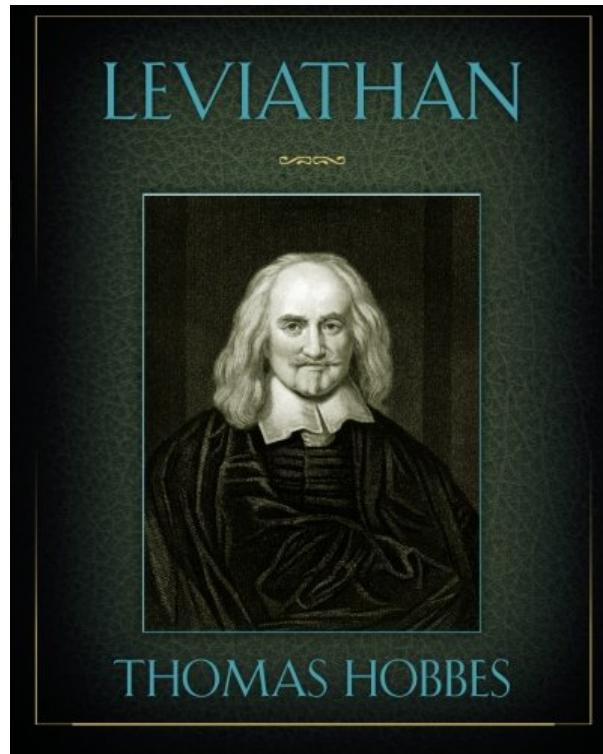
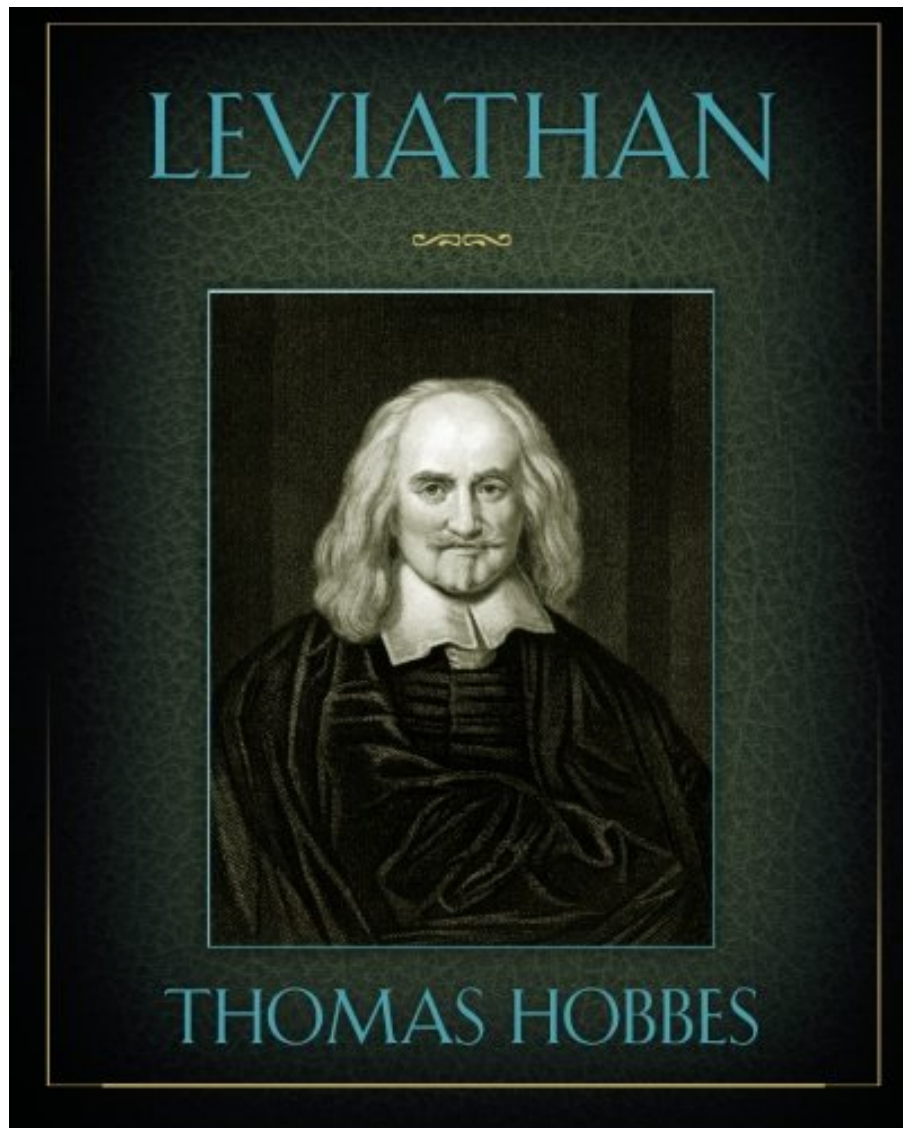


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“Leviathan” is a work of political philosophy. Written by Thomas Hobbes during a time of civil war, it argues that sovereign rule is the most stable form of government. An early proponent of social contract theory, Hobbes’ observations regarding the dangers of unrestrained individual freedom have influenced generations of thinkers.

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Most helpful customer reviews

145 of 159 people found the following review helpful.

Hobbes is a lot smarter than I am

By Ritesh Laud

I finished reading Leviathan a couple months ago, but cringed every time I thought about writing a review. The book is large at over 700 pages and covers so much ground, a review would have to be a book in itself to do it justice. Due to Leviathan's philosophical content and somewhat antiquated language, it's very slow going. Each page needs time to digest.

