

# Thomas Hobbes: Absolute Rule by Kings

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**T**homas Hobbes was born in England in 1588. He wrote about many subjects, including politics and government. He tried to give a rational basis for absolute (unlimited) rule by kings.

The son of a clergyman, Hobbes studied at Oxford University. As an adult, he traveled to other European countries, where he met many writers, scientists, and philosophers. He studied mathematics and science as well as history and government. His studies inspired him to take a scientific approach to problems of human society.

Hobbes's thinking about society was greatly influenced by events in England in the mid 1600s. The king was struggling for power with Parliament, England's lawmaking body. In 1642, civil war broke out between supporters of the monarch and Parliament. Hobbes sided with the king.

In 1649, the king was beheaded. For the next several years, England was ruled by Parliament's House of Commons. But disorder and discontent continued. Finally, in 1660, the monarchy was restored.

The chaos of these years had a powerful impact on Hobbes. What, he asked, is the basis of social order? To answer this question, he tried to reason from his observations of human nature.

In Hobbes's view, human beings were naturally cruel, selfish, and greedy. In 1651, he published a book called *Leviathan*. In this book, he wrote that people are driven by a restless desire for power. Without laws or other social controls, people would always be in conflict. In such a "state of nature," life would be "nasty, brutish and short."

Governments, Hobbes said, were created to protect people from their own selfishness. Because people were selfish by nature, they could not be trusted to make decisions that were good for society as a whole. Only a government that has a ruler with absolute authority could maintain an orderly society.

Later Enlightenment thinkers came to quite different conclusions about human nature and the best form of government. Hobbes was important, however, because he was one of the first thinkers to apply the tools of the Scientific Revolution to problems of politics. His philosophy may sound harsh, but he believed it was based on objective observation and sound reasoning.

## Questions

1. In his book *Leviathan*, Hobbes described his beliefs about what human beings are really like. What are some words he might use to describe what people are really like?
2. According to Hobbes, why were governments created? What kind of government did he think was best, and why?