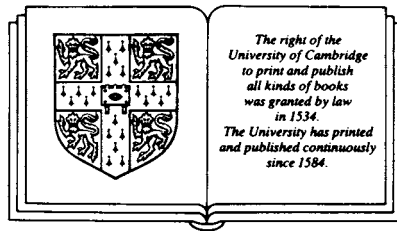


# Ideals as interests in Hobbes's *Leviathan*

The power of mind over matter

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## Introduction

What good is it to promise allegiance and then by and by to cry out, as some ministers did in the pulpit, To your tents, O Israel!?

– Hobbes (*B* 181)

Human beings will fight for their beliefs. People go to war over their moral ideals and religious principles, and are capable not only of risking death in the service of their values but even of embracing death when they believe it will further their cause. The Christian martyrs, Buddhist monks in Vietnam, and some Shiite Muslims in Lebanon today are among countless examples of the human capacity for pursuing religious or moral convictions even at the expense of one's own life. People are capable of forming, and acting on, *transcendent* interests. Of pursuing principles over preservation. Of exerting mind over matter.

We all know this. Hobbes knew it too, and it worried him deeply. It worried him because he believed that transcendent interests very often cause civil wars.

It is difficult to call to mind any modern war that did not contain as one element moral or religious transcendent interests. Correctly or incorrectly, combatants usually view themselves as engaged in a struggle for some value of overriding importance, such as liberty, equality, human dignity, or true religion. Their struggle appears to them in the form of a struggle for right. As the French Revolution, the American Civil War, and the Russian Revolution suggest, civil

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wars are no exception to this rule. Many people on both sides believe themselves to be fighting for moral or religious interests of overriding importance. Hobbes viewed the English Civil War in this way, as a conflict appearing in the form of – indeed, actually generated by – competing transcendent interests. And he believed that any permanent solution to that war – any prospect for a perpetual domestic peace – would have necessarily to address the disruption generated by such conflicts of transcendent interests.

Part of the thesis of this book is that Hobbes's masterwork, *Leviathan*, is intended to address precisely this problem of the domestic social disorder generated by transcendent interests. The sorts of transcendent interests that particularly worried Hobbes were religious interests. This is why he devotes more than half of *Leviathan* to a discussion of religion, which is crucial to his task of providing a permanent remedy to the internal social disorder caused by transcendent religious interests. I shall try to show that Hobbes's conception of the *problem* of social disorder cannot be understood without close attention to Parts 3 and 4 of *Leviathan*. Thus, the first sense in which Hobbes's political theory is a theory of mind over matter is that it analyzes disorder as the result of the primacy of religious interests over material interests, including the interest in self-preservation.

The second part of this book's thesis is that Hobbes develops an effective, stable *solution* to the problem of disorder generated by transcendent interests. His theory works to solve the problem he was addressing. His solution has much less to do with coercive force than is generally supposed. His solution is to reproduce perpetually a proper, stability-reinforcing conception of people's transcendent religious interests by a process of education that continually generates consensus. It is education, and not might, that makes for social order in Hobbes's system. This is the second way in which Hobbes's theory is a theory of mind over matter.

The final part of the thesis of the present book is that Hobbes succeeds in providing a powerful original *method* for addressing social conflict rooted in transcendent interests, a

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method that is instructive for political philosophy generally. His method is to begin from the interests people actually claim as their own (rather than from some physical-scientific account of human beings as matter in motion, or from some idealized notion of what interests people ought, given their physical natures, to have), and through a process of rationalizing their beliefs and redescribing their interests, to provide people with *reasons* linked to the interests they actually affirm, including their transcendent interests, for acting in a way that can ensure the perpetual maintenance of peaceful social order. Hobbes's method provides the third sense in which his theory is a theory of mind over matter.

Of course, there is a fourth sense of that notion in which Hobbes's theory is not a theory of mind over matter. Hobbes believed that all that is (with the possible exception of God, whose nature we cannot know) is material. Or, more precisely, he believed that the contents of the world could in principle be comprehensively described making reference only to bodies and their motions. But because there is, in Hobbes's view, a bidirectional causal relation between mental phenomena and the physical bodies that ground them, and because scientific understanding is not sufficiently developed to allow us to say all we must in the language of physics, any adequate social theory will properly take such things as beliefs, interests, and passionate attachments seriously, as moving parts and explanatory components of primary importance to the theory. Thus, Hobbes's ontological commitments do not preclude a theory that favors mind over matter in the three senses I've described.

This book focuses primarily on the political theory Hobbes presents in *Leviathan*, although the interpretation I offer of that theory is supplemented by considerations from others of Hobbes's writings, most importantly from *Behemoth* and the *Elements of Law*. Although I make use of Hobbes's history of the English Civil Wars, and, from time to time, adduce historical considerations in support of my interpretation of his political theory, I do not intend this interpretation as a work of intellectual history or history of philosophy.<sup>1</sup> My

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aim, as will become clear, is to speak to a particular philosophical school of Hobbes interpretation, and to provide a philosophically defensible alternative interpretation in the style of the Western analytic philosophical tradition.

I should forewarn the reader that this book does not present its argument in a linear fashion. It elaborates a preliminary sketch, adding, chapter by chapter, successively thicker layers of detail. None of the chapters stands on its own. It is not until the end of the book that a full account of any of the discrete components of Hobbes's political theory will have been completed. But it is my hope that by the end, the reader will be satisfied that she or he has received a full account of all of the components of Hobbes's political theory.

The first chapter begins by offering considerations that may cast some doubt on the adequacy of the standard philosophical interpretation of Hobbes's political theory, and thereby justify yet another contribution within philosophy to the mountainous literature on *Leviathan*. It ends with a thumbnail sketch of the alternative interpretation I propose to develop in the remainder of the book.

The next four chapters collectively elaborate the interpretation outlined in Chapter 1. By the end of Chapter 5, three-quarters of the theory presented in *Leviathan* will have been introduced, including all of Hobbes's compositive reconstruction of a stable society, and half of his resolute analysis of disorder.

Chapter 6 attempts to provide preliminary confirmation of the theory developed in the first five chapters, using Hobbes's own history of the period of disorder to which his political theorizing is most intimately tied. Chapter 7 integrates the remainder of *Leviathan*, the final phase of Hobbes's resolute analysis of disorder, into the theory already presented. This order of exposition may surprise those who have worked on *Leviathan*. It is not until Chapter 7 that I discuss Part 1 of *Leviathan*, including its Chapter 13 on the state of nature. I have ordered my discussion in this way because I think that our philosophical tradition of Hobbes scholarship makes it difficult for us to understand the actual function of

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Part 1 without having first understood what is going on in the remainder of the book. Not that there is anything wrong with Hobbes's order of exposition; it's just that our particular philosophical interests prevent us from grasping Hobbes's argument when it is presented in the order he presents it. All of this should become clear in Chapter 7.

Chapter 8 offers some bird's-eye observations about Hobbes's treatment of transcendent religious interests, and presents Hobbes's arguments on the topic of other sorts of potentially transcendent interests such as liberty and justice. Chapter 9 completes our discussion of transcendent interests by examining the status of those interests, on Hobbes's understanding of them. It goes on to examine Hobbes's claim to have established both the necessity and desirability of political absolutism, and argues that Hobbes succeeded – from within his own assumptions, of course – both in validly deriving, and in actually justifying, absolutism. The chapter, and the book, end by suggesting several ways in which Hobbes's work provides us with invaluable insight into the practice of political philosophy, and the constraints on fruitful work in this field.