Thereafter Thomas was raised and educated by an uncle. At local schools he became a proficient classicist, translating a Greek tragedy into Latin iambics by the time he was 14. From 1603 to 1608 he studied at Magdalen College, Oxford, where he was bored by the prevailing philosophy of Aristotelianism.

The 20-year-old future philosopher became a tutor to the Cavendish family. This virtually lifelong association with the successive earls of Devonshire provided him with an extensive private library, foreign travel, and introductions to influential people. Hobbes, however, was slow in developing his thought; his first work a translation of Thucydides's History of the Peloponnesian Wars, did not appear until 1629. Thucydides held that knowledge of the past was useful for determining correct action, and Hobbes said that he offered the translation during a period of civil unrest as a reminder
According to his own estimate the crucial intellectual event of Hobbes's life occurred when he was 40. While waiting for a friend he wandered into a library and chanced to find a copy of Euclid's geometry. Opening the book, he read a random proposition and exclaimed, "By God that is impossible!" Fascinated by the interconnections between axioms, postulates, and premises, he adopted the ideal of demonstrating certainty by way of deductive reasoning. His interest in mathematics is reflected in his second work, A Short Treatise on First Principles, which presents a mechanical interpretation of sensation, as well as in his brief stint as mathematics tutor to Charles II. His generally royalist sympathy as expressed in The Elements of Law (1640) caused Hobbes to leave England during the "Long Parliament." This was the first of many trips back and forth between England and the Continent during periods of civil strife since he was, in his own words, "the first of all that fled." For the rest of his long life Hobbes traveled extensively and published prolifically. In France he met René Descartes and the anti-Cartesian Pierre Gassendi. In 1640 he wrote one of the sets of objections to Descartes's Meditations.

Although born into the Elizabethan Age, Hobbes outlived all of the major 17th-century thinkers. He became a sort of English institution and continued writing, offering new translations of Homer in his 80s because he had "nothing else to do." When he was past 90, he became embroiled in controversies with the Royal Society. He invited friends to suggest appropriate epitaphs and favored one that read "this is the true philosopher's stone." He died on Dec. 4, 1679, at the age of 91.

The diverse intellectual currents of the 17th century, which are generically called modern classical philosophy, began with a unanimous repudiation of the authorities of the past, especially Aristotle and the scholastic tradition. Descartes, who founded the rationalist tradition, and his contemporary Sir Francis Bacon, who is considered the originator of modern empiricism, both sought new methodologies for achieving scientific knowledge and a systematic conception of reality. Hobbes knew both of these thinkers, and his system encompassed the advantages of both rationalism and empiricism. As a logician, he believed too strongly in the power of deductive reasoning from definitions to share Bacon's exclusive enthusiasm for inductive generalizations from experience. Yet Hobbes was a more consistent empiricist and nominalist, and his attacks on the misuse of language exceed even those of Bacon. And unlike Descartes, Hobbes viewed reason as summation of consequences rather than an innate, origative source of new knowledge.

Psychology, as the mechanics of knowing, rather than epistemology is the source of Hobbes's singularity. He was fascinated by the problem of sense perception, and he extended Galileo's mechanical physics into an explanation of human cognition. The origin of all thought is sensation which consists of mental images produced by the pressure of motion of external objects. Thus Hobbes anticipates later thought by distinguishing between the external object and the internal image. These sense images are extended by the power of memory and imagination. Understanding and reason, which distinguish men from other animals, consist entirely in the ability to use speech. Speech is the power to transform images into words or names. Words serve as the marks of remembrance, signification, conception, or self-expression. For example, to speak of a cause-and-effect relation is merely to impose names and define their connection. When two names are so joined that the definition of one contains the other, then the proposition is true. The implications of Hobbes's analysis are quite modern. First, there is an implicit distinction between objects and their appearance to man's senses. Consequently knowledge is discourse about appearances. Universals are merely names understood as class concepts, and they have no real status, for everything which appears "is individual and singular." Since "true and false are attributes of speech and not of things," scientific and philosophic thinking consists in using names correctly. Reason is calculation or "reckoning the consequences of general laws agreed upon for either marking or signifying." The power of the mind is the capacity to reduce consequences to general laws or theorems either by deducing consequences from principles or by inductively reasoning from particular perceptions to general principles. The privilege of mind is subject to unfortunate abuse because, in Hobbes's pithy phrase, men turn from summarizing the consequences of things "into a reckoning of the consequences of appellations," that is, using faulty definitions, inventing terms
which stand for nothing, and assuming that universals are real.

The material and mechanical model of nature offered Hobbes a consistent analogy. Man is a conditioned part of nature, and reason is neither an innate faculty nor the summation of random experience but is acquired through slow cultivation and industry. Science is the cumulative knowledge of syllogistic reasoning which gradually reveals the dependence of one fact upon another. Such knowledge is conditionally valid and enables the mind to move progressively from abstract and simple to more particular and complex sciences: geometry, mechanics, physics, morals (the nature of mind and desire), politics.

Hobbes explains the connection between nature, man, and society through the law of inertia. A moving object continues to move until impeded by another force, and "trains of imagination" or speculation are abated only by logical demonstrations. So also man's liberty or desire to do what he wants is checked only by an equal and opposite need for security. A society or commonwealth "is but an artificial man" invented by man, and to understand polity one should merely read himself as part of nature.

Such a reading is cold comfort because presocial life is characterized by Hobbes, in a famous quotation, as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." The equality of human desire is matched by an economy of natural satisfactions. Men are addicted to power because its acquisition is the only guarantee of living well. Such men live in "a state of perpetual war" driven by competition and desire for the same goods. The important consequence of this view is man's natural right and liberty to seek self-preservation by any means. In this state of nature there is no value above self-interest because where there is no common, coercive power there is no law and no justice. But there is a second and derivative law of nature that men may surrender or transfer their individual will to the state. This "social contract" binds the individual to treat others as he expects to be treated by them. Only a constituted civil power commands sufficient force to compel everyone to fulfill this original compact by which men exchange liberty for security.

In Hobbes's view the sovereign power of a commonwealth is absolute and not subject to the laws and obligations of citizens. Obedience remains as long as the sovereign fulfills the social compact by protecting the rights of the individual. Consequently rebellion is unjust, by definition, but should the cause of revolution prevail, a new absolute sovereignty is created.