

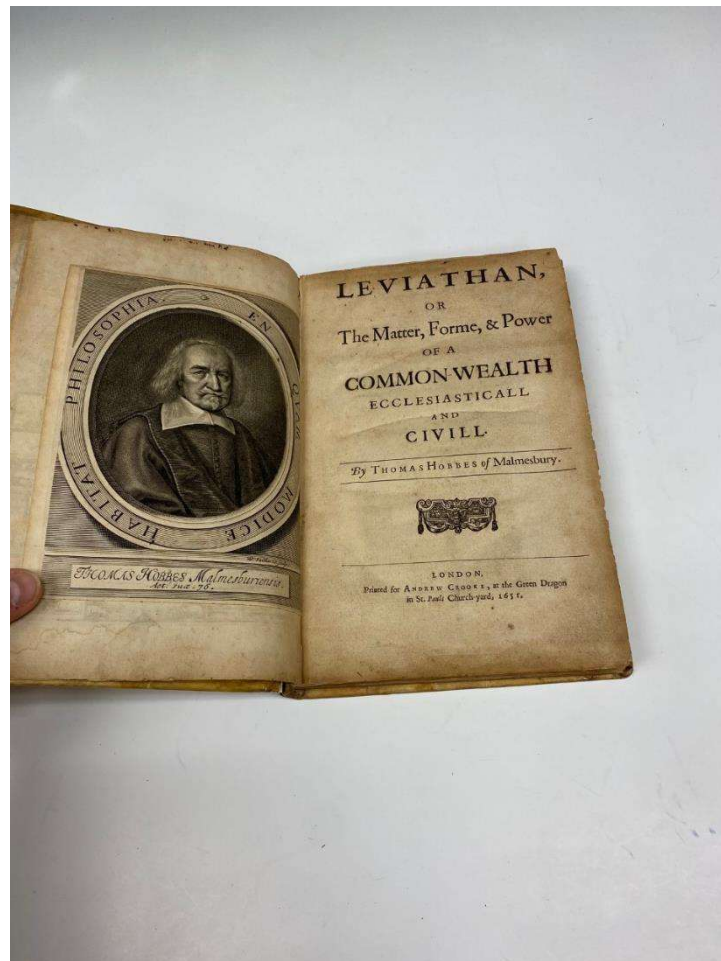
# **“Leviathan” (1651), by Thomas Hobbes: A Canonical Book**

Curated by Stephen A Batman  
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## **Summary of this Particular Rare First Edition**

**Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, 1651**







## "A POWERFUL INFLUENCE ON THE FRAMERS OF THE CONSTITUTION": FIRST EDITION OF HOBBS' LANDMARK *LEVIATHAN*, 1651

*First edition, first issue of one of the most controversial and important tracts ever written in political philosophy—"a model of vigorous exposition, unsurpassed in the language"—and a major influence on the framers of the American Constitution.*

"This book produced a fermentation in English thought not surpassed until the advent of Darwinism. Its importance may be gauged by the long list of assailants it aroused. It was placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* 7 May 1703, though all Hobbes' works had previously been condemned *in toto*, and it still remains a model of vigorous exposition, unsurpassed in the language" (Pforzheimer).

*Leviathan* also numbered among the "Pernicious Books and Damnable Doctrines" proscribed by the University of Oxford and ordered to be burnt. "Pepys, in his *Diary*, remarks on the scarcity of this work 'because the Bishops will not let it be printed again.'

Few books have caused more or fiercer controversy than this one... *The system he constructed is the most profound materialistic system of modern times*" (Rosenbach 36:345). Hobbes concluded an individual should submit to the State unless his life is threatened, because any government proves preferable to anarchy.

Although later philosophical emphasis on individual rights led to a decline in Hobbes' influence, the growth of utilitarianism resulted in his reassessment as "*the most original political philosopher of his time*" (PMM 138).

"Hobbes had a fundamentally pessimistic view of human nature... [which] had a powerful influence on the framers of the [American] Constitution... During the early years of the Revolutionary period, American leaders found Locke's revolutionary compact ideas more useful than Hobbes' view of the unlimited authority of the state. But as the political and social experience of the 1780s seemed to bear out Hobbes's pessimistic view that men are essentially self-interested, the Hobbesian outlook became more relevant. When John Adams wrote that 'he who would found a state, and make proper laws for the government of it, must presume that all men are bad by nature,' he was expressing an idea that was derived at once from Hobbes" (Lutz & Warden, *A Covenanted People*, 38).

