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Educational materials for Thomas Hobbes

INTRODUCTION TO THOMAS HOBBS

In this article, Robert Kraynak explores how Thomas Hobbes could be responsible both for affirming the supreme power of the state against appeals to a higher law and for the idea that there are basic human rights that all states must recognize. The answer lies in Hobbes's novel account of human life as having no ultimate purpose and as consisting in a constant power struggle—a marked contrast to traditional [Aristotelian](#) moral theory. This means that, first, the state must be very powerful in order to keep people under control and must not be weakened by belief in a higher natural law. Second, it is impossible for the state to achieve the greatest good for man because no such good exists. Rather, the state should strive for the minimal goal of preserving order and protecting the most basic rights, in particular the right to life. Hobbes then redefines natural law as that which preserves natural rights. This then provides groundwork for the idea of the modern liberal state, limited in its power insofar as it is not permitted to violate certain human rights.



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THOMAS HOBBS

Thomas Hobbes was born in Malmesbury, England in 1588. Supported in his studies by his uncle, he graduated from Oxford University in 1608 and worked as a tutor to William Cavendish, who later became the 2nd Earl of Devonshire. Hobbes worked for the same family nearly all his life. It was partly his connection to the Cavendish family that enabled Hobbes to think and write as he did. Not only did it afford him access to many books, but it also brought him into association with other philosophers and scientists. In 1620, Hobbes worked for a short time as secretary to the famous natural philosopher Francis Bacon. Later, Hobbes's philosophical writings won him the attention and respect of Descartes.

During this time, England was thrown into civil war and Hobbes fled to Paris and remained in exile there from 1640 to 1651. On account of his associations with the Royalists, as well as his written defense of absolute sovereignty in his political philosophy, Hobbes had reason to fear punishment. It was during his exile that Hobbes wrote his most famous work, *Leviathan*. Hobbes was eventually able to return to England, and he continued to publish philosophical works and to defend his writings in a series of debates. Hobbes died on December 4, 1679 at Hardwick Hall at the age of ninety-one.

To read more about Thomas Hobbes' life and works, see [this](#) encyclopedia article or visit TheGreatThinkers.org/Hobbes.



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GLOSSARY OF TERMS FOR HOBBS

anarchy:

absence of government.

classical natural law:

the kind of natural law thinking prevalent in the pre-modern age and most particularly exemplified by Aquinas. It was characterized by an emphasis on laws rather than rights and by the idea that divine authority was the source of natural law.

materialism:

the metaphysical view that everything that exists is composed of matter. A materialist account of human nature, therefore, would hold that humans (including the human mind or soul) are entirely material and can be described in completely physical terms.

metaphysical:

pertaining to the fundamental nature of being or reality.

natural end (*finis ultimus, summum bonum*):

the way of life proper to a fulfilled human being by reason of his human nature. "Natural" is not used in the sense that all or most people achieve this end, but rather that this end is most fitting for man. By analogy, one can consider that humans "naturally" have an end of possessing thirty-two teeth, and this remains true even if bad hygiene means that almost no one actually has that many. (see *also* [TELEOLOGICAL](#)).

natural inclination:

a tendency that a properly functioning person will possess by reason of his human nature.

natural right:

a power or privilege that people deserve by reason of their human nature, and which therefore is owed to them regardless of customs or positive laws to the contrary.

positive law:

actual, enumerated laws of states or institutions (often contrasted with natural law).

proper end:

see [NATURAL END](#).

sectarian:

pertaining to different sects (in this context, the sects referred to are rival branches of Christianity).

social contract:

an implicit or explicit agreement among individuals that forms the underpinning of their living together in society. In Hobbes, the social contract involves complete submission to the sovereign in exchange for peace and order.

teleological:

purpose-driven, end-directed. In this context, it refers specifically to the moral concept that people, by reason of their nature as human beings, have a purpose in life (see [NATURAL END](#)) that constitutes complete human fulfillment and can be achieved through the practice of virtue.

theocracy:

government by divine guidance or by those invested with religious authority.

virtue:

a habit of character conducive toward achieving one's natural end.



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OUTLINE OF ESSAY ON HOBBS

I. Introduction—natural law's current status

A. Natural law used to be a common mode of thought.

B. Now, natural law is believed to be intolerant and subversive.

II. Hobbes's intellectual legacy

A. Positive law and authority of state must always be obeyed.

B. Hobbes originated the idea of universal human rights which hold and must be respected, regardless of the laws of the state.

