

Leviathan chapter 17 summary

Leviathan Chapter 17 A Comprehensive Guide

**** Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*, a cornerstone of political philosophy, delves into the nature of the state, the sovereign, and the individual's relationship with both. Chapter 17, "Of the Causes, Generation, and Definition of a Common-wealth," is pivotal in understanding Hobbes' social contract theory. This guide provides a detailed summary, exploring the chapter's key arguments, implications, and its significance in the broader context of *Leviathan*.**

Understanding the Context: Hobbes' Philosophy Before diving into Chapter 17, it's crucial to grasp Hobbes' fundamental premise: the state of nature is a war of all against all, characterized by fear, insecurity, and the absence of morality. This "state of nature"

necessitates a social contract to establish order and security. Hobbes argues that only a sovereign power, absolute and unchallengeable, can ensure peace.

Step-by-Step Summary of Leviathan Chapter 17

- 1. The State of Nature as a Precursor:** Hobbes begins by revisiting the state of nature, emphasizing its inherent instability and the constant threat of violence. This vividly illustrated state of constant fear is the engine of his argument for the necessity of a commonwealth.

- **Example: Imagine a group of individuals, each seeking their own gain and without a governing body, constantly vying for resources and power. This scenario mirrors Hobbes' portrayal of the state of nature.**

- 2. The Desire for Security as a Motivator:** Hobbes argues that the fundamental human desire is for self-preservation and the avoidance of violent death. This desire, combined with the state of nature's dangers, drives individuals towards a solution: the formation of a commonwealth.

- **Example: A starving individual facing another with a weapon is far more inclined to submit to a system where both are safe than continue fighting for existence.**

- 3. The Social Contract: A Mutually Beneficial Agreement:** Hobbes outlines the social contract as a mutually beneficial agreement. Individuals willingly surrender certain rights and freedoms to a sovereign in exchange for protection and security. This agreement is essential to escape the horrors of the state of nature.

- **Example: Think of the rules and regulations in a classroom. Students must follow the rules to maintain order, and in return, they are able to learn in a productive environment.**

- 4. The Creation of a Sovereign Power:** Hobbes argues for the necessity of an absolute sovereign to enforce the terms of the social contract. This sovereign, be it a monarch, an assembly, or any other entity, must possess absolute power to prevent civil discord.

- **Example: A dictator who controls all aspects of society and punishes dissent epitomizes Hobbes' view of a necessary, though potentially tyrannical, sovereign.**

- 5. The Definition of a Commonwealth:** Hobbes defines a commonwealth as a unified group of individuals who have agreed to submit to a common authority. This authority is essential for maintaining peace, security, and order.

- **Example: The United States, with its established constitution and legal system, is an example of a commonwealth, though Hobbes' notion of absolute sovereignty is debated.**

Common Pitfalls and Best Practices

- **Pitfall: Misunderstanding the state of nature as a literal historical period, rather than a hypothetical construct.**

- **Best Practice: Acknowledge the conceptual nature of the state of nature and its use as a**

thought experiment. • Pitfall: Viewing the sovereign as inherently benevolent. • Best Practice: **Analyze the role of the sovereign in relation to the social contract, recognizing potential for tyranny.** Analyzing Chapter 17's Significance Chapter 17 lays the foundation for Hobbes' political philosophy. It outlines the reasoning behind the need for a sovereign, the nature of the social contract, and the potential pitfalls of deviating from this arrangement. This framework has profoundly influenced subsequent political thinkers and continues to be relevant in contemporary discussions about power structures and societal stability. Conclusion **Hobbes' Chapter 17 in *Leviathan* offers a powerful and controversial perspective on the origins and nature of the state. Understanding this chapter enables a deeper comprehension of his social contract theory and its profound impact on political thought. The chapter's key arguments resonate across time, prompting continued discussion and analysis.** FAQs 1. Q: What are the criticisms levelled against Hobbes' social contract theory? A: **Critics often point to the potential for abuse of power by the sovereign and the lack of protection for individual rights. The social contract can become a tool for oppression.** 2. Q: How does Hobbes' view of the sovereign differ from other political philosophers? A: *Hobbes argues for an absolute sovereign, unlike thinkers who emphasize limited government and checks on power, such as Locke.* 3. Q: Is Hobbes' "state of nature" a realistic depiction of human behavior? A: *Many scholars argue that it's a highly stylized representation of human nature, emphasizing the importance of fear and self-interest in motivating behavior.* 4. Q: How is Chapter 17 relevant in modern political discourse? A: **Questions of power, security, and the balance between individual liberties and social order remain central to modern political thought, often echoing Hobbes' concerns.** 5. Q: What is the relationship between Chapter 17 and other sections of *Leviathan*? A: **Chapter 17 serves as a foundational explanation for Hobbes' overarching argument about the necessity of a sovereign power, a theme echoed in subsequent chapters concerning the rights and responsibilities of citizens within the commonwealth.**