So I'm not going to bother writing a real review. I will just say that Leviathan is a 5-star classic and worth your time, if you can deal with reading political philosophy. Hobbes divides the work into four major sections:

Of Man, in which he discusses human nature and why civilized people prefer peace to war. Here Hobbes establishes the primary reason that people form a government to rule over them: to safeguard them from enemies, both external and internal.

Of Common-wealth, in which Hobbes first talks about the several forms of government and the pros and cons of each. He then explains the rights that a government has over its people; according to Hobbes, the government can do pretty much anything it wants to. Finally he goes into the things that tend to weaken or dissolve a government.

Of a Christian Common-wealth, the longest section, in which Hobbes accepts the Bible as the word of God and quotes from it numerous time to bolster his position in support of a powerful government.

Of the Kingdome of Darknesse, the shortest and strangest section, in which Hobbes veers away from the topic of government and instead focuses on religious practices and beliefs of the day that he deems improper and inconsistent with the Bible.

It took me months to read this, but I came away with great respect for Hobbes and a better understanding of politics. I can't say that I agree with everything I read, but I think the majority of his arguments are sound and convincing.

Five stars, no doubt in my mind. But it's a dive into the deep end, so you'll probably only finish it if you really appreciate and enjoy philosophical discussion!

84 of 93 people found the following review helpful.

PROMETHEUS edition is only first half.

By A Customer

Like most books, Thomas Hobbes' Leviathan is divided into chapters. But it is also divided into four "Parts." The Prometheus edition (not to be confused with the Penguin edition) includes only the first two parts, though they sell it as if it were the entire book instead of only the first half. Any other edition would be better than this.

If you want a good edition, you could go with the Hackett edition, edited by Edwin Curley, modernized and with the important variants (translated into English, of course) from the Latin edition of the Leviathan published during Hobbes' lifetime. A good edition that is not modernized is the Cambridge edition edited by Richard Tuck. (Having an editor does NOT necessarily mean that the text has been reduced; they often serve to rid the text of previous publishing typographical errors.) Which of these you should get will depend upon two things: Whether you are interested in the variants from the Latin edition, and whether you are comfortable reading something written in the 1600's. For most people, probably the modernized Hackett edition would be best, as many people have difficulty with 17th century English. But if you want Hobbes' exact words, I recommend the Cambridge edition. Whenever buying classic texts, which edition you buy can be extremely important, as the dreadful Prometheus edition demonstrates.

63 of 70 people found the following review helpful.

The case for absolute government

By Derek Jones

Being a free Kindle edition there is no introduction and no notes - but you do get most of the text and all the passages that matter. The main difference from the original is that there are fewer capitals and italics. Hobbes used them for emphasis very much more than a modern writer would, and their pruning in this edition makes the text easier to read.

Modern political philosophy begins with Hobbes. Before Hobbes, writers for centuries had accepted the divine right of kings or did not think much about the origins of government. Hobbes provides reasons as to how and why men come together to form government. He starts with the assumption that the organized state is a choice. The alternative is the "state of nature", where there is both a "right" of nature and "laws" of nature. Hobbes uses these terms in a very individual way. The "right" of nature is "the Liberty each man hath, to use his own power...for the preservation of his own Life". The "laws" of nature dictate that each person should seek to live with others in peace, and should only retain the right to as much liberty as he is willing to permit others. These "laws" are found by reason, and are utilitarian rather than moral. Hobbes is simply saying that if men think about their situation, reason tells them that giving up their natural rights in exchange for others doing likewise is the best means of self-preservation, even though actually doing it is contrary to human nature.

On human nature Hobbes is cynical. Reason suggests advantages stem from co-operation, but unless men are

constrained by an external authority this is outweighed by instinct. Men are fundamentally competitive and selfish. They are also roughly equal in ability so no one person can impose his will on others, and the most one can hope for is to protect oneself from others. Life in the state of nature is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short." Men are therefore driven to create government via a pact with others to give up their natural rights to a sovereign authority, which may be either an individual or an oligarchy (Hobbes prefers the former). Hobbes uses the concept of a "social contract". It is not an historical event but a logical device to describe the ongoing basis of consent to government. Hobbes' view of human nature is such that he allocates absolute power to the sovereign. Limited government, he believed, is unworkable for men are too prone to division and selfishness, and "a kingdom divided against itself cannot stand." Influenced by the divisive years preceding the English Civil War, Hobbes grants the sovereign the power of censorship, including the ability to prevent discussion of religion because such discussion leads to conflict. Anybody seeking to preach a new religion should be treated as a criminal.

Had Hobbes been writing a century later then religion would almost certainly have played no part in his writings. He himself was not a religious man. His concern with religion stemmed from its role in the conflict leading to the English Civil War, a period during which he lived.

Is there an ultimate right of rebellion against the absolute ruler? The answer is to be found in the nature of the social contract. Men give up their natural right to self-preservation to a sovereign in order to better achieve it. If a situation arises where the sovereign cannot ensure that safety then society is dissolved. Can any action by the sovereign be challenged? Yes, if a man is conscripted into military service (an obvious threat to life) in circumstances where the survival of the state is not threatened. If the survival of the state is threatened then so are the lives of its citizens, and in these circumstances the sovereign can impose conscription. Hobbes adds that even in this case a citizen should have the right to replace himself with a volunteer if one is available.

"Leviathan" is not an easy book, not helped by the fact that the English is that of a man born just 24 years after Shakespeare. However, it is an important work that makes a good study companion to Locke's "Second Treatise", which argues for limited government.

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