Thomas Hobbes

Thomas Hobbes was born in 1588 in England. Hobbes’s father abandoned him and his two siblings to be raised by a wealthy uncle. His education began at the young age of four, and within just eleven years Hobbes entered the University of Oxford. He graduated in 1608, at which point he accepted a position working for the prominent Cavendish family. For most of his working life, Hobbes remained in service to the Cavendish family, serving in numerous capacities including as a page, tutor, translator, and adviser. His close affiliation with the Cavendish family, and the connections with other English nobility he forged as a result, played a profound role in shaping Hobbes’s political views during the ongoing struggle between British Parliament and the king of England, especially his belief in the divine right of kings.

Hobbes was a member of both English and French intellectual circles, and he studied and debated with many Enlightenment thinkers, including René Descartes. Though he was a self-taught scientist, Hobbes is best known for his political philosophy. Hobbes wrote his first work in 1640, *The Elements of Law, Natural and Political*; around this time, he was forced to flee to France as the political situation in England became increasingly tenuous for supporters of the British monarchy. Hobbes resided in France for the next decade, dedicating much of his time to philosophical study and to writing his most famous work, *Leviathan*.

In *Leviathan*, Hobbes posits that human beings are naturally cruel, greedy, and selfish. What’s more, Hobbes contends, “the condition of man . . . is a condition of war of everyone against everyone”; humans only seek to feel pleasure and avoid pain and will achieve those ends through any means necessary. To curb the naturally selfish ways of humankind, Hobbes believed, humans must enter into a “social contract,” in which members of society forfeit some of their individual freedoms to a powerful government responsible for making choices that will ultimately benefit society and preserve order. He argued that humans are incapable of making such decisions for themselves. Though Hobbes eventually returned to England after the restoration of the English monarchy, his views would make him unpopular with many of his countrymen. Hobbes died in 1679 at the age of ninety-one.