Leviathan Chapter 17: A Turning Point in Hobbes's Grand Design

Thomas Hobbes's seminal work, *Leviathan*, is a philosophical journey that dissects the very nature of society, government, and human existence. Within its intricate structure, Chapter 17 stands out as a pivotal moment. It's here that Hobbes transitions from the bleak, theoretical landscape of the state of nature to the practical necessity and mechanics of establishing a sovereign power. If you've been delving into Hobbes's arguments, understanding Chapter 17 is crucial for grasping the core of his political philosophy. Let's unpack this essential chapter, exploring its key themes and why it's so significant.

The State of Nature: A Necessary Precursor

Before we dive into the heart of Chapter 17, it's vital to remember what precedes it. Hobbes, in the earlier chapters, paints a stark picture of the "state of nature." This isn't a historical period, but rather a thought experiment representing life without any governing authority. In

this condition, human beings are driven by self-preservation and a constant fear of death. Without common power to keep them in awe, life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Every individual is their own judge, and conflict is inevitable due to competition, diffidence (mistrust), and glory. This bleak outlook isn't meant to be pessimistic for its own sake; it serves as the foundation upon which Hobbes builds his case for an all-powerful sovereign.

Chapter 17: The "Generation of a Commonwealth"

Chapter 17, provocatively titled "Of the Causes, Generation, and Definition of a Commonwealth," is where Hobbes lays out the escape route from the Hobbesian nightmare. He argues that the passions that lead to the state of nature, particularly the fear of death, also incline men to seek peace. This desire for peace, coupled with the understanding of the "Laws of Nature" (which, in essence, dictate that men should endeavor to preserve themselves), leads to a rational decision: to leave the state of nature and form a political society, a "Commonwealth."

The Social Contract: The Heart of the Matter

The central concept introduced and solidified in Chapter 17 is the ****social contract****. Hobbes argues that individuals, recognizing the unbearable nature of the state of nature, voluntarily agree to surrender a portion of their natural liberty and power to a common authority. This isn't a contract between the people and the sovereign, but rather a contract among the people themselves. Each person promises to obey the sovereign, and in return, the sovereign is empowered to protect them from internal strife and external enemies. This act of mutual covenant is the very foundation of political society.

Think of it like this: imagine a group of people in a room, all distrustful and ready to fight over the last biscuit. They realize this is unsustainable and will lead to everyone being hungry. So, they agree amongst themselves: "We will all give our biscuit-collecting rights to one person, Bob. Bob will then distribute the biscuits fairly, and we will all obey Bob's decisions, even if we don't always like them. In return, Bob promises to make sure everyone gets a biscuit, and no one else can steal them." This is a simplified, but useful, analogy for Hobbes's social contract.

The Nature of Sovereignty: Absolute and Indivisible

Chapter 17 is also critical in defining the nature of the ****sovereign power****. Because the purpose of the Commonwealth is to prevent a relapse into the state of nature, the sovereign must possess absolute and indivisible authority. Hobbes rejects any notion of a separation of powers or a limited government in the sense that we understand it today. The sovereign's power, once granted, cannot be rescinded or divided without undermining the very fabric of the Commonwealth and risking a return to anarchy.

