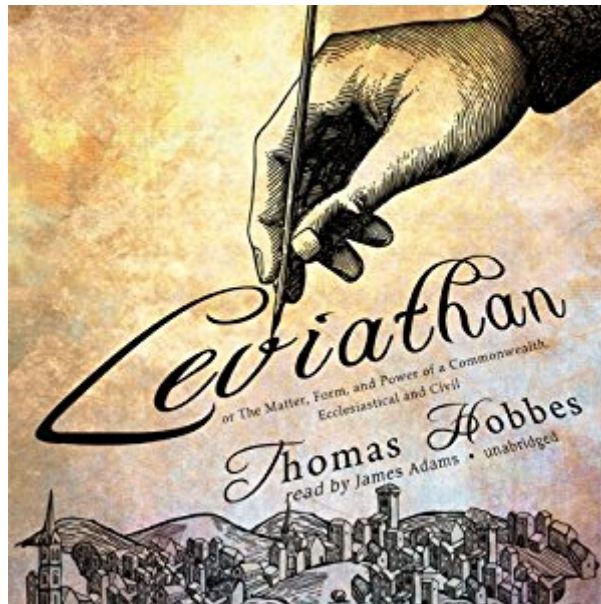


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Leviathan: Or The Matter, Form, And Power Of A Commonwealth, Ecclesiastical And Civil



Synopsis

The Leviathan is the vast unity of the State. But how are unity, peace, and security to be attained? Hobbes' answer is sovereignty, but the resurgence of interest today in Leviathan is due less to its answers than its methods: Hobbes sees politics as a science capable of the same axiomatic approach as geometry. Written during the turmoil of the English Civil War, Leviathan was, in Hobbes' lifetime, publicly burnt and even condemned in Parliament as one of the causes of the Great Fire of London in 1666. Its current appeal lies not just in its elevation of politics to a science, but in its overriding concern for peace, its systematic analysis of power, and its convincing apologia for the then-emergent market society in which we still live.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

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 Commonwealth, the longest section, in which Hobbes accepts the Bible as the word of God and quotes from it numerous times to bolster his position in support of a powerful government. Of the Kingdom of Darkness, 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.

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.

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