

# The Divine Right of Kings

David L. Cawthon

*David L. Cawthon is T. K. Hendrick Professor of Management at Oklahoma City University. Dr. Cawthon is writing a collection of articles about what “leadership” has meant to influential philosophers and writers, and thereby how “leadership” has come to be understood in Western culture. Future articles of his to appear in the St. Croix Review include those on John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, George W. F. Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche.*

*Naturally, every man has right to every thing. —Thomas Hobbes*

**T**hroughout the history of Western civilization, never, perhaps, has there been a period more rich and illuminating than the middle centuries of the second millennium. Accordingly, as we examine the philosophic foundations of leadership, the intellectual scenery gradually becomes more glorious as we travel from the years of St. Thomas Aquinas to those of Thomas Hobbes. By the time we reach the seventeenth century, Gutenberg will have printed his bible. Columbus will have discovered America. Michelangelo will have completed his statue of David. Machiavelli will have shaken the political world with his discourse on power. Luther will have posted his ninety-five theses at Wittenburg. Henry VIII will have declare himself as supreme head of the English church. Shakespeare will have written *Hamlet*. Copernicus and Galileo and Kepler will have given humanity a new understanding of its position in the universe. A reformation, a renaissance, and a scientific revolution unparalleled in our history will have tempered the mind and the soul of humankind. In his book, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, Professor Richard Tarnas describes the period as follows:

And so between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, the West saw the emergence of a newly self-conscious and autonomous human being curious about the world, confident in his own judgments, skeptical of orthodoxies, rebellious against authority, responsible for his own beliefs and actions, enamored of the classical past but even more committed to a greater future, proud of his humanity, conscious of his distinctness from nature, aware of his artistic powers as individual creator, assured of his intellectual capacity to comprehend and control nature, and altogether less dependent on an omnipotent God.

This is the world in which we find Thomas Hobbes, one in which the dynamics of intellectual curiosity and individual responsibility would forge a new understanding of how man would perceive himself and his relationship to others.

In terms of his philosophy, Thomas Hobbes was a rationalist. Deeply influenced by the inductive empiricism of Francis Bacon, he made no *a priori*

assumptions about the nature of the universe. Since rationalism had been successful in revealing truths within the physical sciences, Hobbes held that the scientific method could be applied with equal success to human relationships. By understanding the laws of nature, he believed, man could understand his appropriate position within the leadership dyad.

Accordingly, he scoffed at the teachings of both Plato and Aristotle. For Hobbes, there was no ideal. There were no *transcendentals*. *Universals* were mere mental constructs that had nothing to do with the divine. Hobbes drew a clear distinction between philosophy and theology. If we want to understand nature, he taught, we must rely on reason. If we want to know about God, we must rely on faith and revelation. He separated the physical from the metaphysical. Consequently, his philosophy encompassed only the impersonal world of concrete experience.

Likewise, Machiavelli had significantly influenced his thought, for Hobbes gave little credence to political philosophies based upon assertions regarding man's ultimate purpose and final end. He did not begin with a premise as to what man *should* do. Instead, he based his conclusions upon his empirical observations as to what man *does* do. *Virtue* and *goodness* are not to be considered as *absolutes*, but only relative to one's experiences. What appears *good* to one may appear *evil* to another. Hobbes thus concluded that humans do not act in accordance with a final cause. Rather, they seek pleasure and avoid pain. They are driven by the passions of their nature, and these passions give rise to the formation of their social institutions.

It might be expected, then, that Hobbes would reject those teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas that viewed man as a political animal being drawn collectively toward virtue and the contemplation of God. Instead, he proposed that in a pure state of nature, there is no goodness. Every man is the enemy of every other man. Humans live in a condition of constant fear, he taught, one being pitted against the other as they attempt to escape death. In the *Leviathan*, Hobbes describes the world of primitive 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, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.

Interestingly, Hobbes does not attribute this state of continuous war and conflict to a condition of inequality among men. He does not hold that some are born superior to others, and, therefore seek to subjugate those born with less talent and ability. On the contrary, he argues that *equality*, not *inequality*, lies at the core of man's struggle. It is because all men are *equal* that they believe they can attain their needs;

it is because they are equal that no person, neither man nor woman, is willing to serve as the slave of another. Hobbes explains:

Nature hath made man so equal, in the faculties of the body, and mind; as that though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body, or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together, the difference between man, and man, is not so considerable, as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he. For as to the strength of body, the weakest has strength either by secret machination or by confederacy with others, that are in the same danger with himself.

