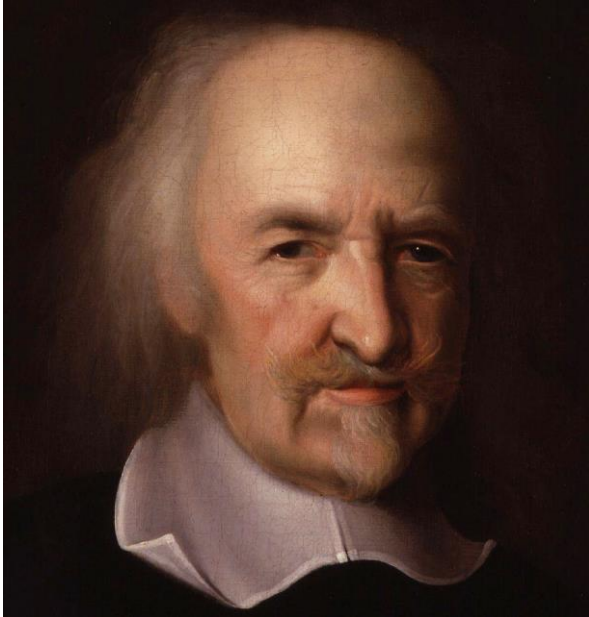


# Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan* Reading Guide

Patrick R. Frierson



## **Hobbes's Life and Works<sup>1</sup>**

1588	Born in Malmesbury, England.
1608	Receives BA from Oxford, serves as tutor to William Cavendish (jr)
1619-23	Serves as secretary/assistant to Francis Bacon (loaned by Cavendishes)
1628	Formally leaves the service of the Cavendishes.
1629	Publishes a translation of Thucydides
1635	Meets Mersenne, Gassendi, and other French philosophers in Paris
1636	Visits Galileo in Italy
1640	Flees to Paris
1641	Contributes Objections to Descartes's <i>Meditations</i>
1642	English Civil War begins.
1649	Charles I beheaded in England
1651	Publishes <i>Leviathan</i> .
1652	Returns to England
1660	Charles II restored to throne in England.
	1679 Dies

<sup>1</sup> Much of this chronology is taken from *Leviathan* (ed. Tuck, Cambridge University Press).

## **Descartes's Meditations:** **Hobbes's Objections and Descartes's Replies**

Before doing the reading:

1. We are now transitioning from Descartes to a new philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. Hobbes was born before Descartes, died after him, and directly dialogued with him through the objections and replies to Descartes's *Meditations*. In many ways, they are philosophers of the same era, with many of the same concerns, but in other ways, they are diametrically opposed. In many ways, too, Hobbes is more "contemporary" than Descartes; many of the presuppositions prevalent in the English-speaking (and English-colonized) world are informed by philosophical traditions that Hobbes helped inaugurate. So before delving (back) into Hobbes's objections to Descartes, think about what your own overall reaction to Descartes has been. What objections do *you* have? What aspects of his views are most at odds with the prejudices and assumptions of (y)our culture?

2. Unlike Descartes's exchange with Elizabeth, which is a model of respectful dialogue in which each listened carefully to the other and even, to some degree, modified their position in the light of the other's, Descartes's exchange with Hobbes is often snarky, and throughout the philosophers seem to be speaking past each other. As you read, try to play the role of the generous interlocutor. Why does Hobbes raise the objections he does? Why does Descartes respond in the way he does? What are the underlying assumptions of each that prevent them from being able to effectively dialogue with each other?

While reading:

Focus on identifying the key difference of opinion between Hobbes and Descartes with respect to each of the objections (other than the first, on p. 76a, which is silly) and then what key assumptions underlie the arguments of each.

For example, for the argument on pp. 76b-77a, Hobbes's main point seems to be that "a thing that thinks is something corporeal" (76b), and his key assumptions are, first, that there is a distinction between thinking and the thing that thinks, and second, that "the subjects of all acts seem to be understood only in terms of matter," that is, we can only picture material *things*, even if we can imagine those things *doing* stuff other than being material. It is really that second assumption that Descartes takes issue with (on p. 77b).

Now carry out a similar analysis for at least three of the other places where Hobbes and Descartes disagree. Be sure to analyze Objection V (pp. 79-80) and Objection IX (p. 81).

### While rereading:

Focus on discerning as much as you can about Hobbes's views of the relationship between mind and body, the existence and nature of God, and the nature of human reasoning.