C. Seemingly, these ideas are contradictory.

III. Hobbes on human nature

A. Materialist concept of man

1. Man lacks the "final end" spoken of in traditional moral theories.

2. Life is a constant power struggle.

B. Man and society

1. People are not naturally social and disposed to live in a community.

2. Left unchecked, society will devolve into an anarchical state of nature.

IV. Hobbes and natural law

A. Natural law presupposes some highest good for man and society, but no such good exists.

B. Agreement on what constitutes natural law is impossible; intractable conflict will ensue if such beliefs are allowed.

C. People must avoid conflict and achieve peace by agreeing to a government that will preserve the most basic goods.

V. Hobbes and natural right

A. Primary good—avoidance of violent death

1. Reason demands that everyone has a right to defend his life.

2. Therefore, humans have a natural "right" of self-preservation.

3. Other rights follow from this one.
4. Natural law is that which preserves natural right.

B. Role of state

1. The state can and should protect natural rights and thus create peace and stability.
2. But in order to do this, the state needs to have complete control and becomes the ultimate arbiter and enforcer of natural law.

VI. Conclusion

A. Hobbes and natural law legacy

1. Natural law is subsumed under positive law.
2. Hobbes is the source of the modern idea that traditional natural law is dangerous because it subverts power of state.

B. Hobbes, natural rights, and liberalism

1. State should not attempt to promote a unifying greatest good.
2. State must protect certain fundamental human rights.
3. Both of these are tenets of modern liberal state.



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STUDY GUIDE FOR HOBBS

Part I. Basic Interpretation of Hobbes

If you are interested in the thought of Thomas Hobbes after reading Kraynak's essay, please go to the [Primary Source Documents](#) to read some of the critical passages that informed the paper. As you return to the primary sources, keep these questions in mind:

1. What is distinctive about Hobbes's views on human nature?
2. Why does Hobbes believe that the sovereign must have total control over the state?
3. What is Hobbes's reasoning behind his belief in an individual's fundamental right of self-preservation? Why does he call this a natural right?
4. How do the other natural rights follow from the right of self-preservation?
5. What does Hobbes think is the biggest problem with traditional natural law thinking?
6. Why does Hobbes think the state should protect natural rights rather than obey natural laws? What is the difference?

Part II. Connections to Other Thinkers

In order to properly understand Hobbes, it is important to place him in his proper context. He is often, and appropriately, compared with other early modern thinkers like Locke and [Rousseau](#). However, one must also remember that he was classically educated and thus intimately familiar with the thought of Greek and Roman philosophers like Aristotle or Cicero. And, of course, we can see his influence on contemporary thinkers. Let us see how we can enhance our understanding by comparing him to some other political philosophers.

1. Hobbes writes, “For though they that speak of this subject used to confound jus and lex (right and law), yet they ought to be distinguished...” Whom do you think Hobbes is referring to here? What distinction is he making that other thinkers failed to make?
2. Compare Hobbes’s concept of self-preservation as a fundamental right with the [New Natural Lawyers’](#) idea of life as a basic good.
3. For classical thinkers like Aristotle, virtue was essential for living peacefully in a community. What role does Hobbes assign to virtue, and how does it differ from that of earlier thinkers’ theories?
4. Compare Hobbes’s and [Locke’s](#) views on rights, both as to their content and the justification for them.
5. One of Kraynak’s central arguments in his article is that Hobbes provides some of the intellectual underpinning for modern liberalism. Is there a particular liberal thinker who owes a lot to Hobbes? Try comparing Hobbes’s ideas with those of someone like John Rawls.

Part III. Critical Interpretation of Hobbes

Now that you have a basic understanding of Hobbes’s thought, let us turn a more critical eye towards his work. Are his arguments persuasive? Can we speculate from them what Hobbes would have thought about issues that he did not directly address? Use the questions below as your guide:

1. Is there a fundamental conflict in Hobbes between the absolute power of the sovereign and the absolute individual right of self-preservation?
2. Is Hobbes successful in refuting classical teleology? Kraynak argues that Hobbes’s materialism, taken in itself, is not enough—do you agree? To what extent does Hobbes’s second argument from “moral experience” strengthen his case?
3. How far does the right of self-preservation go? One can imagine situations where, in order to avoid violent death, it might be necessary to commit a host of other crimes (for instance, if a criminal threatens you with death unless you assist him). Or, you might only be able to preserve your own life by infringing on someone else’s right of self-preservation. What would Hobbes say to this?
4. To what extent do you think Hobbes’s beliefs were colored by his experience of the English Civil

War, where rebellion from the king in the name of a higher law eventually led to significant disorder and bloodshed? Can you think of a time or place where appeals to natural law instead promoted peace and stability?