And as to the faculties of the mind, setting aside the arts grounded upon words, and especially that skill of proceeding upon general, and infallible rules, called science; which very few have, and but in few things; as being not a native faculty, born with us; nor attained, as prudence, while we look after somewhat else; I find yet a greater equality amongst men, than that of strength. For prudence, is but experience; which equal time, equally bestows on all men, in things they equally apply themselves unto.

Yet, out of this equality comes diffidence and mistrust, for no matter how strong or how intelligent one might be, when two people desire the same thing, they become enemies to one another. As a result, they live in fear that others will want what they have, whether it be their possessions or their lives. Thus, in the state of nature, humans can never be secure. There can be no trust. There can be no pleasure. There can be no justice. There can only be fear. In keeping with the proposals of Machiavelli, Hobbes describes the plight of humans as follows:

To this war of every man, against every man, this also is consequent; that nothing can be unjust. The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law: where no law, no injustice. Force, and fraud, are in war the two cardinal virtues. Justice, and injustice are none of the faculties neither of the body, nor mind. If they were, they might be in a man that were alone in the world, as well as his senses, and passions. They are qualities, that relate to men in society, not in solitude. It is consequent also to the same condition, that there be no propriety, no dominions, no *mine* and *thine* distinct; but only that to be every man's, that he can get; and for so long, as he can keep it.

Thus, in order to escape his natural state of war, primitive man, Hobbes taught, was driven by his natural passions to seek peace. Fear and hope had motivated him to join his fellow men in order that they, together, might protect themselves from each other:

The passions that incline men to peace, are fear of death; desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a hope by their industry to obtain them. And reason suggesteth convenient articles of peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement. These articles, are they, which otherwise are called the Laws of Nature.

Hobbes' laws of nature, however, differed from those of his classical Greek ancestors. His natural law did not direct and inspire civil law. There was no divine revelation against which to measure justice. In fact, many argue that his natural laws were not *laws* at all. They were *rights*. They did not forbid. Conversely, they provided liberty. They were man's source of freedom

Drawing a distinction between a *right* and a *law*, Hobbes held that all people have the right to do *anything* necessary for their self-preservation. This *right* is his first *law* of nature. No person or social institution has the authority to deny any man this liberty. Accordingly, he concluded that *every* person has the right to *every* thing in order to maintain this liberty. In the *Leviathan* he explains:

And because the condition of man . . . is a condition of war of every one against every one; in which case every one is governed by his own reason; and there is nothing he can make use of, that may not be a help unto him, in preserving his life against his enemies; it followeth, that in such a condition, every man has a right to every thing; even to one another's body. And therefore, as long as this natural right of every man to every thing endureth, there can be no security to any man, how strong or wise soever he be, of living out the time, which nature ordinarily alloweth men to live. And consequently it is a precept, or general rule of reason, *that every man, ought to endeavour peace, as far as he has hope of obtaining it; and when he cannot obtain it, that he may seek, and use, all helps, and advantages of war.* The first branch of which rule, containeth the first, and fundamental law of nature; which is, *to seek peace, and follow it.* The second, the sum of the right of nature; which is, *by all means we can, to defend ourselves.*

From this premise, Hobbes derived his second law of nature:

*. . . that a man be willing, when others are so too, as far-forth, as for peace, and defence of himself he shall think it necessary, to lay down this right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himself.*

In brief, Hobbes concluded that within our primitive state, we live in constant fear, and the first law of nature provides us the right and liberty to do anything we deem necessary in order to defend and protect ourselves. At the same time, in order to achieve peace, nature gives us the liberty to set aside this right and form a covenant agreeing not to do harm to one other. Paraphrasing the *Golden Rule*,

Hobbes suggested that it is natural for humans to agree *not* to do unto others what they would *not* have others do unto them

According to Hobbes, one can set aside his right to do anything he wishes in one of two ways: either by renouncement or by transfer. If one agrees to renounce his right, he simply gives it up. All within the covenant do the same. On the other hand, we can willingly choose to transfer our rights to another whom we believe is capable of defending us. We can forfeit our rights to gain protection. Once they have been transferred to another, however, the covenant cannot be broken. Having transferred our rights, it is our duty to obey.

