

# The Hobbes-Bramhall Debate on Liberty and Necessity

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Nayeli Riano

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Despite their contrasting metaphysics, Thomas Hobbes and John Bramhall were Royalist supporters during the English Civil War. Both men believed that monarchy was the best form of government despite their opposing perceptions of liberty. If philosophy influences politics, why then would two thinkers' opposing philosophical views result in support for the same form of government?

An intriguing feature about Thomas Hobbes' famous political treatise is how it is divided into two separate but connected sections. The first chapters of *Leviathan* discuss philosophy before discussing political theory: Part one, titled "Of Man," comprised of no less than sixteen chapters, discusses Hobbes' metaphysical views of human nature before arriving at its practical application in part two, "Of Common-Wealth."<sup>[1]</sup> This interest in metaphysics did not originate in *Leviathan* alone. Prior to publishing *Leviathan* Hobbes had a debate in 1645 with the Anglican bishop John Bramhall on the topic of liberty and necessity. Despite its strictly philosophical content, Hobbes's debate with Bramhall has been used to elucidate his later political writings under the presumption that Hobbes' philosophical queries influenced and even paralleled his political writings.<sup>[2]</sup> Admittedly, this act can be historically justified since philosophical theology was so pervasive during the seventeenth century and topics under this area influenced, directly or indirectly, civil matters concerning sovereignty, morality, and ecclesiology.<sup>[3]</sup> But the relationship between philosophy and politics is not linear, and both figures can help to elucidate this reality.

A pervasive philosophical theology did not mean that Hobbes and Bramhall's political practices directly represented their philosophical principles. Despite their contrasting metaphysics, Hobbes and Bramhall were Royalist supporters during the English Civil War.[4] Both men believed that monarchy was the best form of government despite their opposing perceptions of liberty. If philosophy influences politics, why then would two thinkers' opposing philosophical views result in support for the same form of government? To answer this question, this essay will interpret how Hobbes and Bramhall's definitions of liberty translated into their conceptions of monarchy. To a larger extent, this epistolary debate between Hobbes and Bramhall is a springboard to demonstrate the errant lineage often made to connect political theory to political practice.

Before explaining where Hobbes and Bramhall diverged in metaphysics and where they converged in politics, it serves to revisit their general points regarding human will and freedom. The debate re-visited the common yet contentious issue of the seventeenth-century: the relevance of Aristotelian philosophy.[5] Bramhall upheld scholasticism while Hobbes advocated for materialism and determinism. Materialism reduced all things to matter, denying any abstract, immaterial qualities; determinism posited that human actions are the necessary effects of previous causes.[6] By conceiving of all actions as necessitated by one another, Hobbes's conception of free will brusquely veered from scholastic thought when he stated that the will does not exist; that it is merely a combination of "appetites" or "desires" that result in what we call "the will." [7] Bramhall, instead, defended the traditional concept of free will: Actions must be free from necessity if men truly possess moral agency over their actions and decisions.

Bramhall's belief in free will and necessity was contingent on a different notion of liberty from Hobbes. Hobbes's definition of liberty is "the absence of all the impediments to action that are not contained in the nature and intrinsic quality of the agent." [8] Bramhall's view on liberty was a recapitulation of the Aristotelian tradition of the High Middle Ages: [9] He wrote, "...by liberty I do understand... a liberty from necessity... which the Schools call liberty of contrariety and is found in men endowed with reason and understanding, that is, a liberty to do and not to do good and evil, this or that." [10] In line with scholastic intellectualism, Bramhall says that *reason* is the true root of liberty since it provides man with the ability to judge by his will (which is free from necessity) and to act upon that judgement. [11] Bramhall famously refuted Hobbes through an analogy, arguing that liberty cannot be solely defined by the prevention of external impediments because internal impediments are another factor that can constrain liberty. He wrote,

[Hobbes] cuts off the liberty from inward impediments also, as if a hawk were at liberty to fly when her wings are plucked, but not when they are tied. And so he makes liberty from extrinsic impediments to be complete liberty... [12]

Bramhall's account of liberty differs from that of Hobbes in that it is more focused on the psychological impediments—*internal* factors—that prevent an individual from reaching his greater, freer self. Hobbes's definition of liberty, in contrast, focuses on outside phenomena—*external* factors—that men can create and impose upon others to restrict their freedom. Bramhall's focus on internal factors resonates with his theological education on metaphysics and reason, aimed at the ultimate goal of discovering personal freedom through self-enlightenment. Hobbes' practical focus on the external factors that humans can create against each other resonates with what later became his political philosophy, practically derived from observations on human nature in society. As we know, it was this view of humans as advantageous and selfish beings which led Hobbes to believe that a proper government needed to prevent men from imposing such impediments on each other, lest life become "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." [13]

