



## THINKER IN BOXES

# THOMAS HOBBS

**Team:** British Imperial Lions

**Position:** Deep extra cover

**Status:** Not living

If you're a dictator, king, or uptight schoolmarm with your hair pulled into a bun that's so tight you can't blink, Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) is going to be your favorite political theorist. Influenced by the scientific revolution that occurred during his lifetime, Hobbes rejected all information that was not acquired empirically as he sought to craft a scientific theory of politics and government. In his most famous work, *Leviathan*, Hobbes sought to explain why government was necessary.<sup>a</sup> To accomplish this task, he asks us to engage in a thought experiment: what would life be like in this “state of nature”?

Imagine a time when there were no laws, no government, and no justice system at all, when individuals enjoyed perfect liberty to do whatever they pleased. Hobbes considered human beings to be essentially egotistical and self-interested rational pleasure seekers, but for some reason—a reason that will be difficult for university students to fathom—that belief did not lead him to predict that a world of complete freedom would lead to something like a constant spring break at Daytona Beach. Instead, he describes life in the state of nature as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” It was a life of constant war and violence. It was *Lord of the Flies* in Technicolor.

Hobbes believed that people form governments because they want to escape this state of nature and they are willing to trade some of their liberty to achieve tranquility. According to Hobbes, government begins when people join together to form a “social contract” with each other. Under the terms of the contract, people agree to trade their liberty for protection from the harshness of the state of nature. Their individual freedom is turned over to a sovereign—a person or a group of people with supreme authority—who is responsible for securing and maintaining the peace. Once the people consent to join into this social contract, they must follow the will of the sovereign, and the dude in charge has the power to do whatever is necessary to ensure domestic tranquility. People have surrendered all of their rights, including their right to disagree. There is no such thing as freedom of speech or freedom of religion, and people should expect nothing except what is granted by the sovereign. Unlike Aristotle, Hobbes did not believe that government and the state were natural. Instead, they were human creations that originated because they served a useful purpose.

Thus, not only does Hobbes provide the reason for the origin of the state but he also tells us about the obligations of the individual and the sovereign. The sovereign's responsibility is to provide for the safety of the populace. Consequently, Hobbes contrasts the state of nature with the positive utopia of a life of security. However, that original, negative utopia always lurks in the background as a justification for the sovereign's rule.

<sup>a</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin, 1985).