Nevertheless, Hobbes taught that some rights are beyond negotiation. No man, for example, can be forced to do anything he perceives to be harmful to himself. No man can give away his right to resist arrest or confinement. No man can be asked to wound another. He explains:

And therefore there be some rights, which no man can be understood by any words, or other signs, to have abandoned, or transferred. As first a man cannot lay down the right of resisting them, that assault him by force, to take away his life; because he cannot be understood to aim thereby, at any good to himself. The same may be said of wounds, and chains, and imprisonment; both because there is no benefit consequent to such patience; as there is to the patience of suffering another to be wounded, or imprisoned: as also because a man cannot tell, when he seeth men proceed against him by violence, whether they intend his death or not.

This covenant wherein humans willingly transfer their rights of liberty to others, then, is the foundation of Hobbes' society. It is the foundation of his civil law. For our purposes, it is the foundation of leadership, for those to whom these rights have been transferred have full authority to command obedience from those who seek their protection.

It should be noted, however, that even though one's rights might have been transferred to the sovereign, the leader is not part of the social contract itself, for the contract is only among those who have willingly agreed to the covenant, those who are to be protected. Moreover, since the sovereign makes the law, he is above the law; his authority is not to be questioned; his decisions cannot be challenged. He maintains his authority until such time that he can no longer protect the commonwealth in the *war of all against all*. Hobbes explains:

The only way to erect such a common power, as may be able to defend them from the invasion of foreigners, and the injuries of one another, and thereby to secure them in such sort, as that by their own industry, and by the fruits of the earth they may nourish themselves and live contentedly; is, to confer 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: which is as much as to say, to appoint one man, or assembly of men, to bear their person, and every one to own, and acknowledge

himself to be author of whatsoever he that so beareth their person, shall act, or cause to be acted, in those things which concern the common peace and safety, and therein submit their wills, every one to his will, and their judgments, to his judgment . . . as if every man should say to every man, *I authorize and give up my right of governing myself to this man, or to this assembly of men on this condition, that thou give up thy right to him, and authorize all his actions in like manner.*

Having established this natural evolution of social institutions, the answers to our questions regarding leadership become more apparent: *Who should lead? What gives one the right to exact obedience from another? What are the rights of those being led?* In simple terms, for Hobbes, one's ability to provide *protection* determines who should lead. *Fear* gives one the right to exact obedience from another. Leadership is rooted exclusively in one's ability to protect followers from themselves as well as their adversaries, and with the exception of those individual liberties that cannot be transferred, the rights of followers are forfeited to the sovereign. They must pay homage even if the leader is a tyrant, for according to Hobbes, tyranny is preferable to man's condition in his primitive state of nature. He explains:

And though of so unlimited a power, men may fancy many evil consequences, yet the consequences of the want of it, which is perpetual war of every man against his neighbour, are much worse. The condition of man in this life shall never be without inconveniences, but there happeneth in no commonwealth any great inconvenience, but what proceeds from the subject's disobedience, and breach of those covenants, from which the commonwealth hath its being. And whosoever thinking sovereign power too great, will seek to make it less, must subject himself, to the power, that can limit it; that is to say, to a greater.

Of course, Hobbes did not consider obedience within this covenant to be an infringement upon individual rights, upon individual freedoms, for he believed that we willingly do what we perceive we must do in order to protect ourselves from our natural enemies. Although we may prefer not to transfer our rights, because we are afraid, we choose to do so. He explains:

. . . when a man throweth his goods into the sea for fear the ship should sink, he doth it nevertheless very willingly, and may refuse to do it if he will: it is therefore the action of one that was free.

Likewise, in a commonwealth men freely exchange their natural liberties for the peace and protection of the leader.

However dismal and bleak such an arrangement might appear, it should be noted that according to Hobbes, man's greatest freedom is not embedded in law, but in the *silence of law*. "In cases where the sovereign has prescribed no rule," he

explains, “there the subject hath the liberty to do, or forbear, according to his own discretion.” In brief, followers are free to do anything they wish as long as there is no law against it. Thus, his social contract imposes few infringements on our daily lives, for in most of our activities, there are no laws against our behavior. As the law is silent, so, too are we free.

In response to our questions regarding those who should lead within our societies, Hobbes made no distinction between men and women. Although he believed men to be more fitted “for actions of labour and danger,” he also held that humans are equal. “And whereas some have attributed the dominion to the man only, as being of the more excellent sex; they misreckon in it,” he writes. “For there is not always that difference of strength, or prudence between the man and the woman, as that the right can be determined without war.” Women are as capable as men in their ability to instill fear.

