

History of Philosophy

30 Thomas Hobbes

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Abstract:

Dr. Arthur Holmes explores how **Thomas Hobbes** was driven by a deep desire for **social order** following the trauma of the English Civil War. Hobbes rejected the **divine right of kings**, instead using a **methodological naturalism** to argue that human behavior is governed by **mechanistic cause-and-effect** processes. He viewed human nature as inherently **pessimistic** and "brutish," suggesting that individuals are primarily motivated by **self-interest** and the need for **self-preservation**. To escape a natural state of perpetual conflict, Hobbes proposed a **social contract** where people vest absolute authority in a ruler to ensure peace. His philosophy transitions from **empirical science** and **sensory epistemology** to a structured political theory based on **deductive reasoning**.

Briefing Document:

The Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: Materialism, Methodology, and the Body Politic
Executive Summary

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) developed a comprehensive philosophical system designed to provide a rational basis for political authority and social order during an era of profound instability. Influenced by the English Civil War and the scientific revolution, Hobbes rejected the "Divine Right of Kings" in favor of a social contract rooted in psychological egoism and the drive for self-preservation.

His work is characterized by **Methodological Naturalism**, asserting that all phenomena—including human thought and political structures—can be explained through material cause-and-effect relationships. Hobbes's epistemology is strictly empiricist and nominalist, viewing consciousness as a byproduct of brain processes

and "reason" as a mechanical calculation of consequences. Ultimately, he argues that because human nature is inherently prone to a "war of all against all," peace can only be secured by vesting absolute power in a sovereign ruler through a collective covenant.

I. Motivational and Historical Context

Hobbes's philosophy was profoundly shaped by the political and religious turmoil of the 17th century. His primary objective was to find a basis for law, order, and peace in a world he perceived as naturally chaotic.

- **The Experience of Conflict:** Born during the threat of the Spanish Armada and living through the English Civil War (1640s), Hobbes developed a pessimistic view of the human condition. He famously characterized the natural state of man as "nasty, short, and brutish."
 - **Rejection of Divine Right:** While a Royalist in sympathy, Hobbes abandoned the traditional "Divine Right of Kings" as the basis for authority. He sought a more "scientific" and rational justification for monarchical power.
 - **Erastianism and Religious Order:** To avoid the sectarian violence of his time, Hobbes adopted an Erastian position, arguing that the state should have authority over the church. He believed that allowing individuals or sects to interpret religious truth independently would lead to anarchy. He favored a "broad church" (Latitudinarian) approach to minimize persecution and conflict.
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II. Methodological Foundations

Hobbes aimed to elevate philosophy to the status of a rigorous science by synthesizing the inductive methods of Francis Bacon with the deductive certainty of geometry and the physics of Galileo.

The Method of Reconstruction

Hobbes found Francis Bacon's inductive methods "simplistic" because they merely identified regularities without providing a theoretical framework. Instead, he adopted Galileo's "method of reconstruction":

1. **Analysis:** Dissecting natural processes into their simplest parts.
2. **Reconstruction:** Reorganizing findings into an intelligible, rational order.
3. **Deduction:** Using empirical generalizations as premises to draw logical conclusions, creating a system with the form of geometry.

Methodological Naturalism

Hobbes operated under the assumption that everything in the universe is explicable through natural causal processes (cause-and-effect). This created a "unity of the sciences," where the same methods used to study astronomy were applied to psychology and politics.

The Scope of Knowledge

Hobbes defined "Science" or "Philosophy" as the "knowledge of consequences." He categorized knowledge into two primary branches:

Category	Subject Matter	Examples of Disciplines
Natural Philosophy	Consequences from the accidents of natural bodies	Physics, Geometry, Astronomy, Ethics (as psychological causes)
Civil Philosophy	Consequences from the accidents of political bodies	Politics, the Science of Just and Unjust, Duties and Rights

III. Epistemology and the Material Mind

Hobbes's theory of knowledge is rooted in a mechanical, materialist view of the human person. He denied the existence of innate ideas, asserting that all thought originates in physical sensation.

- **Sensation as Causal Effect:** Sensations are physical effects produced in the human self by external objects. These objects trigger changes in the nervous system and brain, which then produce "phantasms" (mental images).

- **Primary vs. Secondary Qualities:**
 - **Primary Qualities:** Objective properties that bodies actually possess (size, shape, weight, density).
 - **Secondary Qualities:** Subjective experiences (color, sound, texture) that are not in the object itself but are caused by the object's interaction with our sense organs.
- **Imagination and Memory:** Hobbes defined imagination as "nothing but decaying sense images." Memory is simply the lingering effect of a previous sensation.
- **Reasoning as Calculation:** Reasoning is not a spiritual or independent faculty; it is a cause-and-effect process controlled by brain activity. It is the process of combining or separating ideas, much like a mathematical calculation.
- **Nominalism:** Hobbes was an explicit nominalist, following the tradition of William of Ockham. He argued that there are no "universal" things in reality; "universal" is merely a name applied to a group of similar particular things.

