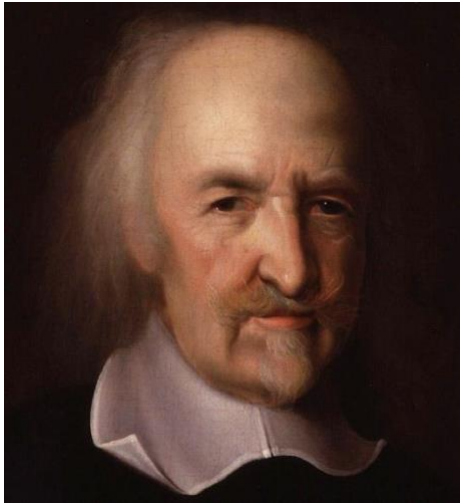


## Influential Philosophers (Major) – Readings Booklet

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### Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) - A Pessimist!



Thomas Hobbes wrote *Leviathan*. He saw the world as a mechanical system operating according to the laws of nature and therefore humans were under constant threat.

He believed that in a ‘state of nature’ (which was an arena of violence) prior to government or laws, life would be solitary, poor, nasty, and short because a ‘war of all against all’ would result from the unrestrained pursuit of wealth.

He believed that humans were driven by their needs and desires including the desire for social recognition and that the best way to fulfill their desires was by the pursuit of wealth. This universal pursuit of wealth would bring individuals in conflict with one another.

Since violence and death would be prevalent, he thought that self-interested persons would voluntarily enter into a ‘**social contract**’ with others to establish a government with absolute authority to define and protect individual rights. In other words, when man leaves the state of nature he gives up some of his independence and the right to govern himself in exchange for order, peace and safety which would be the responsibility of the sovereign (one person).

For Hobbes government cannot oppress people and government must serve the interests of the people. In addition, the individual’s pursuit of private interests is the only purpose of human existence and government is merely a necessary activity to maintain social order.

For these reasons, Hobbes preferred a monarchy because it was efficient. He believed it was better to fear one tyrant than all of your neighbours! This would also avoid civil war.

Hobbes does not fit easily on the spectrum. He is authoritarian but believes that all people equal under social contract – no one has individual rights!

## Influential Philosophers (Major) – Readings Booklet

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### John Locke (1632-1704)- *An Optimist!*



John Locke believed that individuals were self-interested, acquisitive and that man's capacity for reason enabled people to discover 'natural laws' that would serve as guides for restraining the pursuit of self-interest and defining the proper role of government

He claimed that property rights existed before government and therefore government's authority was limited to protecting those natural rights.

In *Two Treatises of Government*, Locke claimed that people's ownership of themselves and their labor is a self-evident truth. When individuals mix their labor with a part of nature unclaimed by anyone else, that portion of nature becomes their property. Since this process requires no government action or consent of others,

Locke concluded that property rights are natural and therefore no person or government can legitimately violate them. Locke argued that private property benefits everyone in society and therefore a private-property system was the best for a society.

For Locke government exists only to protect the individual rights of the people, in particular their property rights. The purpose of government was to protect men in their life, health, liberty and possessions. Government was not authorized to 'destroy, enslave or impoverish the subjects. The way this could be accomplished was by having a legislative body (a group elected by the people) that would make the laws for society.

He believed that laws rest on the will of the majority and when government does not protect their rights government can be overthrown.

The main themes of his idea of the Social Contract include:

- The government is an employee of the people and if it is not meeting the needs of the people, it should be fired. For these reasons, revolutions in society are seen as necessary.
- Individual rights of society are assumed. These include life, liberty, property.
- There needs to be separation between church and state

These ideas were all key to the development of western constitutions. John Locke is considered to be the "father" of classical liberalism and therefore is considered right wing.

## Influential Philosophers (Major) – Readings Booklet

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### Jean Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778)



Rousseau felt the Enlightenment gave knowledge but didn't necessarily make people better. He believed in more cooperation and less competition, private property was terrible, inequality = conflict.

Rousseau believed that humans need to be engaged in a community to develop fully, unlike Hobbes and Locke who saw humans as self-interested creatures (primarily concerned with their own desires and self).

In *On the Social Contract* (1762), he proposed a reorganization of society to promote greater individual freedom, equality and a sense of community.

He advocated popular sovereignty (government by the people) in which all citizens would participate in politics (government decision making). He believed in direct democracy. The experience of living in a true democracy would teach citizenship skills and the ability to merge one's personal interests (self-interests) with the public interest (collective good/group interests). The idea was there would be an ongoing debate among people which would create shared values.

Rousseau called the public interest the **General Will** and claimed that it reflected the interests of the people in their roles as citizens rather than as private individuals. The General Will could be one person or a group or the entire community, as long as the laws promoted the well-being of society. For Rousseau the purpose of government is to promote the general will and it has supreme authority. Individual rights would be determined by the General Will. Rousseau believed that individuals could conform to the General Will and still be free if they participated in establishing the institutions by which they were governed.

Once the General will had been determined, each individual would be morally obligated to obey it (these would be laws). Individuals who placed their private interests above the good of society should be 'forced to be free'. Think back to the French Revolution and Committee of Public Safety.

He believed that repressive governments were inappropriate, and he promoted individual freedom within the context of a group situation. However, some of his ideas were later used as support for authoritarian/totalitarian governments. It's difficult to place him on the spectrum too. Supports the liberal ideas of direct democracy and equality but also supports communal and authoritarian systems. For this reason, we would place him left of center.