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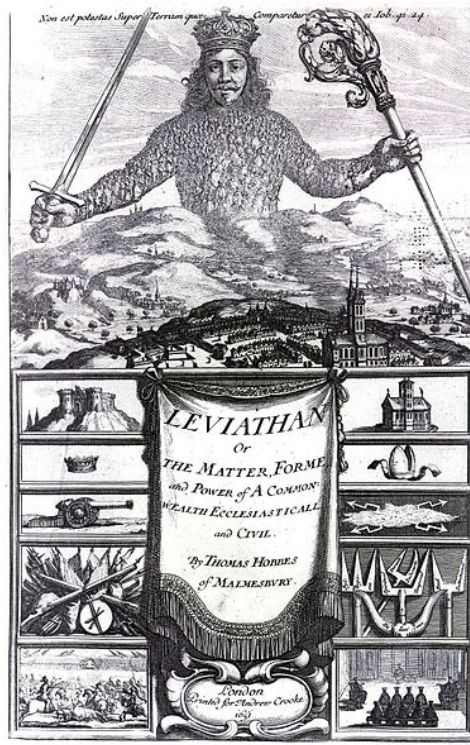
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## Historical Context for Leviathan



Frontispiece engraving of Leviathan by Thomas Hobbes by Abraham Bosse, 1650. (Wikimedia Commons)

John Rawls said in his lectures on Hobbes that, "in [his] own

view and that of many others, Hobbes's *Leviathan* is the greatest single work of political thought in the English language." Central to his justification for this acclaim is the extraordinary scope of the *Leviathan*. This short introduction to the *Leviathan* will focus on following three core topics of Hobbes's Social Contract Theory, as presented in the *Leviathan*: the Contractual Agreement, the State of Nature, and Absolute Sovereignty.

## Relates to:

[Leviathan](#)

Hobbes is generally recognized as the modern father of Social Contract Theory, which was also central to the political and moral theories of John Locke, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Immanuel Kant, and more recently John Rawls. At its basis in political theory, Social Contract Theory among the individuals of a political state confers legitimacy on the authority of the state to promulgate, to interpret, and to execute the civil laws to which these individual bind and obligate themselves. According to Hobbes, "A *commonwealth* is said to be *instituted*, when a *multitude* of men do agree, and *covenant*, every one, with every one, that to whatsoever man, or assembly of men, shall be given by the major part, the *right to present* the person of them all (that is to say, to be their *representative*;) every one, as well he that *voted for it*, as he that *voted against it*, shall *authorize* all the actions and judgments, of that man, or assembly of men, in the same manner, as if they were his own, to the end, to live peaceably amongst themselves, and be protected against other men" (*Leviathan* 2.XVIII.1). Hobbes argues that it is rational for individuals existing outside of a political state to divest

themselves of their natural right to pursue their rational interests without limit and to bind themselves to the will of a sovereign political authority. For Hobbes, it is the rationality of living within a political state that ultimately justifies both the legitimacy of sovereign authority and the legitimacy of the contractual agreement itself. As Part I of the *Leviathan* argues, the inevitable dreadfulness of the state of nature (more on which below) renders it rational for individuals to relinquish most of their basic freedoms in order to obtain the valuable security provided by a political state, even one with absolute power. On this point, Hobbes parts ways with later social contract theorists, like Locke and Rousseau, who aim to ensure that a state instituted by a social contract preserves the freedom of individuals while also providing for their security and the conditions for cooperative living.

Importantly, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau all concur that the social contract is a sort of hypothetical justificatory device. For a political authority to have legitimacy, it need not be the case that there ever was an actual, historical contractual agreement. The social contract serves as a sort of thought experiment: given the threat of political society falling into war and dissolution (salient in Hobbes's mind given the English Civil War), all individuals should reflect that they have a rational interest in supporting an effective sovereign authority, and thus that they would consensually agree to support such an authority when faced with the alternative of devolving into a State of Nature.

Within Social Contract Theory, the State of Nature is understood as the condition of human life outside of any sovereign authority or political state. Often, it is illustrated by an imaginative reconstruction of what life and human interactions would have been like before the institution of political states. Crucially, for Hobbes, the state of nature is tantamount to a State of War, wherein he famously describes human life as being "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" (*Leviathan* 1.XIII.9). While this state of nature need not consist of a constant, violent struggle, it is marked by the ever-present threat of violence. It is important to understand that Hobbes's state of nature is not a state of war because human beings are naturally bloodthirsty, evil, or even dispositionally aggressive towards each other. Rather, the state of nature is a state of perpetual unrest simply as a result of individuals—relatively equal in strength of body and mind—rationally pursuing their fundamental interest in obtaining a secure and commodious life. By rationally pursuing the means to subsisting with moderate comfort, individuals enter into competition with each other over scarce and indivisible resources. Such competition results in a world of mutual distrust and enmity, which may be augmented by the disposition for glory—the desire to be recognized as having preeminent standing over others. Hobbes's argument that the state of nature is tantamount to a state of war sets him somewhat apart from Locke and Rousseau. Although these latter two social contract theorists both admit that a state of nature may eventually devolve into a state of conflict and war, their distinct conceptions of human nature allow them to argue that the state of nature may also provide for a much more peaceable state of human coexistence than does Hobbes.

Because the state of nature is tantamount to a state of war, Hobbes argues that it is rational for individuals to exit or avoid the state of nature by relinquishing their natural rights to pursue their fundamental interests without limit and to transfer these rights to a effective Sovereign Political Authority. This transfer of rights is rational insofar as a sovereign authority is more effective at satisfying all individuals' fundamental interests (e.g.

subsistence, security, and comfort) than were these individuals to attempt to satisfy these interests on their own, without the binding legal framework of a state. According to Hobbes, the only such effective sovereign is one with absolute authority, where the absoluteness entails that this authority has total and unchecked powers of legislation, enforcement, and adjudication. Hobbes argues that were there to exist a division of sovereign authority (as we find in many contemporary democratic states, such as the US), this itself would provide the conditions for a state of war. For were these different sovereign factions to disagree and to conflict with each other (such as was the case with the Royalists and Parliamentarian factions of the English Civil War), there would be no further authority to resolve effectively the dispute so as to avoid conflict and war between the disagreeing factions. Thus for Hobbes, and in contrast to Locke and Rousseau who support versions of divided and popular sovereignty, the only legitimate form of sovereignty is one with absolute power. While Hobbes is inclined to argue that monarchy is the most effective form of absolute sovereignty, he does allow for the legitimacy of absolute sovereign rule by assembly.

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### Works Consulted

John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*

Noel Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes*

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