*First issue*, with "head" (rather than "bear") ornament on letterpress title page, additional engraved title, and folding table (between leaves [F3] and [F4]). With decorative woodcut initials and headpiece. Wing H2246. Pforzheimer 491. Macdonald & Hargreaves 42. Kress 830. Owner signature to engraved title page dated February 14, 1693/4; a few leaves with neat marginal annotations.

HOBBS, Thomas. *Leviathan, or, The Matter, Forme, & Power of a Common-wealth Ecclesiastical and Civil*. London: Andrew Crooke, 1651. Small folio (7-1/2 by 11 inches), rebound in early vellum, raised bands. Housed in a custom clamshell box.

Interior generally quite clean, with a few pages with minor tears or paper repairs, including the margin of the engraved title page; a few leaves with very faint marginal damp staining, small marginal worm holing to last 80 pages. An excellent copy.

## Introduction

Thomas Hobbes's "Leviathan," published in 1651, stands as one of the most influential works in political philosophy. The book emerged during a period of intense political turmoil in England, specifically during the latter half of the English Civil Wars (1642-1651), which pitted the Royalists against the Parliamentarians in a bloody struggle for power<sup>7</sup>. This tumultuous environment profoundly shaped Hobbes's thinking about government, human nature, and social order.

Hobbes wrote "Leviathan" while in exile in France, having fled England due to his royalist sympathies<sup>2</sup>. The full title, "Leviathan: The Matter, Forme and Power of a Commonwealth Ecclesiasticall and Civil," reflects the comprehensive scope of Hobbes's ambition to create a complete theory of the state. His primary motivation was to develop a rational basis for political authority that could prevent the chaos and violence he witnessed in his homeland.

The cultural and political climate of mid-17th century England was characterized by religious disputes, constitutional crises, and the breakdown of traditional authority. The execution of King Charles I in 1649 represented a radical challenge to the divine right of kings and traditional political legitimacy. In this context, Hobbes sought to establish a new foundation for political authority based not on divine right or historical tradition, but on rational self-interest and the need for security. His materialist philosophy and his advocacy for absolute sovereignty scandalized many of his contemporaries, who viewed his ideas as atheistic and morally subversive<sup>1</sup>.

## The Author

Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) was an English philosopher whose intellectual contributions extended beyond political theory to include works in mathematics, physics, and history. Born in Malmesbury, Wiltshire, Hobbes received his education at Oxford University, though he was reportedly dissatisfied with the scholastic philosophy taught there.

Hobbes's career was closely tied to the aristocratic Cavendish family, whom he served as a tutor and secretary. These connections provided him access to intellectual circles across Europe, including the Mersenne circle in Paris, where he engaged with leading thinkers of his time<sup>2</sup>. His European travels exposed him to new scientific and philosophical ideas, particularly those of Galileo and Descartes, which influenced his materialist approach to philosophy.

The political upheavals of his lifetime profoundly shaped Hobbes's thinking. Having lived through the English Civil War, he developed a deep fear of social disorder and anarchy. His

royalist sympathies forced him into exile in France from 1640 to 1651, during which time he wrote much of "Leviathan." Upon the book's publication, its controversial ideas about religion and sovereignty made Hobbes unwelcome in both royalist and parliamentary circles.

Throughout his life, Hobbes was embroiled in intellectual controversies. He engaged in disputes with Anglican bishops and faced accusations of heresy and atheism due to his materialist philosophy and his views on religion<sup>2</sup>. Despite these controversies, Hobbes continued to write and publish until his death at the remarkable age of 91, leaving behind a body of work that would fundamentally reshape political philosophy.

## **Why this is a Canonical Book**

"Leviathan" must be included in the canon of essential books for several compelling reasons. First, it represents one of the earliest and most systematic attempts to establish a rational basis for political authority without relying on divine right or historical tradition. This secular approach to political legitimacy laid important groundwork for later democratic theories, even though Hobbes himself advocated for absolute sovereignty.

Second, Hobbes's conception of the social contract has been enormously influential in American political thought. While his conclusions about absolute sovereignty were rejected by America's founders, his method of reasoning from the state of nature to justify government through consent of the governed was adopted and transformed by John Locke and later reflected in the Declaration of Independence and Constitution<sup>7</sup>. The American system of checks and balances can be understood partly as a response to Hobbesian concerns about human nature while rejecting his solution of absolute power.

Third, Hobbes's materialist approach to human psychology and motivation represented a revolutionary break from previous political thought. By grounding politics in human nature rather than divine order, Hobbes helped establish a scientific approach to understanding society and government that continues to influence American social sciences and public policy.

Fourth, "Leviathan" articulates fundamental tensions that remain central to American political discourse: between individual liberty and collective security, between rights and obligations, and between secular and religious foundations for law and morality. These tensions continue to animate American political debates about the proper scope and limits of government power.