Perhaps, the most seemingly incongruent facet of Hobbes’ understanding of the leadership dyad, however, is his assertion that freedom of religion must not be tolerated within a society. Although many have questioned his motives, in the later chapters of the *Leviathan*, Hobbes notes that the king is God’s only representative on earth. Such a proposal would hardly seem appropriate to a rationalist, to one who had been accused of atheistic totalitarianism. Indeed, his critics suggest that such a doctrine was most convenient for Hobbes at a time of religious turbulence when the populace was in a state of uprising against its king. Regardless, his teachings gave rise to the concept of the *Divine Right of Kings* within Western society. In defense of his king against the attacks of the papacy, Hobbes held that the authority of the king is the authority of God; it cannot be questioned; there can be no appeal to a higher power. To disobey the king is to disobey God.

If a man therefore should ask a pastor, in the execution of his office, as the chief-priests and elders of the people (*Matt.xxi.23*) asked our Savior, *By what authority doest thou these things, and who gave thee this authority?* he can make no other just answer, but that he doth it by the authority of the commonwealth, given him by the king, or assembly that representeth it. All pastors, except the supreme, execute their charges in the right, that is by the authority of the civil sovereign, that is *jure civili*. But the king, and every other sovereign, executeth his office of supreme pastor by immediate authority from God, that is to say, in *God’s right* or *jure divino*. And therefore none but kings can put into their titles a mark of their submission to God only, *Dei gratia rex, &c.*

Undoubtedly, the influence of Thomas Hobbes regarding our understanding of leadership is significant, for he was among the first in Western civilization to construct a covenant among followers within the dyad, a covenant based on the dark side of humanity. He expanded the practical advice of Machiavelli to his prince into a systematic discourse on human relationships. When we read Hobbes we find little mention of *goodness*, or *beauty*, or *altruism*. Instead, we find *hostility*,

and *chaos*, and *conflict*. According to Hobbes, leadership is not based on a vision of the common good. It is based on *fear*. It is based on *fraud*. One's ability to lead is measured in terms of his ability to protect his followers from themselves. In many ways, leadership under Hobbes is similar to leadership within Augustine's City of Man. It is rooted in deception and despair.

Certainly, within the more developed societies of our culture, there are decreasing numbers of examples regarding the leadership dyad of Hobbes. Few nations in the Western world continue to base the authority of their leaders on the Divine Right of Kings. Nevertheless, many leaders assume highly authoritative postures within their companies and organizations in a manner that resembles the monarchs of Thomas Hobbes. They are self-serving. They are self-indulgent. Their concern is not the well-being of their employees, it is simply to maintain power, whether through fear or fraud or deceit. They command blind obedience from their people. They are not to be questioned, for it is their belief that challenged authority can only lead to chaos, and within a state of chaos, neither jobs nor people can be adequately protected. As in the *Leviathan*, employees have few liberties within these authoritarian organizations, for in the minds of the executives, individuals have set aside their rights as a condition of employment. Exceptions to the employee rights granted by management are not to be tolerated.

Except in the more underdeveloped societies of Western culture, authoritarianism within our organizations, however, seems to be on the wane. With leadership styles based on participation and delegation proving to be more productive in terms of effectiveness and efficiency, fear is used less frequently as a motivational tool. Followers are not threatened. They are respected. They are not coerced. They are nurtured and encouraged to develop their individual talents.

Nevertheless, there continue to be sweat-shop environments where leaders capitalize on the innate fears of those who live on the margins of our society. There continue to be leaders who link their civil authority to heavenly authority. There continue to be those who advocate a *dog-eat-dog* perspective regarding human relationships. Whether such leaders function in political organizations, corporations, religious groups, or other social institutions, the philosophical foundation of their leadership can be traced directly to the writings of Thomas Hobbes.

The teachings of Hobbes, however, would not go unquestioned. His understanding of natural law and individual rights would be challenged. The meaning of a social contract would be debated. For the revolution in political thought brought about by the reformation and the renaissance did not end with Thomas Hobbes. The enlightenment of Western man was just beginning, and those who would follow Hobbes would reshape our understanding of the leadership dyad. Not only would the impact of their thought threaten authority throughout Europe, it would fuel the fire of an American revolution.  $\Omega$