This includes the power to:

1. Make and enforce laws
2. Judge disputes
3. Wage war and make peace

4. Control the means of communication and opinion
5. Punish those who break the covenant

Hobbes's reasoning is that any division or limitation of power would create avenues for dissent and conflict, effectively weakening the sovereign and endangering the peace. The sovereign is the "artificial man," the Leviathan, whose will is the will of the people, and whose strength is their collective strength.

Why We Need a Sovereign: The Escape from "War of All Against All"

The core argument for the existence of a sovereign, as presented in Chapter 17, is to escape the perpetual fear and violence of the state of nature, often referred to as the "war of all against all." While individuals might possess reason and understand the Laws of Nature, these alone are insufficient to guarantee peace. Without a coercive power, there's no guarantee that individuals will abide by these laws when their own interests or survival are threatened.

The sovereign acts as a deterrent. The fear of punishment by the sovereign replaces the fear of each other. This is a rational trade-off: individuals give up some freedom for security. Hobbes believed that this trade was not only necessary but also beneficial, as it allows for the development of arts, sciences, and commerce, which are impossible in a state of perpetual war.

Artificial Man vs. Natural Man

Hobbes's concept of the "artificial man" or the Commonwealth is a brilliant metaphor. He sees the Commonwealth as a large, complex organism created by human artifice, much like a clockwork mechanism. The sovereign is its soul, giving life and direction to the body politic. The citizens are its limbs, acting in concert under the direction of the head (the sovereign).

This contrasts sharply with the "natural man" of the state of nature, driven by instinct, passion, and immediate self-interest. The Commonwealth, through the social contract, transforms natural men into citizens, bound by law and a shared purpose.

Key Takeaways from Chapter 17

To summarize the crucial elements of Leviathan Chapter 17:

1. **The necessity of leaving the state of nature:** The inherent dangers and miseries of life without a common power drive individuals to seek a better way.
2. **The social contract:** Individuals mutually agree to surrender their rights and liberties to a sovereign authority.
3. **The generation of a Commonwealth:** This act of agreement creates the political body.
4. **Absolute and indivisible sovereignty:** The sovereign's power must be total and undivided to effectively maintain peace and order.
5. **The purpose of sovereignty:** To provide security, prevent internal conflict, and allow for societal development.

The Enduring Relevance of Hobbes's Arguments

While *Leviathan* was written centuries ago, its core arguments about the social contract, sovereignty, and the balance between liberty and security remain remarkably relevant. Chapter 17, in particular, forces us to confront fundamental questions about the nature of authority and the price of peace. Even if we disagree with Hobbes's conclusion about absolute sovereignty, his analysis of why people would voluntarily submit to a higher power to escape chaos is a powerful and enduring insight into human nature and political organization.

Understanding *Leviathan* Chapter 17 is not just about comprehending a historical philosophical text; it's about engaging with foundational ideas that continue to shape our understanding of governance, law, and the very essence of civilization. It's a chapter that demands contemplation and offers profound insights into the human condition.

Dive Deep into *Leviathan* Chapter 17: Navigating the Shifting Sands of Power Hey everyone! Welcome back to the channel. Today, we're diving deep into a truly fascinating chapter of Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan*: Chapter 17, "Of the Causes, Generation, and Definition of a Commonwealth." This is where the philosophical groundwork for the modern state really takes shape, so buckle up! Chapter 17 explores the crucial transition from the state of nature to the establishment of a commonwealth. Hobbes lays bare the reasons why people willingly surrender certain freedoms to a sovereign authority. This isn't just an academic exercise; it's a blueprint for understanding the very foundations of political organization.