Scholars on this topic are keen to wring the political implications out of Hobbes and Bramhall's views on liberty, saying "it is misleading to refer to their debate on free-will as merely philosophical or theological... the issue was intertwined with politics, that is, matters of concern to governments." [14] And indeed it is believed that Hobbes and Bramhall were trying to influence the child who would be the future Charles II. By publishing their debate, they hoped to persuade the young king and his closest advisors with the merits of their views. [15] Since both men were Royalist supporters, however, one is left to ponder over *what* Hobbes and Bramhall were trying to persuade the king. The most logical answer is the amount of power that the king should possess. Their distinct concepts on liberty were based on their philosophies and theories of human nature, but when these theories were stretched to fit the mold that was cast by historical and political circumstance, these distinctions adapted into subtle variances of the same form of government. In other words, historical and political circumstance forced theory into a box. Hobbes and Bramhall's support for Royalists requires the political and historical context in which the debate took place—the First English Civil War and the Interregnum.

The debate between Bramhall and Hobbes took place during the British Civil War that started in 1642, while Charles I was still monarch of Britain. [16] Whigs and English parliamentarians backed constitutionalism and its support of institutional checks and rights of resistance. The extent to which Royalists supported the monarchy varied. [17] But there was also a middle way: Constitutional Royalism, which emerged during the 1640s, was a response to the political problem posed by the Civil Wars as it attempted to "guide" Charles I towards a form of monarchy that still upheld the rule of law by enforcing a relationship with Parliament and also maintaining an established church in England. [18] Constitutional Royalism was based on legally limited monarchy, rightful powers of parliament, and the rule of law. [19]

The term “constitutional royalism” may sound oxymoronic, but the assumption that there is a logical opposition between royal and constitutional forms of government is anachronistic: This notion that royalism and constitutionalism conflict with each other was unknown to an early seventeenth-century mind, especially in England. In fact, the incompatibility between constitutionalism and royalism was an Enlightenment ideal that was reinforced in the eighteenth century by the American and French Revolutions.[20] It was “axiomatic” for most people in the decades before the Civil Wars that “the monarch and the Constitution were integrally and symbiotically bound together.”[21] The medieval metaphor of *the body politic* exemplified this belief.

Bramhall supported royalism because it was constitutional and closely tied to the church. [22] His reasoning for supporting this form of government was as follows: The legitimacy and success of the sovereign was dependent on his ability to be both wise and virtuous, and that wisdom and virtue could only come from the counsel and education of clergymen.[23] Bramhall’s version of royalism was not absolute, like Hobbes’, because he believed that customs and constitutions as well as laws and parliaments were the supplement to the intellect of the ruler and also served as a check to his caprices.[24] Bramhall was a Royalist so long as the importance of the church was balanced with the sovereign. Hobbes astutely pointed out that Bramhall’s royalist support had a veneer of self-interest. Churchmen, he would argue, should not be exempt from the rule of the sovereign: They “did not inhabit or function in a separate sphere free from the forces that determined the ‘secular’ or ‘temporal’ one.”[25]

While Bramhall believed that the relationship of the clergy with the monarch was meant to instill morality in the sovereign, Hobbes’s absolutist framework argued that the concept of morality was arbitrary since morals come from the political sovereign.[26] Contrarily, Hobbes’s conception, “that all right of dominion is founded only in power” and that “all moral righteousness is founded only in the law of the civil magistrate,” was anathema to Christian moral philosophy and ethics.[27] Hobbes built a theory of the state arguing that agreement about moral truths must lie through politics, and he used the concept of *the body politic* to further stress the people’s unity under a monarch.[28] By writing *Leviathan*, Hobbes was hoping “to refute the idea repeatedly put forth in the English Civil War, that ‘the people’ had the collective right to limit their sovereign...”[29] Hobbes supported royalism as the form through which absolutism could most easily be secured because it granted the sovereign the power to execute a strict doctrine and simplified the process of succession. [30]

Leo Strauss has remarked that Hobbes’s doctrine on absolute sovereignty required the context of his philosophy because it gave us a trace of his pessimistic view of human nature and his materialistic metaphysics.[31] He concluded, moreover, that Hobbes’s critique of religion, and therefore his views on the relationship between church and state, were only a secondary result of his philosophy.[32] That is to say, the church in itself was not the central

issue to Hobbes, and his criticism of it was consequential to his political theory. More pragmatically for Hobbes, it was the political influence of the church as a counsel to the monarch that concerned him as a political theorist. Strauss has written, moreover, that Hobbes had his own interest in supporting Royalists and in dividing the relationship between Church and State: For Hobbes, invalidating the role of priests would, perhaps, make way for a new form of politics—one devoid of religious influence that could, therefore, open the seat for a visionary theorist to come along and become “the founder of modern politics.”[33]

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The second part of this essay will complete the point made earlier about the disconnect between political theory and political practice, using the Hobbes-Bramhall debate as an example. To do so, I ask the reader for permission to take a fair share of historical creative license. Hobbes and Bramhall’s different conceptions of liberty might sound similar to an argument that was made much later in 1958 by Isaiah Berlin in his famous lecture “Two Concepts of Liberty.” Given this resemblance, it would make for an interesting task to re-read both Hobbes’ and Bramhall’s definitions of liberty through the lens of Berlin’s analysis of liberty as two “irreconcilable” forms.[34] To briefly paraphrase Berlin’s two concepts of liberty (they will be defined in his own terms in the following paragraphs), one concept is *negative*, defined by the *absence* of external impediments, and the other is *positive*, defined by man’s ability to *act* to achieve what he wants. Berlin rightly notes that these two forms of liberty are at opposite philosophical ends.

