

chapter breakdown leviathan hobbes

chapter breakdown leviathan hobbes offers a profound exploration into the foundational principles of political philosophy, examining the nature of man, the social contract, and the establishment of sovereign power. Thomas Hobbes's seminal work, *Leviathan*, is a cornerstone of Western thought, and understanding its structure is crucial for grasping its enduring relevance. This article provides a comprehensive chapter breakdown of *Leviathan*, delving into each of its four parts: "Of Men," "Of Commonwealth," "Of a Christian Commonwealth," and "Of the Kingdom of Darkness." We will dissect Hobbes's arguments on human nature, the necessity of a strong sovereign, the role of religion in the state, and the perceived threats of superstition and illegitimate authority, offering detailed insights into the complex arguments within each significant section.

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Part I: Of Men - The Foundations of Hobbesian Thought

The initial section of Leviathan lays the groundwork for Hobbes's entire political project by meticulously analyzing human nature and the fundamental principles that govern individual interactions. Hobbes begins by defining motion and sense, asserting that all mental phenomena can ultimately be reduced to physical processes. This mechanistic view of humanity is critical because it informs his understanding of human desires, fears, and motivations, which he posits as the driving forces behind all human actions. He meticulously details the qualities and faculties of mankind, emphasizing equality in physical and mental capacities, a seemingly benign observation that paradoxically leads to his stark conclusion about the inevitability of conflict in a state of nature. Understanding this first part is essential, as it directly underpins his subsequent arguments for the necessity of a sovereign power.

Chapter XIII: Of the Natural Condition of Mankind, as Concerning Their Felicity, and Misery

This chapter is arguably the most famous and foundational in Leviathan. Hobbes describes the "state of nature" not as a historical epoch, but as a hypothetical condition where individuals exist without any overarching authority to govern them. In this state, he argues, life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." The primary drivers of human action in nature are self-preservation and the pursuit of power. Because individuals are roughly equal in their capacity to harm one another, and because resources are scarce, a perpetual state of war of "all against all" (*bellum omnium contra omnes*) emerges. There is no industry, no agriculture, no arts, no society, and worst of all, a continual fear of violent death. This bleak assessment of humanity's natural condition serves as the primary justification for the need

for civil society and government.

Chapter XIV: Of the First and Second Laws of Nature, and of Contracts

Hobbes introduces the concept of "Laws of Nature," which he defines not as immutable moral laws in a philosophical sense, but as prudential rules derived from reason that guide individuals toward self-preservation. The first and fundamental law of nature is to seek peace and follow it. The second law of nature dictates that to achieve peace, individuals must be willing to lay down their right to all things, provided that others are also willing to do so, and to be contented with as much liberty against others as he would allow others against himself. This mutual renunciation of rights is the basis of contracts, which are essential for establishing a commonwealth. However, Hobbes is keenly aware of the limitations of contracts in the state of nature, as they are unenforceable without a power to compel adherence. This leads directly to the need for an artificial person, the sovereign.

Chapter XVII: Of the Causes, Generation, and Definition of a Commonwealth

Following his analysis of human nature and the laws of nature, Hobbes explains the generation of a commonwealth. He argues that the fear of death and the desire for a more commodious life compel individuals to escape the state of nature by entering into a social contract. This contract is not an agreement between the people and the sovereign, but an agreement among the people to surrender their natural rights to a third party – the sovereign. This sovereign power, whether a monarch, an aristocracy, or a democracy, is created to enforce the laws and provide security. The commonwealth, or Leviathan, is an artificial person, endowed with immense power, representing the will of all its subjects, whose primary function is to maintain peace and order by wielding absolute authority.

Part II: Of Commonwealth - The Architecture of Sovereignty

Having established the necessity and formation of a commonwealth, Hobbes dedicates the second part of Leviathan to detailing the nature, rights, and powers of the sovereign, as well as the liberties of the subjects. This section is crucial for understanding the practical implications of his political theory. Hobbes elaborates on the different forms of government and the mechanisms through which sovereign power is maintained and transferred. He meticulously outlines what the sovereign can and cannot do, and crucially, what rights subjects retain, which are surprisingly limited but essential for the functioning of the commonwealth. This part of the book is a direct

response to the chaos he envisioned in the state of nature, proposing a robust and centralized authority as the only viable solution.