### After rereading:

Step back and think about the overall metaphysics and epistemology offered by Hobbes and Descartes. At this point in your reading, who wins the argument? Why? Be very specific, and give your answer in terms of who offers better reasons for their views, not merely in terms of whose views you *like* better.

# *Hobbes's Leviathan*

## Introduction and Chapters 1, 2, 5, and 6

Before doing the reading:

1. Reflect back on Descartes. What were the most appealing aspects of his philosophy? What problems was he aiming to solve? To what extent did he solve them?
  
2. Now think about your own philosophical interests. What philosophical problems did Descartes *not* solve for you? What did he address (or inspire) that he did not sufficiently argue for? What, specifically, is lacking in either his arguments or his conclusions?

While reading:

1. As you read, note how much different Hobbes's tone is from Descartes. What are the main differences between them in substance?
  
2. How is Hobbes's overall project *like* Descartes? How it is *unlike* Descartes?
  
3. How does Hobbes treat dreams differently from Descartes? Does he have an adequate response to Descartes's dream-based skeptical argument? What does he argue with respect to dreams that goes beyond Descartes?
  
4. When you finish chapter two, you should read at least the first two paragraphs of chapter three, to set the stage for what comes later.

5. Note how Hobbes's builds from the senses through reason and voluntary motion. Recall Descartes's example of the wax, where Descartes claims that we know the wax through the understanding rather than the senses. Given Hobbes's conception of "reason," what would it mean to know something through reason *rather than* through the senses?
  
6. With respect to chapter six, on voluntary motion, focus on what seem to you the key passages and skim the unnecessary details, but don't miss Hobbes's discussion of "deliberation" and the "will."

### While rereading:

1. First, at the level of metaphysics, the most important thing to do when rereading is to pay close attention to those places where Hobbes says what senses, imagination, reason, desire, and the will *are*. What, literally, are the senses? What is reason? What is the will? (Before rereading his discussion of reason, go back and look at the Objections to Descartes's *Meditations*, especially the key paragraph on p. 78b that starts, "But what are we to say now...")
  
2. How would Hobbes respond to Elizabeth's question, "If the soul is merely a thinking substance, how can it cause motion in the body?"
  
3. Note too Hobbes's approach to dispelling philosophical problems through careful attention to words...Does this help explain some of what you found in the Objections and Replies? Can you think of any good examples where close examination of the meanings of words, and particularly tracing them back to their ultimate origins/meanings, can make philosophical puzzles dissolve? How might Descartes respond to the claim that "immaterial substance" is a pair of "words without meaning"?

### After rereading:

1. Go back to the very beginning of the Introduction, where Hobbes describes life as “but a motion of limbs” and identifies “all automata” with “artificial life.” In what sense has this view been vindicated by his philosophy so far? Does his account of human reasoning show that every single aspect of human life is just like an automaton (a robot)?
2. Note that, for Descartes, the human *body* was essentially an automaton, but the human mind (or soul), and in particular human freedom and human intellect (reason) could not be reduced to mere physical mechanisms. Does Hobbes disagree? If so, does he adequately show that Descartes is wrong?
3. How might the analogy, or – more accurately – the strict identity, between life and automata relate to what is coming next, where Hobbes will discuss moral and especially political philosophy?
4. Now look closely at the picture on the cover of the *Leviathan* (reproduced above). What is the huge towering king actually *made of*? Would it be possible to see a state, a society, as literally a single living thing? As an automaton? What sort of configuration of parts would make that possible? How, for instance, could it have a single will? Would such a united mega-automaton be a good thing? Why or why not?

# *Hobbes's Leviathan*

## Introduction and Chapters 13-16

### Before reading:

1. Review chapter six, paying particular attention to Hobbes's account of the human will. The title of chapter 13 is "Of the natural condition of mankind, concerning their felicity [that is, happiness] and misery." Given his account of the will, what would you expect the "natural condition of humankind" to be like? Why?
2. Now recall the definition of the "good" from Chapter Six. Given that definition of what "good" means, in humans' natural condition, what moral rules would govern human actions? What would be the effect of everyone pursuing what is "good" and acting in the ways that they consider "good"?