The State of Nature: A World Without Rules Hobbes famously portrays the state of nature as a "war of all against all." This isn't a literal war, but rather a condition of constant insecurity and potential violence. Individuals, driven by self-preservation and competing desires, are locked in a perpetual struggle for resources and power. This bleak picture acts as a stark contrast to the ordered society Hobbes envisions as the solution. *Why is the state of nature so crucial?* The state of nature's depiction is paramount because it illustrates the human condition without a governing authority. This, in turn, reveals the inherent need for structure and security, which propels the establishment of a commonwealth. Imagine a world without traffic laws – chaos ensues. Similarly, without a state, life becomes a struggle for survival, far from comfortable.

The Social Contract: Trading Freedom for Security The core concept of Chapter 17 is the social contract. Hobbes argues that individuals willingly surrender certain natural rights – the right to judge, the right to punish, etc. – to a sovereign power in exchange for protection and order. This isn't a passive agreement; it's a deliberate trade-off, driven by self-interest. This act of surrender is the foundation of the commonwealth. *Practical Application of the Social Contract:* This idea isn't just historical theory; it underlies many modern political systems. The legal framework of most societies reflects the surrender of individual rights for the benefit of collective security. Think of traffic laws as a practical example: we surrender our freedom to drive as we please in exchange for a more orderly and efficient road system.

The Definition of a Commonwealth: The Leviathan Emerges Hobbes defines a commonwealth as a single, unified entity, ruling with absolute power. This sovereign, be it a monarch, an assembly, or another form, acts as the embodiment of the collective will. The chapter emphasizes the absolute nature of this power – a crucial point in Hobbes' philosophy. *How does the sovereign's absolute power impact stability?* Hobbes believed that absolute power is crucial for

maintaining peace and preventing the relapse into the state of nature. This strong hand prevents the chaos inherent in a decentralized system. However, this concept is highly controversial and debated even today. **Key Takeaways & Real-World Examples • Security trumps freedom:** This is the central tenet of Hobbes' argument. Individuals will willingly accept restrictions on their liberty to ensure safety and order. • **Unitary leadership fosters stability:** This is evident in societies that have historically employed strong, centralized governments. (Example: China during periods of strong leadership). • **Challenges to absolute authority:** History offers numerous examples of challenges to absolute power. (Example: The French Revolution, highlighting the limits of unchecked power). **Expert-Level FAQs** 1. **How does Hobbes' concept of the social contract compare to modern theories?** Modern contractarian theories often emphasize rights and liberties more explicitly than Hobbes. 2. **Can a commonwealth be successful without absolute power?** This remains a hotly debated point, with differing schools of thought. 3. *How does Hobbes' philosophy impact contemporary discussions on political legitimacy?* His work continues to serve as a framework for evaluating the power dynamics of states and regimes. 4. **What are the criticisms leveled against Hobbes' Leviathan, especially concerning individual rights?** Critics argue that Hobbes downplays the importance of individual liberties. 5. *How can the social contract theory be applied to international relations?* The concept of state sovereignty can be understood through the lens of a social contract, though its application on a global scale remains complex. In conclusion, Chapter 17 of Leviathan provides a profound and often unsettling look at the origins and nature of political authority. While its ideas might seem stark in a modern context, they remain relevant in understanding the ongoing struggle for order, security, and individual rights in any society. Do you have thoughts on this complex chapter? Let me know in the comments below! Thanks for watching.

Leviathan Chapter 17: A Deep Dive into the Social Contract's Foundation

Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* is a foundational text in political philosophy, a rigorous examination of the nature of sovereignty and the necessity of a powerful state. Chapter 17, titled "Of the Causes, Generation, and Definition of a Commonwealth," is pivotal. It lays bare the intellectual groundwork upon which Hobbes constructs his arguments for absolute monarchy, explaining precisely why individuals would willingly surrender their natural liberties to a sovereign entity. This chapter is not merely a historical curiosity; it offers profound insights into the enduring questions of social order, security, and the inherent fragility of human coexistence.

The State of Nature: A World Without Order

Before delving into Chapter 17, it's crucial to recall Hobbes's stark depiction of the "state of nature." This hypothetical condition, devoid of any governing authority, is characterized by perpetual conflict and fear. Hobbes famously describes life in the state of nature as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." In this anarchic existence, individuals are driven by their

appetites and aversions, constantly seeking self-preservation and advancement. The absence of a common power to keep them in awe leads to a "war of all against all" (*bellum omnium contra omnes*). There is no justice, no property, no industry, and no society. It is a state of radical insecurity where the strongest fear the weak, and the weak fear the strong.