IV. Human Nature and Psychological Egoism

Hobbes's ethics and politics are built upon a deterministic psychology where passion, rather than reason, governs human behavior.

The Nature of Consciousness

Hobbes viewed consciousness as an **epiphenomenon**—a byproduct or "appearance" produced by bodily processes. Physical changes in the brain and heart produce cognitive content as well as "desires and aversions."

Determinism and "Soft" Freedom

Hobbes argued for a form of inner determinism:

- **Freedom from Constraint:** One is "free" if there are no external obstacles to doing what one desires.

- **Deliberation and Choice:** Choice is not a result of free will but is merely the "last desire" in a "see-saw" of alternating appetites and fears. When one desire outweighs another, we call it a "choice."

Psychological Egoism

Hobbes asserted that human beings are "psychological egoists," meaning they are naturally driven by self-interest and the desire for power.

- **The Power Struggle:** Life is a perpetual, restless desire for the power necessary for survival.
- **Relativism:** Individuals label what they desire as "good" and what they dislike as "bad," leading to inherent ethical relativism in the natural state.

V. Political Philosophy: The Social Contract

Because the natural state of humanity is a "war of all against all," Hobbes argued that "right reason" dictates the necessity of a social contract for self-preservation.

- **The Natural Law:** Unlike the teleological natural law of Aquinas, Hobbes's natural law refers to the "dictates of right reason"—consequentialist thinking aimed at survival.
 - *First Law:* Seek peace.
 - *Second Law:* Keep covenants (contracts) made with others.
- **The Covenant:** To escape the chaos of the natural state, individuals must enter a covenant to vest their collective authority in an absolute ruler.
- **The Leviathan (Absolute Sovereign):**
 - The ruler must have absolute power to maintain order and settle disputes.
 - The authority of the ruler is based on a contract (contractarianism) rather than divine right.

- The only limit to this power is when the ruler attempts to destroy the subjects, at which point the right to self-preservation takes precedence.
- **Sovereignty over Religion:** The ruler serves as the final interpreter of God's laws and religious doctrine to prevent sectarianism from upsetting the peace.

Study Guide:

The Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes: A Study Guide

This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of the philosophical system of Thomas Hobbes, as outlined in the lectures of Dr. Arthur Holmes. It explores Hobbes's motivations, his mechanistic methodology, his epistemological foundations, and his influential political theory.

Part I: Short-Answer Quiz

Instructions: Answer the following questions in 2–3 sentences based on the provided source context.

1. How did the historical context of Thomas Hobbes's birth and early life shape his philosophical outlook?
2. What was Hobbes's "Erastian" view regarding the relationship between the church and the state?
3. In what way did Hobbes find Francis Bacon's inductive method to be "simplistic"?
4. Explain the "method of reconstruction" that Hobbes adopted from Galileo.
5. How does Hobbes distinguish between primary and secondary qualities?

6. What is the role of "phantasms" in Hobbes's epistemology?
7. How does Hobbes define "reasoning" within his mechanistic framework?
8. What is the difference between "psychological egoism" and "ethical egoism" in relation to Hobbes?
9. How does Hobbes explain the concept of "deliberation" and "choice" if human actions are determined?
10. What is the fundamental basis for political authority in Hobbes's theory, and how does it differ from the "divine right of kings"?

Part II: Answer Key

1. **How did the historical context of Thomas Hobbes's birth and early life shape his philosophical outlook?** Hobbes was born during the threat of the Spanish Armada and later lived through the English Civil War, leading to a life-long preoccupation with civil turmoil. These experiences fostered a pessimistic view of human nature as "nasty, short, and brutish," convincing him that the primary human motivation is self-preservation and the avoidance of a "war of all against all."
2. **What was Hobbes's "Erastian" view regarding the relationship between the church and the state?** Hobbes sought to avoid religious sectarianism and civil conflict by advocating for a state-controlled church where the government determines religious details beyond a few basic Christian tenets. This Erastian approach subordinates church authority to the state to maintain social order and prevent the chaos caused by individual religious disputes.
3. **In what way did Hobbes find Francis Bacon's inductive method to be "simplistic"?** Hobbes believed Bacon's focus on empirical induction only identified constant conjunctions and regularities without providing an overall theoretical understanding. He argued that science needed a deductive framework to transition from empirical observations to a comprehensive political and ethical philosophy.
4. **Explain the "method of reconstruction" that Hobbes adopted from Galileo.** The method involves first analyzing or "dissecting" natural processes

and physical bodies into their component parts. These findings are then reconstructed in a rational, intelligible order, allowing the philosopher to proceed deductively from empirical generalizations to specific conclusions, similar to geometry.