Chapter XVIII: Of the Rights of Sovereigns by Institution

This chapter defines the absolute and indivisible nature of sovereign power once it has been established by institution (through agreement). The sovereign is not a party to the contract and therefore cannot breach it. The subjects, by instituting the sovereign, have transferred all their rights to it, with the sole exception being the right to self-preservation. Consequently, the sovereign has the right to make laws, judge controversies, wage war and peace, control opinion, and punish subjects. Rebellion is considered illegitimate because it would mean returning to the state of nature. Hobbes argues that no sovereign can be unjust, as their actions, by definition, are authorized by the subjects who created them. The sovereign's power must be absolute to prevent the descent back into chaos.

Chapter XIX: Of the Several Kinds of Commonwealth by Institution, and of Succession to the Sovereign Power

Hobbes categorizes the forms of commonwealth based on the number of individuals who hold sovereign power: monarchy (one person), aristocracy (a few persons), and democracy (all persons indifferently). He expresses a clear preference for monarchy, arguing that it is the most stable and efficient form of government because the private interests of the monarch are more likely to align with the public interest than those of an aristocracy or democracy. He also addresses the critical issue of succession, explaining how sovereign power can be passed on, particularly in monarchies, to ensure continuity and prevent disputes that could lead to civil war. The methods of succession must be clearly defined to maintain the integrity of the commonwealth.

Chapter XXI: Of the Liberty of Subjects

Despite his emphasis on absolute sovereignty, Hobbes does not entirely negate the concept of liberty for subjects. He defines liberty as the "absence of external impediments." Subjects retain liberty in those areas where the sovereign has not made laws or where the sovereign's commands are silent. This means that subjects are free to do anything that the sovereign has not forbidden. Furthermore, the fundamental right to self-preservation means that subjects are not obligated to obey a sovereign command that directly threatens their life, as this would contradict the very purpose for which sovereignty was instituted. However, this liberty is highly circumscribed and dependent on the sovereign's will and the existence of laws.

Part III: Of a Christian Commonwealth - The Intersection of Religion and State

The third part of Leviathan delves into the complex and often contentious relationship between religious authority and civil sovereignty, particularly within the context of Christianity. Hobbes, a keen observer of the religious wars of his time, sought to subordinate religious institutions to the power of the sovereign to prevent religious disputes from undermining political stability. He critically examines biblical texts and ecclesiastical doctrines, arguing that the Church, as an institution, possesses no inherent power independent of the sovereign. This section highlights Hobbes's efforts to reconcile his political philosophy with Christian scripture, arguing that true Christianity, as understood through scripture, does not necessitate a separate, divinely ordained political authority.

Chapter XXXIX: Of the Signification of "Kingdom of Heaven"

Hobbes reinterprets the concept of the "Kingdom of Heaven" as presented in scripture. He argues that the "Kingdom of Heaven" was understood by the Jews of the Old Testament as a temporal kingdom ruled by God directly through a covenant. After Christ's ascension, and until the final judgment, the earthly kingdom of God is the dominion of those who govern under Christ's laws, which are made manifest through his appointed ministers or, more commonly, through civil sovereigns who have submitted to Christian doctrine. He contends that the promised "Kingdom of Heaven" for the faithful is primarily a future, spiritual reward, rather than a present, earthly political structure.

Chapter XLIII: Of Such Things as Hinder or Deface the Kingdom of God

In this chapter, Hobbes identifies various factors that hinder or deface the "Kingdom of God," which he equates with the civil commonwealth living according to God's laws. He criticizes doctrines that attribute temporal power to the Church, such as the absolute authority of the Pope, and emphasizes that such claims are detrimental to the peace and stability of the commonwealth. He also addresses the dangers of attributing scripture to divine inspiration in a way that bypasses the authority of the sovereign to interpret it. For Hobbes, any doctrine that leads to disobedience of the civil sovereign or promotes division within the commonwealth is a threat to God's kingdom on Earth.

Part IV: Of the Kingdom of Darkness - The

Perils of Ignorance and Superstition

The final part of Leviathan is a powerful and scathing critique of what Hobbes perceives as the forces that obscure truth and lead individuals and societies astray. He labels this realm the "Kingdom of Darkness," attributing it to the influence of superstition, false doctrines, and the misinterpretation of scripture. This section is less about political theory and more about combating the intellectual and spiritual forces that Hobbes believed were responsible for societal unrest and the undermining of rational governance. His target is often the established Church and the philosophical traditions that, in his view, promoted ignorance and fear for their own gain.

Chapter XLIV: Of That What Is Meant by Darkness

Hobbes defines "darkness" metaphorically as ignorance and the absence of true knowledge. The "Kingdom of Darkness" is thus a realm where people are kept in ignorance by various means, often for the benefit of those in power, particularly religious authorities. He argues that the primary source of this darkness is the misinterpretation and manipulation of scripture, along with the proliferation of obscure philosophical doctrines that are not grounded in reason or empirical observation. This intellectual darkness, he contends, prevents people from understanding their true interests and the proper basis of civil society.

