

Leviathan

'During the time men live without a common Power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called Warre; and such a warre, as is of every man, against every man . . . In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain; and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continuall feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.'

The most famous passage from a masterpiece of political philosophy, this dystopic vision of humankind is painted by the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes in his book *Leviathan*, published in 1651. Dejected in the

«In the first place, I put for a generall inclination of all mankind, a perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death.»

Thomas Hobbes, 1651

immediate aftermath of the English Civil War, Hobbes presents a picture of humanity that is consistently pessimistic and bleak: a vision of humans, living in an imagined 'state of nature', who are isolated, self-interested individuals whose sole object is their own security and their own pleasure; who are constantly in competition and conflict with one another, concerned only to get their own

Social contracts

The idea of taking a legal contract as a model for understanding the workings of a state has appealed to several philosophers since Hobbes. Entering into a contract confers on one who is party to it certain rights and imposes certain obligations; a parallel form of justification, it may be supposed, underlies the system of rights and obligations that exists between the citizens of a state and the authorities that control it. But precisely what kind of contract is meant or implied here? The contract between citizen and state is not meant literally, and the 'state of nature' that is imagined to exist in the absence of civil society is likewise hypothetical, intended as

a device to distinguish natural and conventional aspects of the human condition. But then we may wonder, as did Scottish philosopher David Hume, what weight can be put on such hypothetical notions when determining the actual powers and prerogatives of citizen and state.

Hobbes's most influential successor was the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau whose work *The Social Contract* was published in 1762. There have since been a number of more recent social-contract theorists (or 'contractarians'), most significantly the US political philosopher John Rawls (see page 181).

retaliation in first; amongst whom no trust and hence no cooperation is possible. The question for Hobbes is how individuals mired in such wretched and relentless discord can ever extricate themselves. By what means can any form of society or political organization develop from such unpromising origins? His answer: 'a common Power to keep them all in awe'; the absolute power of the state, symbolically named 'Leviathan'.

'Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words' It is, in Hobbes's view, everyone's natural instinct to look after their own interest,

The noble savage

Hobbes's bleak view of humans in the 'state of nature' (i.e. unrestricted by social and legal conventions) is not shared by his French successor, Rousseau. Where Hobbes sees the power of the state as a necessary means of taming people's bestial nature, Rousseau considers that human vice and other ills are the product of society – that the 'noble savage', naturally innocent, contented in the 'sleep of reason' and living in sympathy with his fellow men, is corrupted by education and other social influences. This vision of lost innocence and non-intellectualized sentiment proved inspirational for the Romantic movement that swept across Europe towards the end of the 18th century. Rousseau himself, however, was under no illusion that a return to some former idyllic condition was possible: once the fall from innocence was complete, the kind of social constraints envisaged by Hobbes were bound to follow.

and it is in everyone's interest to cooperate: only in this way can they escape from a condition of war and a life that is 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short'. If this is so, why is it not a simple matter for people in the state of nature to agree to cooperate with one another? It is no simple matter because there is always a cost to pay in complying with a contract and always a gain to be had from not complying – in the short term, at least. But if self-interest and self-preservation are the only moral compass, how can you be sure that someone else will not pre-emptively seek an advantage by non-compliance? Indeed, surely it is certain that they will

Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains. One thinks himself the master of others, and still remains a greater slave than they. How did this change come about? I do not know. What can make it legitimate? That question I think I can answer.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1782

Of beasts and monsters

Leviathan, often linked with Behemoth, is a fearsome mythical sea monster that appears in various creation stories in the Old Testament and elsewhere. The name is used by Hobbes to suggest the awesome power of the state – 'that great LEVIATHAN, or rather (to speake more reverently) . . . that Mortall God, to which wee owe under the Immortall God, our peace and defence'. In modern usage, the word is usually applied to the state, with the suggestion that it is appropriating power and authority beyond its proper scope.

seek such an advantage, so the best you can do is to break the contract first? Of course, everyone else reasons in the same way, so there is no trust and hence no agreement. In Hobbes's state of nature, long-term interest is always sure to give way to short-term gain, leaving no way out of the cycle of distrust and violence.

'Covenants, without the Sword, are but Words', Hobbes concludes. What is needed is some form of external power or sanction that *forces* people to abide by the terms of a contract that benefits them all – provided that they all abide by it. People must willingly restrict their liberties for the sake of cooperation and peace, on condition that everyone else does likewise; they must 'conferre all their power and strength upon one Man, or upon one Assembly of men, that may reduce all their Wills, by plurality of voices, unto one Will'. In this way citizens agree to cede their sovereignty to the state, with absolute power to 'forme the wills of them all, to Peace at home, and mutuall ayd against their enemies abroad'.

the condensed idea
The social contract