This grim portrayal serves as the dramatic backdrop against which Chapter 17 unfolds. Hobbes argues that humans, being rational creatures, recognize the unbearable costs of this perpetual conflict. While self-interest is a primary motivator, so too is the desire for a more secure and comfortable life, which the state of nature utterly fails to provide. This is where the concept of natural laws, or precepts for self-preservation, becomes relevant. These laws, discovered through reason, dictate that individuals should seek peace and follow it. However, in the absence of enforcement, these natural laws remain mere unenforceable dictates.

The Rational Leap: From Chaos to Covenant

Chapter 17 begins by directly addressing the question: why do humans, despite their natural desire for liberty, agree to form a commonwealth? Hobbes's answer is rooted in a fundamental calculation of risk and reward. The potential for greater security and the possibility of achieving one's desires in a stable society far outweigh the perceived freedom of the state of nature. The fear of death and the desire for a commodious life are the primary engines driving this transition.

Hobbes posits that individuals, recognizing the untenability of their natural condition, are compelled by reason to seek a way out. This seeking leads to the formation of a "Covenant," a mutual agreement to lay down their right to all things and transfer it to a sovereign power. This is the genesis of the commonwealth. It is not a spontaneous event but a deliberate, rational act undertaken by individuals for their collective betterment.

The Social Contract: More Than Just an Agreement

The concept of the "social contract" is central to Hobbes's political theory, and Chapter 17 meticulously explains its generation. It is crucial to understand that for Hobbes, this is not a contract between the subjects and the sovereign, but rather a contract among the subjects themselves. They agree to authorize the sovereign to act on their behalf, to represent their wills, and to enforce their agreements. The sovereign, therefore, is not a party to the contract and cannot breach it. This distinction is vital for Hobbes's argument for absolute sovereignty.

The chapter emphasizes that the covenant is made out of fear – not the fear of the sovereign, but the fear of each other. It is an act of self-preservation that transcends individual desires for absolute freedom. By entering into the covenant, individuals surrender their natural right to govern themselves and submit to the authority of a common power. This power, once established, has the right to make laws, enforce them, and punish those who transgress them. The purpose of this sovereign power is to ensure peace and security for all its subjects.

The Sovereign: The Artificial Man

Hobbes famously likens the commonwealth to a "great Leviathan," an artificial man created by

humans. In Chapter 17, he elaborates on the nature and necessity of this sovereign. The sovereign is the embodiment of the collective will of the people, holding absolute power to prevent a relapse into the state of nature. This power is not derived from divine right but from the consent of the governed, albeit a consent given out of necessity.

The sovereign's authority is indivisible and absolute. Hobbes argues against any division of powers, as this would weaken the sovereign and invite factionalism and conflict. The sovereign is the ultimate legislator, judge, and enforcer. Its primary duty is to maintain peace and order, and to achieve this, it must possess the power to coerce. This power is the very essence of the commonwealth; without it, the covenant would be meaningless.

Why Absolute Sovereignty is Essential

Chapter 17 meticulously details why Hobbes advocates for absolute sovereignty. He believes that any limitation on the sovereign's power would inevitably lead to a weakening of its authority and, consequently, a return to the chaotic state of nature. If subjects retain certain rights or the ability to resist the sovereign, the very foundation of the commonwealth crumbles. The fear of punishment and the desire for security are the only effective means of enforcing the social contract.

Hobbes anticipates potential objections to absolute sovereignty, such as the idea that it is tyrannical or unjust. He counters that in the absence of a sovereign, there is no justice, and therefore no injustice. Tyranny, for Hobbes, is not the abuse of power but the absence of power that leads to greater suffering and insecurity for the populace. The sovereign's actions, however harsh, are justified if they preserve peace and prevent the horrors of the state of nature. This focus on security as the paramount political value is a defining characteristic of Hobbesian thought.