### While reading:

1. For your initial read of chapters XIII and XIV of the Leviathan, take Hobbes at his word about human nature and the conditions to which it gives rise. Sketch the logic of his argument, starting with the three principal driving motives of human beings (or at least the three that cause the most trouble) and ending with his articulation of the first law of nature (in the fourth paragraph of Chapter XIV, on p. 83 of my printout).
2. Before reading any further, try to come up with some more laws of nature. What else would follow "from this fundamental law of nature"?
3. In the long discussion of contracts, pay close attention to the initial justification for contracts, and also to the paragraphs beginning "If a covenant be made wherein neither of the parties perform presently..." and "The force of words being (as I have formerly noted) too weak...". Ultimately, what *is* this second law of nature? What is one actually obligated to do, in the state of nature, with respect to contracts? Why?

4. Chapter XV is a long list of further laws of nature. Don't skip this chapter, but don't dwell on every detail, either. First, do spend some time with the third law of nature, and particularly with Hobbes's argument in the paragraph that starts "For the question is not of promises mutual, where there is no security..." What is Hobbes's claim here? Why does he think it is true? How does it fit (or not) with the first law of nature? Do you agree with Hobbes?
5. Then, pick one or two interesting or counter-intuitive or fun laws and dwell with them for a bit, figuring out how they follow the conditions of the state of nature.
6. Finally, before reading Chapter XVI, recall the image on the frontpiece of *Leviathan*. This chapter is pivotal for understanding the sort of mechanism that will make the creation of the mega-automaton, the Leviathan, possible.

### While rereading:

1. First, now that you know where his overall argument is going, use your rereading to clarify just what the state of nature is and how it leads to the laws of nature.
2. In addition, now is a good time to adopt a critical eye. Does Hobbes mis-characterize human nature? Does he get wrong what a "state of nature" would be like? What motives does he *not* include in his account of human psychology? How would adding these change his picture? How, if at all, would it change the laws of nature?

### After rereading:

1. Note that many of the laws of nature are provisional or double-edged, starting with the first. Seek peace *or* by all means defend oneself. Lay aside your rights *or* defend them with all your might. A lot seems to depend upon getting into a cooperative society where we can all rely on each other to seek peace together. What do you think would be the most effective way to create such a society, assuming that human beings are as Hobbes describes them?
2. What do you think would be the most effective way to create such a society, assuming that human beings are as *Descartes* describes them?
3. What do you think would be the most effective way to create such a society, assuming that human beings are as you think they really are?



# *Hobbes's Leviathan*

## Introduction and Chapters 17-18

### Before reading:

1. Recall the post-reading questions from the last section: Note that many of the laws of nature are provisional or double-edged, starting with the first. Seek peace *or* by all means defend oneself. Lay aside your rights *or* defend them with all your might. A lot seems to depend upon getting into a cooperative society where we can all rely on each other to seek peace together. What do you think would be the most effective way to create such a society, assuming that human beings are as Hobbes describes them? Take the time to actually think this through before you look at Hobbes's solution. Briefly describe (or sketch) what you think would work.

### While reading (and rereading):

1. Pay close attention to the summary of the problem in the opening paragraphs of Chapter XVII.
2. Hobbes goes through various proposed solutions to the problem and rejects them. List at least two such solutions and explain the problems with them.
3. What is Hobbes's solution? Is this really the only solution? If not, why not?
4. Why does Hobbes think that subjects "cannot lawfully make a new covenant" (XVIII, paragraph three, p. 111 of my printout)? Hobbes lays out several reasons that we cannot do this. List at least three and think carefully through the reasoning for them.

5. Much of chapter XVIII lays out the rights of sovereigns, but also gives recommendations to sovereigns about how best to make use of those rights. What restrictions, if any, is the sovereign under in her/his exercise of these rights? What criteria should the sovereign use in deciding how to exercise them?

### After rereading:

1. Imagine the best possible life under a Hobbesian sovereign. Would this be better than the state of nature? What aspects of it would be better? What would be worse?
2. Imagine the worst possible life under a Hobbesian sovereign. Would this be better than the state of nature? What aspects of it would be better? What would be worse?
3. Think really carefully about whether there would be a better solution to the problems of the state of nature than Hobbes's. Consider what disadvantages your proposed solution would have.
4. Now give yourself a little more freedom. If you don't have to assume that human nature is the way that Hobbes describes it, can you come up with an even better solution? Is there a view of human nature that is *both* more realistic than Hobbes's *and* gives rise to a better solution to the problems of living a happy life and forming a thriving society?