5. What modern form of government would Hobbes find most attractive, given both his belief in the necessary extent of state power and his belief in natural rights? Is there a particular country whose government best embodies his ideals?
6. Hobbes rejects the idea of man as having a natural end, while he keeps the idea (albeit redefined) of natural law. Is it really possible for there to be a natural law without an end for man that the law is supposed to achieve? Does Hobbes set up as a new ultimate end for society the state itself and the order that it alone can create?

Part IV. Contemporary Connections

Hobbes has had a tremendous influence on modern political and philosophical thought. Therefore, let us now turn our eye to some contemporary debates and see how Hobbes's thought may be relevant in understanding them.

1. Often, natural law is thought of as a "conservative" idea, perhaps because it is often cited in support of traditional values or because people associate it with the Middle Ages and religious figures like [St. Thomas Aquinas](#). However, consider recent landmark Supreme Court cases (*Brown v. Board of Education*, [Griswold v. Connecticut](#), *Lawrence v. Texas*, etc.). Here, it is the liberals who believe that some fundamental natural rights must always be protected, whether the [Constitution](#) explicitly mentions them or not, and it is the conservatives who advocate a strict reliance on the written positive law alone.
 - a. Would you classify Hobbes as a liberal or a conservative? Belief in natural rights is a fundamental tenet of modern liberalism, but Hobbes's emphasis on the absolute authority of the state goes against the classical liberal ideal of limited government.
 - b. Is belief in natural law liberal or conservative? Does it make a difference whether you're talking about natural law or natural rights? Is liberal v. conservative even an appropriate distinction to make here?
2. As we have discussed earlier, Hobbes had a very negative view of what happens when people make appeals to a higher law, due partly to the times in which he lived. In recent times, episodes of disobedience to the state in the name of obedience to a higher law abound: the 1960s civil rights movement, pacifists dodging the draft, religious sects practicing polygamy. As is clear from these examples, our opinions of these efforts vary greatly, from overwhelming support of the civil rights movement to overwhelming disapproval of polygamy. Do people, therefore, only favor appeals to natural law insofar as those same people agree with the natural law evoked? If so, does this lend credence to Hobbes's view that belief in natural law only leads to disagreement and social chaos?
3. In Hobbes we [see](#) a switch in the word "right" from an adjective describing states of affairs (as in, "laws should promote a right ordering of society") to a noun, a thing possessed by individuals

(as in, “I have a right to a fair trial”). The former concept is relatively easy to understand, as it treats “right” as an abstract concept analogous to “good.” The latter, however, is more difficult to pin down, despite its ubiquity in modern discourse. What is a right, for instance the right of self-preservation? Does it mean that it is irrational not to protect one’s life? That it is never morally wrong to do so? That it is always wrong for someone else to try to take your life?

4. Hobbes believed that, from the fundamental right of self-preservation, he could derive all the other basic rights by a fairly simple process of reasoning. Modern disagreements about the content of human rights, however, show that it is not nearly so simple. On one hand, everything from health care to clean water to a “living wage” is thought of as a basic right by some, but is derided by others as a ridiculous cheapening of the very concept of a human right. On the other hand, even the right to life, seemingly the most obvious and basic, runs into controversies about abortion, war, capital punishment, and euthanasia. Does belief in natural rights create the same chaos that Hobbes feared from belief in natural law?
5. In *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues that the state, instead of pursuing the highest good, should instead concern itself with preserving the minimal goods of peace and order. He can thus be seen providing the underpinning for the modern liberal state, in which the state, by protecting rights and maintaining the peace, provides a sort of neutral ground in which individuals can pursue their own conceptions of the good. Would Hobbes welcome this development? Or would he think that, because there is no highest good in his view, it is as foolish for individuals to seek it as it is for the state as a whole to do so? Would he argue that a society in which people are all pursuing different goods is inherently unstable and will ultimately lead to the downfall of the state?

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