

# Social fragmentation in the leviathan: a critique of hobbes



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Hobbes begins *Leviathan*, a primarily political work, with a description of man, whom he sees as an isolated unit, a mechanical automaton whose only connection to the outside world is through the senses. Even his thoughts are determined by external objects whose effect is translated by sensation, “for there is no conception in a man’s mind, which hath not at first, totally, or by parts, been begotten upon the organs of sense” [8]. His view of men is similar to Epicurus’s conception of atoms, a theory in which the universe consists of indivisible, eternal particles whose endless collisions affect our senses and allow us to understand the world around us. Hobbes interprets this condition, the state of nature, as one of fear and uncertainty. There are no absolute moral standards because each person experiences the world differently, finds pleasure in different things, and judges them accordingly. Hobbes assumes that the reader will be convinced by his description of human nature; he challenges him to read his portrayal of mankind and “consider if he also find not the same in himself” [8]. However, it is unavoidable that the author’s ideas are fundamentally influenced by his own particular experiences. If human beings only arrive at understanding through sense and experience, then different conditions should require a different understanding. According to his own logic, Hobbes’s theories only apply to the specific situation in which he lived. Perhaps his observations and conclusions would have been very different if he had lived in an era of peace and stability, rather than in the midst of a chaotic civil war. Hobbes’s understanding of interactions between individuals is predicated on the assumption of complete self-interest. Above all else, men are concerned with their own preservation, and they enjoy dominion over others. He claims “men have no pleasure, (but on the

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contrary a great deal of grief) in keeping company, where there is no power able to over-awe them all” [83]. Furthermore, there is no obligation, thus no inclination, to respect the rights of others in the absence of a higher authority to enforce the law, since “ in such a condition every man has a right to every thing; even to one another’s body” [87]. For Hobbes, right, wrong, and a sense of responsibility to others do not exist until the establishment of a contract. However, not everyone would agree that human nature is really so misanthropic. Within families, for example, individuals clearly do not behave as atomized units; each member is instinctively committed to the security of the others. Seeing that it is nearly impossible to survive, much less enjoy life alone, many would argue that compassion and concern in the welfare of others is as intrinsic a part of human nature as is the drive for self-preservation. At the same time, Hobbes claims that men are equal because of their similar passions and faculties. His proof that they are equally wise, for example, is that every man is satisfied with his own level of wisdom, which he defines as “ not the reading of books, but of men” [7]. However, the logic that supports this conclusion is unconvincing: “ there is not ordinarily a greater sign of the equal distribution of any thing, than that every man is contented with his share” [82]. It is just as likely that men are contented with what they possess when they are unable to compare it with what others have and cannot imagine having anything else. In any case, if men are equally wise, why should one man have dominion over others? Shouldn’t a leader with absolute power over his subjects have a superior understanding of men in order to properly represent them? The reader is thus left at a loss as to how the Leviathan deserves his authority.

Hobbes tries to resolve this dilemma by claiming that the laws on which a <https://assignbuster.com/social-fragmentation-in-the-leviathan-a-critique-of-hobbes/>

civil society is based can only be understood with reason, a faculty that is “not born with us,” but rather “attained by industry” [31]. For him, “a law of nature is a... general rule found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do, that, which is destructive of his life” [86]. It seems that such laws should be instinctive, or, according to Hobbes’s logic, quickly discovered by experience. However, he supports his argument for an absolute leader who understands and enforces law and reason by declaring that “the laws of nature (as justice, equity, modesty, mercy, and (in sum) doing to others, as we would be done to, of themselves, ...are contrary to our natural passions” [111]. Only with the faculty of reason can men understand the fundamental laws of nature, notably the directive to endeavor peace, which are otherwise unclear to them. Apparently, most men do not sufficiently develop their faculty of reason and are incapable of organizing themselves into a peaceful society without the constant threat of force, since they act according to their passions. However, it seems unlikely that a society could function only through the enlightened reasoning of an elite who can see the benefits of peace. A society that is kept in line through fear would quickly forget the conditions that led them to accept despotic rule in the first place, especially if they are forbidden to read history books. More plausibly, the whole of mankind feels naturally compelled to live together and maintain peace within a sustainable unit, at least. Even if the reader accepts Hobbes’s conception of the state of nature, his description of a state organized around a Leviathan does not seem any less unattractive; he only offers the fear of punishment as a replacement for the fear of death. Hobbes himself says, “there are very few so foolish, that had not rather govern themselves, than be governed by others” [102]. Fear of punishment is the only compelling force

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that makes contracts possible, thus allowing for the benefits of trade, commerce, and a comfortable, stable life. However, the absolute power of the Leviathan does not eliminate uncertainty; subjects are still vulnerable to the changing whims of the ruler. The only change is that uncertainty comes from one powerful source instead of the many weaker ones that constitute the state of nature. Moreover, the Leviathan will only enforce both ends of a contract when he chooses to do so. He may take no interest in a violation or could intervene on behalf of his own interests or those of a favorite subject. Not being bound by a contract himself, he can change the laws as he chooses. Locke justly criticizes this arrangement, stating, “ much better it is in the state of nature, wherein men are not bound to submit to the unjust will of another... ” [Political Writings 268]. Hobbes’ description of the Leviathan’s rule is also inconsistent with his earlier statements. The ruler’s theoretical representation of all of his subjects seems impossible given the assumption of knowledge through sense experience. Though the people sacrifice their rights to him, there is no way that the Leviathan can have perfect knowledge of all of their opinions and wishes “ he may have none at all. If he is not accountable to the will of the people, how can he avoid ruling solely according to his own experience? In fact, the longer he rules, the more his experiences will be completely unlike those of his subjects. Eventually he would have a perspective that is completely cut off from theirs, since absolute power would eliminate the fear of external threat that would remain present in their lives. This dictator demands more than outward obedience from his subjects; he also requires the sacrifice of private property and even personal standards of morality. In a commonwealth, the subject has only the right to his life, since he has

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replaced his own will with the public one. Accordingly, Hobbes advocates strict censorship of the press, as well as books of history and literature in order to suppress the “ seditious doctrines that lead to rebellion” [214]. Subjects give up their freedom of thought in order to preserve the strength of the commonwealth, and they must accept that “ the measure of good and evil actions is the civil law; and the judge the legislator, who is always the representative of the commonwealth” [214]. Only the Leviathan can act according to the dictates of his own conscience. In this argument, Hobbes shows that he is undeniably a materialist. He is satisfied that a comfortable life is enough persuasion to justify surrendering the kind of individuality that Locke and most Americans today value so highly. Hobbes begins from such a pessimistic and chaotic view of man that it seems impossible to create any kind of order from his state of nature. How could one ruler subdue the varied and completely self-centered interests of an entire nation? The brutish man that Hobbes describes seems incapable of living in organized society, whereas the enlightened reader is disgusted by the idea of sacrificing all rights except that of self-preservation to another. Regardless, a close reading of the Leviathan reveals it to be closer to dark fantasy than to reality.