Finally, Hobbes's work serves as an essential counterpoint to more optimistic views of human nature and limited government that have dominated American political thought. His pessimistic assessment of human nature and his arguments for strong central authority provide a necessary challenge to American assumptions, forcing a more rigorous defense of democratic principles and constitutional limits on power.

## **Five Timeless Quotes**

1. "During the time men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war as is of every man against every man."

This quote encapsulates Hobbes's famous description of the state of nature as a "war of all against all." Its relevance today is profound as we witness the fragility of international order and the challenges of governing in divided societies. In an era of increasing polarization, the quote reminds us that without effective governance and shared norms, social cooperation breaks down. It challenges Americans to consider what binds us together as a nation beyond our individual interests and warns against the dangers of extreme individualism that undermines collective institutions.

2. "The right of nature... is the liberty each man hath to use his own power, as he will himself, for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life."

This quote articulates Hobbes's conception of natural rights, which influenced later thinkers like Locke and Jefferson. Today, it remains relevant to debates about individual rights versus collective responsibilities. Americans continue to grapple with questions about the extent of personal liberty, particularly in contexts like public health emergencies, gun ownership, and economic regulation. The quote challenges us to consider both the importance of individual liberty and its necessary limits in a functioning society.

3. "Covenants, without the sword, are but words and of no strength to secure a man at all."

This statement reflects Hobbes's realism about the necessity of enforcement mechanisms to make agreements meaningful. In contemporary America, this insight remains relevant to discussions about international agreements, constitutional enforcement, and the rule of law. It reminds us that rights and laws require effective institutions and enforcement mechanisms to be meaningful, challenging idealistic views that good intentions or moral principles alone can sustain social order.

4. "The obligation of subjects to the sovereign is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth by which he is able to protect them."

This quote reveals Hobbes's pragmatic view of political obligation as conditional on effective protection. Today, it speaks to questions about the legitimacy of government and the social contract. It suggests that government derives its authority not from tradition or divine right but from its ability to fulfill its essential functions. This perspective informs American debates about government performance, reform, and the conditions under which civil disobedience might be justified.

5. "For the laws of nature, as justice, equity, modesty, mercy, and, in sum, doing to others as we would be done to, of themselves, without the terror of some power to cause them to be observed, are contrary to our natural passions."



This quote highlights Hobbes's pessimistic view of human nature and the necessity of authority to enforce moral principles. In contemporary America, it challenges both libertarian assumptions about self-regulation and progressive assumptions about natural human goodness. It raises enduring questions about the relationship between law, morality, and human psychology that remain central to debates about criminal justice, regulation, and social policy.

## **Five Major Ideas**

### **1. The State of Nature and Human Psychology**

Hobbes presents a stark vision of human life without government as "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." This pessimistic anthropology stems from his materialist view of human motivation, which he sees as driven primarily by self-interest and fear<sup>7</sup>. In Hobbes's account, humans in the state of nature are roughly equal in physical and mental capacities, leading to competition, diffidence, and glory-seeking that inevitably result in conflict. This conception of human nature as fundamentally self-interested and potentially violent provides the foundation for his political theory and justifies the need for absolute sovereignty. While many Americans reject Hobbes's extreme pessimism, his insights about human psychology continue to influence fields from economics to international relations.

### **2. The Social Contract**

Hobbes's theory of the social contract represents one of his most enduring contributions to political thought. He argues that rational individuals, seeking to escape the dangers of the state of nature, would consent to transfer their natural rights to a sovereign power in exchange for security and order<sup>7</sup>. This idea of government legitimacy deriving from the consent of the governed, rather than divine right or tradition, profoundly influenced later democratic theory. However, Hobbes's version of the social contract differs from American conceptions in crucial ways: he believed this consent was irrevocable, and he saw no right of revolution against established authority. The tension between Hobbesian concerns about security and American commitments to limited government continues to shape political discourse.

### **3. Absolute Sovereignty**

Perhaps Hobbes's most controversial idea is his defense of absolute, undivided sovereignty. He argues that for a sovereign to effectively maintain peace, its power must be unlimited and indivisible<sup>7</sup>. Hobbes rejects separation of powers and constitutional limits on authority, seeing them as recipes for civil conflict. This position directly contradicts American constitutional principles of checks and balances, federalism, and limited government. Yet Hobbes's arguments for strong central authority continue to resonate in debates about executive power, national security, and emergency authority, particularly in times of crisis when security concerns become paramount.



