

# Thomas Hobbes: Balancing Dominion and Liberty

By Professor John Rogers

## A cement to bind society

When Thomas Hobbes published *Leviathan* in 1651, he set a model for the understanding of the nature, purpose and justification of government, according to principles which could for the first time be characterized as 'scientific'. At the heart of his account is the idea of a social contract: a cement which binds together the atoms of society—individual persons—in a mutually advantageous agreement to accept a central authority, the function of which is to provide the conditions under which individuals may flourish. Without that central authority things fall apart into anarchy or war, which destroys all possible civic life and prosperity.

Hobbes was born in the Wiltshire town of Malmesbury where his father, Thomas senior, was a curate. Hobbes said of himself that 'Fear and I were born twins. My mother hearing of the Spanish Armada sailing up the English channel gave premature birth to me.' The father had a reputation for being quarrelsome, and after an altercation and court case he fled the area in 1604. His son Thomas, after schooling in Malmesbury, entered Magdalen Hall, Oxford (later Hertford College) from which he matriculated in 1603.

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## Tutor to the Cavendish family

At Oxford the syllabus was the standard scholastic curriculum, dominated by the works of Aristotle. Many years later in *Leviathan* Hobbes expressed his contempt for the universities which act 'as a handmaid to the Roman religion: and since the authority of Aristotle is only current there, that study is not properly philosophy... but Aristotelity'. Yet substantial traces of Aristotle's thinking can be seen even in Hobbes' mature work. Like many other great thinkers, he believed that he had more fully escaped from his early teaching than he really had.

Although Hobbes did not distinguish himself as an undergraduate his tutor recommended him to the wealthy Cavendish family, a stroke of fortune for Hobbes that provided him with employment throughout his life. Hobbes became tutor and companion to William Cavendish, two years his junior, accompanying him to London, as a student to Cambridge, and on a continental tour to France, Germany and Italy. William went on to become a Member of Parliament, while Hobbes began to publish.

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## A universe of matter and motion

His first important work was a translation of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* (1629). By now Hobbes seemed to sense that England was moving towards civil war, and will have seen in Thucydides' account effective arguments against a national conflict. Sometime after this Hobbes discovered Euclidean geometry, which provided him with a paradigm of rational argument in which, from self-evident first principles, it was possible to prove by rigorous logic that other, less evident, propositions were also true. He went on to

develop a materialist and mechanical conception of the world in which the universe consists of nothing but matter and motion.

Combining these insights, Hobbes saw the possibility of a science of nature, which would begin from agreed definitions and from which it would be possible to deduce in a way similar to geometry, new truths about the world, man and society. This three-fold vision emerged as three works written in Latin: *De Corpore* (1655), *De Homine* (1658) and *De Cive* (1642). The last, *De Cive*, was published first, in response to the outbreak of civil war in England. It was completed in Paris, where Hobbes had fled in 1640.

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### **Nasty, brutish and short**

*Leviathan*—a fuller, English version of *De Cive* published in 1651 just before Hobbes' return to England—reveals a political philosophy that is intimately related to Hobbes' account of the natural world. Thus he takes it for granted that all change—every cause—is produced by the motion of bodies impacting one on another. He took up Galileo's principle of inertia: that an object, once set in motion, would continue to move unless acted upon by some other body.

In Hobbes' atomistic psychology imagination is described as 'dying sense'. It is the imagination which motivates people as we try to achieve goals which, until they are realized, exist only in our thought. The goals we have are the satisfaction of our desires, of which the most fundamental are the desires to go on living and to avoid pain. In the pre-social state—the state of nature—competing desires amongst essentially equal human beings for the limited supplies, generate conflict and, in Hobbes' most famous phrase, the life of man is 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'.

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### **The purpose of the state**

It clearly is to the advantage of all men to escape from this state of 'war of all against all'. But to do so requires men to give up their liberty to pursue any goal they wish and to enter into agreement or contract with other men to accept some common power to make and enforce laws over them. Thus the state comes into existence through a compact. And the power to create and enforce laws is vested in some person or persons.

Hobbes favored monarchy as the best form of government, holding that both aristocracy and democracy were less effective; but he accepted that this was to some extent an open question. The crucial step was to get an authority. It was the role of the ruler to provide the conditions under which people could live at peace with one another and to protect them from external enemies.

It is central to Hobbes' system that sovereign power is absolute, in the sense that whatever the sovereign decides is final. This famously includes the whole area of religion. As Hobbes saw it the most common source of conflict in the century, including England's civil war, were religious disagreements. For this reason he held that there must a national religion in which the sovereign was also head of the church. Not surprisingly Hobbes was hostile to the Roman church and to all other forms of independent church government.

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### **'Everything is either body or nothing'**

Hobbes' materialism—'everything is either body or it is nothing'—and his mechanical determinism soon brought against him the charge of atheism. Although it would be wrong to regard him as strongly religious there is no reason to doubt his claim that he was an Anglican, albeit with Calvinist leanings. He is often regarded as sanctioning absolutism, but he would reply that all that he had done was to describe the way in which societies actually work and that unless this was recognized the outcome would be disorder and social disaster.

Hobbes remained close to the Cavendish family from the Restoration of 1660 until his death at the age of 91 at Hardwick Hall in 1679. Whilst in France he had been mathematics tutor to the young exiled Charles II and remained a favorite with his monarch until his death, though the pension that Charles granted him was only rarely paid. His ability to invite dispute at the court led the young bloods to gather to 'bait the bear'.

His published works caused an enormous amount of controversy in his own lifetime, and indeed have done ever since. But few would deny the intellectual power of his analysis, the rhetorical force of his English prose, or his place in the very first rank of political philosophers. He remains a powerful presence in political theory to this day, three hundred and fifty years after the publication of his major work.