Chapter XLVI: Of Darkness from the Multitudinous Heap of Obscure Sentences

This chapter specifically targets the use of convoluted and incomprehensible language, particularly in theological and philosophical discourse, as a tool for obscuring truth and maintaining power. Hobbes criticizes scholars and theologians who employ obscure metaphors, ambiguous terms, and complex syllogisms to impress rather than enlighten their audiences. He argues that such obfuscation leads to superstition and error, preventing individuals from exercising their reason and understanding their obligations to both God and their sovereign. The proliferation of such "obscure sentences" creates a fertile ground for intellectual and spiritual manipulation.

Chapter XLVII: Of the Empire of Spirits, Invoked by the Laws of Nations

In his final significant chapter, Hobbes addresses the concept of spirits, particularly in relation to the invocation of supernatural entities and the perceived power of sorcery and demonic influence. He dismisses these beliefs as products of ignorance and superstition, arguing that they are often used to instill fear and obedience. He critiques the idea that there exists an independent empire of spirits that can interfere with human affairs or

challenge the authority of the sovereign. Hobbes insists that all power, even that attributed to spirits, must ultimately be understood through the lens of natural and civil law, and that any belief in an autonomous spiritual realm capable of political influence is a dangerous delusion that contributes to the "Kingdom of Darkness."

Conclusion: The Enduring Legacy of Hobbes's Leviathan

Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan remains a monumental work in the history of political thought, offering a systematic and often challenging perspective on the nature of society, government, and human beings themselves. Its detailed chapter breakdown reveals a carefully constructed argument that moves from the individual to the collective, from the abstract to the practical. The enduring power of Leviathan lies not only in its stark depiction of the state of nature and the necessity of a sovereign but also in its sophisticated analysis of the intricate relationship between power, law, religion, and human psychology. The concepts explored within its chapters continue to inform debates on state sovereignty, individual rights, and the fundamental requirements for social order, making a thorough understanding of its structure and content invaluable for anyone seeking to grasp the foundations of modern political philosophy.

FAQ

Q: What is the primary purpose of Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan?

A: The primary purpose of Thomas Hobbes's Leviathan is to provide a philosophical justification for absolute sovereignty and to demonstrate how a strong, centralized government is necessary to prevent civil war and maintain social order, thereby protecting individuals from the perils of the state of nature.

Q: How does Hobbes define the "state of nature" in Leviathan?

A: Hobbes defines the "state of nature" as a hypothetical condition of humanity without any sovereign power to govern. In this state, he argues, life is a "war of all against all," characterized by constant fear, competition, and the absence of any form of industry, culture, or justice, leading to a life that is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short."

Q: What is the social contract according to Hobbes

in Leviathan?

A: According to Hobbes, the social contract is an agreement among individuals to surrender their natural rights and freedoms to a sovereign power. This surrender is not to the sovereign itself, but among the individuals, to create an artificial person (the commonwealth or Leviathan) that will enforce peace and order.

Q: What are the key rights of the sovereign as outlined in Leviathan?

A: The key rights of the sovereign in Hobbes's Leviathan are absolute and indivisible. They include the right to make laws, to judge controversies, to wage war and peace, to control opinion and the dissemination of doctrine, and to punish subjects, all with the ultimate aim of preserving peace and security.

Q: How does Hobbes address the role of religion in Leviathan?

A: Hobbes argues for the subordination of religious authority to civil authority. He contends that the sovereign must have the power to determine religious doctrine and practice within the commonwealth to prevent religious disputes from leading to civil unrest and to ensure that religious belief does not undermine the sovereign's power.

Q: What does Hobbes mean by the "Kingdom of Darkness"?

A: By the "Kingdom of Darkness," Hobbes refers to a state of ignorance and superstition perpetuated by false doctrines, obscure philosophical language, and the manipulation of scripture, often by religious authorities. He views this as a significant threat to rational governance and social stability.

Q: Which form of government does Hobbes favor in Leviathan and why?

A: Hobbes favors monarchy as the most stable and effective form of government. He believes that the private interests of a monarch are more likely to align with the public good than those of an aristocracy or democracy, and that monarchy is less prone to internal division and conflict.

Q: Can subjects rebel against the sovereign in

Hobbes 's Leviathan?

A: In Hobbes's Leviathan, subjects generally cannot rebel against the sovereign because doing so would mean returning to the state of nature, which is the worst possible condition. The only exception is if the sovereign directly threatens a subject's life, as the fundamental right to self-preservation cannot be surrendered.

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