#### **4. Religion and the State**

Hobbes develops a complex theory of the relationship between religious and civil authority. He argues that in a Christian commonwealth, the sovereign must have supreme authority over religious matters to prevent competing claims to obedience<sup>1</sup>. While acknowledging religious truth, Hobbes subordinates religious authority to political authority, arguing that religious doctrines should be interpreted to support civil peace. This position scandalized his contemporaries and contributed to accusations of atheism against him. In the American context, Hobbes's views contrast sharply with constitutional separation of church and state, yet his concerns about religious authority challenging civil authority remain relevant to contemporary debates about religious freedom and its limits.

#### **5. Language, Knowledge, and Power**

Throughout "Leviathan," Hobbes develops a sophisticated theory of language and its relationship to political power. He argues that clear definitions and precise language are essential to avoid the confusion and conflict that arise from ambiguity<sup>3</sup>. Hobbes sees control over language and meaning as a crucial aspect of sovereignty, anticipating later insights about the relationship between knowledge and power. This concern with linguistic clarity and the political implications of language use remains relevant to contemporary American debates about media, education, and public discourse, particularly in an era of "fake news" and information warfare.

### **Three Major Controversies**

#### **1. Materialism and Atheism**

The most immediate controversy sparked by "Leviathan" was Hobbes's apparent materialism and its implications for religion. By explaining human behavior in mechanistic terms and subordinating religious authority to civil authority, Hobbes provoked accusations of atheism and heresy<sup>1</sup>. His contemporaries were scandalized by his suggestion that religious doctrines should be interpreted to support civil peace rather than treated as absolute truths. This controversy reflects a fundamental tension between secular and religious foundations for political authority that continues to animate American political discourse. While the American system embraces religious freedom and separation of church and state, debates persist about the proper relationship between religious values and public policy, from abortion to education to same-sex marriage.

#### **2. Absolute Sovereignty versus Limited Government**

Hobbes's defense of absolute, undivided sovereignty directly contradicts the American constitutional tradition of limited government, separation of powers, and federalism. His rejection of the right to revolution and his dismissal of constitutional constraints on authority place him at odds with core American political values<sup>7</sup>. This controversy reflects a fundamental

tension in political thought between security and liberty, between effective governance and protection against tyranny. In contemporary America, this tension manifests in debates about executive power, emergency authority, and the proper scope of government regulation. Hobbes's arguments for strong central authority continue to challenge American assumptions about the virtues of limited government and constitutional constraints.

### **3. Human Nature and Social Order**

Hobbes's pessimistic view of human nature as fundamentally self-interested and potentially violent contradicts more optimistic traditions in American thought that emphasize human capacity for cooperation, moral development, and self-governance. His insistence that social order requires external coercion rather than natural sociability or moral sentiment challenges both religious views of human goodness and Enlightenment optimism about human perfectibility<sup>6</sup>. This controversy about human nature and its implications for social order continues to divide American political thought, with conservatives often emphasizing Hobbesian concerns about human fallibility and the need for order, while progressives tend to adopt more optimistic views about human potential and the possibility of cooperation without coercion.

## **In Closing**

Civic-minded Americans should read "Leviathan" because it forces us to confront fundamental questions about the foundations of political authority, the nature of human motivation, and the conditions necessary for social cooperation. While many of Hobbes's specific conclusions—particularly his defense of absolute sovereignty—run counter to American constitutional principles, his method of reasoning and his identification of core political problems remain invaluable.

Reading Hobbes challenges Americans to articulate more clearly why we reject absolute sovereignty in favor of constitutional government, helping us to understand and defend our own political traditions more effectively. His pessimistic assessment of human nature and the state of nature provides a necessary counterpoint to more optimistic views, reminding us of the fragility of social order and the importance of effective governance.

Furthermore, Hobbes's insights about the social contract, though transformed by later thinkers like Locke and Rousseau, established a framework for thinking about political legitimacy that continues to inform American conceptions of government by consent of the governed. His emphasis on security as the primary function of government reminds us of essential purposes that can sometimes be overlooked in discussions focused primarily on rights and liberties.

Finally, at a time of increasing polarization and challenges to democratic norms, Hobbes's warnings about the dangers of civil conflict and the breakdown of authority have renewed relevance. His vivid depiction of life without effective governance serves as a sobering reminder of what is at stake in maintaining functional political institutions and social cooperation.

In sum, while "Leviathan" is not a blueprint for American governance, it remains an essential text for understanding the problems that any political system must address and the tensions inherent in balancing security, liberty, and order. For civic-minded Americans committed to preserving and improving our democratic institutions, engaging with Hobbes's challenging vision provides invaluable perspective and intellectual tools.

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