5. **How does Hobbes distinguish between primary and secondary qualities?** Primary qualities are objective properties inherent in material bodies, such as size, shape, weight, and spatial occupancy. Secondary qualities, like color, sound, and taste, are subjective effects produced in the observer's consciousness by the causal influence of those primary qualities on the sense organs.
6. **What is the role of "phantasms" in Hobbes's epistemology?** Phantasms are mental images or sensations caused by the impact of external physical objects on the nervous system and brain. They serve as the starting point of all human thought, though Hobbes emphasizes that they are merely mental appearances resulting from physical causal processes.
7. **How does Hobbes define "reasoning" within his mechanistic framework?** Reasoning is viewed as a purely causal process determined by brain activity, where one idea follows another as a byproduct of neural stimuli. It is essentially a form of mental "addition or subtraction" of consequences, with no innate ideas or independent a priori knowledge involved.
8. **What is the difference between "psychological egoism" and "ethical egoism" in relation to Hobbes?** Hobbes is described as a psychological egoist, meaning he makes the descriptive claim that human beings naturally and always act out of self-interest and a desire for power. Unlike ethical egoism, which asserts that one *ought* to act for self-interest, Hobbes's view is an empirical generalization about how humans actually behave.
9. **How does Hobbes explain the concept of "deliberation" and "choice" if human actions are determined?** Deliberation is described as a "see-saw" or alternation of competing desires and aversions in the mind. A "choice" is simply the final desire or appetite that outweighs others in this causal process, meaning the sense of being "free" to decide is merely a byproduct of the ambiguity of one's own desires.

10. **What is the fundamental basis for political authority in Hobbes's theory, and how does it differ from the "divine right of kings"?** Hobbes rejects the "divine right of kings" in favor of a "social contract" or covenant based on right reason and self-preservation. Individuals collectively vest absolute authority in a ruler (the Leviathan) to ensure peace and security, making political authority a product of human agreement rather than divine appointment.

Part III: Essay Questions

Instructions: Use the provided source context to develop detailed outlines or responses for the following prompts.

1. **Mechanistic Materialism:** Analyze how Hobbes applies the principles of "matter and motion" to the study of human psychology and politics. Does this framework leave room for the existence of God or the soul?
 2. **The State of Nature vs. Civil Society:** Compare Hobbes's description of the "natural condition of man" with the "body politic." Explain why he believes an absolute ruler is a logical necessity for human survival.
 3. **Empiricism and Nominalism:** Discuss the relationship between Hobbes's empiricist view of sensation and his nominalist view of language. How does his rejection of "abstract names" support his broader philosophical goals?
 4. **Freedom and Determinism:** Evaluate Hobbes's concept of "soft determinism." How does he reconcile the idea of human freedom (defined as the absence of external constraints) with the belief that all actions are caused by internal desires?
 5. **The Unity of Science:** Explore Hobbes's "magnificent chart" of knowledge. How does his classification of the sciences demonstrate his belief in a methodological continuity between physics and civil philosophy?
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Part IV: Glossary of Key Terms

Term	Definition
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Broad Church	The Latitudinarian tradition in the Anglican Church that sought to avoid sectarian conflict and persecution of minorities.
Commonwealth	A form of body politic established for the "common good," a term notably used by Oliver Cromwell.
Epiphenomenon	A byproduct; in Hobbes's view, consciousness is a byproduct of physical brain processes rather than an independent substance.
Erastianism	The doctrine that the state should have supreme authority over the power and details of the church.
Imagination	For Hobbes, this refers to "decaying" sense images or mental pictures left over after the external cause of a sensation has ceased.
Methodological Naturalism	The assumption that everything, including human behavior and politics, can be explained in terms of natural causal processes.
Natural Law	The "dictates of right reason" that guide humans toward peace and self-preservation, such as seeking peace and keeping covenants.
Nominalism	The belief that universals or abstract concepts do not exist; only particular things exist, and "universal" names are just signs for groups of particulars.
Phantasms	Mental images or sense appearances produced by physical stimuli impacting the sense organs and brain.
Psychological Egoism	The descriptive theory that all human actions are motivated by self-interest and the desire for self-preservation.
Right Reason	A form of consequentialist thinking used to determine the best means of survival and social order.

Sensus Deitatis

A "sense of a deity" or "seed of religion" (semen religionis) that Hobbes suggests arises naturally from human curiosity about first causes.