The Role of Fear and Reason in Political Formation

Chapter 17 underscores the dual role of fear and reason in the formation of political society. Reason dictates that the state of nature is unsustainable and that a commonwealth is necessary. Fear, however, is the potent motivator that drives individuals to act on their rational conclusions. The fear of violent death and the fear of losing all possessions compel individuals to enter into the social contract. Once the commonwealth is established, the fear of the sovereign's punishment serves as the mechanism for maintaining order.

This pragmatic, even cynical, view of human motivation is a hallmark of Hobbes's philosophy. He doesn't rely on appeals to altruism or inherent goodness but on the fundamental drives of self-interest and the avoidance of pain. This is why his political theory is often described as consequentialist; the legitimacy of political authority is judged by its ability to produce desirable outcomes, namely peace and security.

Implications and Legacy of Chapter 17

Chapter 17 of *Leviathan* is more than just a historical artifact; it continues to resonate with contemporary political discourse. Hobbes's arguments about the social contract, the necessity

of a strong state for order, and the potential for anarchy if authority collapses are themes that reappear in various forms throughout political philosophy and practice.

While many modern thinkers find Hobbes's advocacy for absolute sovereignty problematic, his insights into the fundamental questions of political legitimacy and the tension between liberty and security remain highly relevant. The chapter forces us to confront the uncomfortable reality that social order is not an automatic given but requires a deliberate and often coercive framework. It prompts us to consider what we are willing to sacrifice for peace and security, and what the true costs of anarchy might be. The enduring influence of Hobbes's ideas on political thought, particularly on concepts like sovereignty and the social contract, solidifies the importance of understanding Chapter 17 in its entirety.

In summary, Leviathan Chapter 17 provides a detailed and analytical account of why individuals, driven by reason and fear, would voluntarily relinquish their natural liberties to form a commonwealth. It explains the mechanics of the social contract, the absolute necessity of a sovereign power, and the foundational role of security in any stable political order. Hobbes's rigorous logic, even if unpalatable to some, offers a profound and enduring perspective on the human condition and the indispensable role of the state.

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Questions & Answers About leviathan chapter 17 summary

No	Question	Answer
1	What's the central conflict explored in Leviathan Chapter 17?	Chapter 17 delves into the inherent tension between individual liberty and the necessity of a strong sovereign power to maintain order and prevent a state of nature.
2	How does Hobbes use the concept of 'fear' in Leviathan Chapter 17?	Hobbes emphasizes that fear, particularly the fear of death, is a primary motivator for individuals to enter into a social contract and submit to a sovereign's authority.
3	What is the 'right of nature' as described in Chapter 17?	The 'right of nature' in Chapter 17 refers to an individual's liberty to use their own power for self-preservation, meaning they can do whatever they deem necessary to survive.
4	Why does Hobbes argue for absolute sovereignty in Chapter 17?	Hobbes argues for absolute sovereignty because he believes divided power or limitations on the sovereign would inevitably lead back to the chaos and insecurity of the state of nature.
5	What role do the 'laws of nature' play in Leviathan Chapter 17?	The 'laws of nature' in Chapter 17 are prudential rules that reason dictates for self-preservation, guiding individuals to seek peace and form covenants, thus paving the way for the commonwealth.
6	How does Chapter 17 set the stage for the creation of a commonwealth?	Chapter 17 lays the philosophical groundwork by explaining why individuals must relinquish certain natural rights and establish a common power (the sovereign) to escape the perils of the state of nature.

Leviathan Chapter 17 summary analysis, Leviathan 17 key points summary, Chapter 17 of Leviathan summary breakdown, Leviathan Chapter 17 theological summary, Understanding Chapter 17 of Leviathan, Leviathan 17 chapter summary and insights, Leviathan 17 summary critique and key themes, Chapter 17 Leviathan summary explication, Leviathan 17 theological interpretation, Summary of Leviathan Chapter 17 insights

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