If we attempt to place Hobbes and Bramhall within Berlin’s two concepts of liberty, it might appear intuitive at first to associate Bramhall with Berlin’s definition of positive liberty, and Hobbes with the definition of negative liberty. There is a parallel between Hobbes’s account of external impediments and Berlin’s understanding of negative liberty; there is also another parallel between Bramhall’s insistence on internal impediments and Berlin’s understanding of positive liberty. Under this theoretical framework, then, Bramhall can be viewed as defending liberty in the positive sense, and Hobbes as championing negative liberty. The point of this exercise, however, is to demonstrate how this assumption would be mistaken: Let’s take positive liberty as the first example, which Berlin described in the following hypothetical perspective:

I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by *reasons*, by *conscious* purposes, which are my own, not by *causes* which affect me, as it were, from outside. I wish to be somebody, not nobody; a doer—deciding, not being decided for, self-directed and not acted upon by external nature or by other men as if I were a thing, or an animal, or a slave incapable of playing a human role, that is, of conceiving goals and policies of my own and realizing them... I wish, above all, to be conscious of myself as a thinking, *willing*, active being, bearing responsibility for my choices and able to explain them by references to my own ideas and purposes. [35]

It is possible to pick out autonomous words, “thinking,” “willing,” and “active,” reminiscent of Bramhall’s definition of liberty that elevates reason and free will as the important components of human action. But Berlin’s theory on the individual’s desire to rule himself raises an interesting question about the practical needs of government to achieve such an end. This conception of liberty as “self-mastery” created an intellectual division between “the transcendent, dominant controller, and the empirical bundle of desires and passions to be disciplined and brought to heel.”[36] Thus, the socio-political implications to ensure this type of freedom have taken on a form that is the opposite of autonomous, and Berlin recognized this himself when he deemed positive liberty as the more dangerous form of liberty. Berlin asserted that negative liberty is the preferred political framework, because advocates of negative liberty aim to “curb authority” while advocates of positive liberty aim “to place it in their own hands.”[37] Negative liberty is preferable to positive liberty because it is most conducive to “pluralism,” which Berlin described as a “truer and more human ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great, disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of ‘positive’ self-mastery by classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind.”[38]

What becomes clear upon reading Berlin’s full definition of positive liberty, as its political implications are outlined, is that it is not at all in line with how Bramhall practiced his politics. Bramhall conceived of liberty as an intellectual pursuit that was positive to the extent that it was internal and based on concepts of reason and free will. Positive freedom for Bramhall lies within a personal framework that does not necessarily connect with a theory of government. To put it another way, Bramhall would have likely agreed with Berlin’s understanding of positive liberty, but he would not have supported (and did not support) a political system built from the premises of positive liberty.

Now for negative liberty, which Berlin defined in the following manner:

Political liberty in [the negative] sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others. If I am prevented by others from doing what I could otherwise do, I am to that degree unfree; and if this area is contracted by other men beyond a certain minimum, I can be coerced, or, it may be, enslaved. Coercion is not, however, a term that covers every form of inability. If I say that I am unable to jump more than ten feet in the air, or cannot read because I am blind, or cannot understand the darker pages of Hegel, it would be eccentric to say that I am to that degree enslaved or coerced.[39]

In this instance Berlin's definition of negative liberty is very similar to Hobbes's own definition of liberty in his treatise, "Of Liberty and Necessity":

Liberty is the absence of all the impediments to action that are not contained in the nature and intrinsic quality of the agent. As, for example, the water is said to descent freely, or to have liberty to descent, by the channel of the river, because there is no impediment that way... And though the water cannot ascent, yet men never say it wants the liberty to ascend, but the faculty of power, because the impediment is in the nature of the water and intrinsic. So also we say he that is tied wants the liberty to go, because the impediment is not in him but in his bands; whereas we say not so of him that is sick or lame, because the impediment is in himself.[40]

Berlin's definition of negative liberty and Hobbes' definition of liberty are almost identical. But Berlin noted that Hobbes, according to his theory of nature, believed people needed "greater safeguards to keep them in their places," which would require to "increase the area of centralized control and decrease that of the individual" in the form of absolute monarchy. [41] In other words, while Hobbes' definition of liberty is most similar to Berlin's conception of *negative* liberty, Berlin still interpreted Hobbes' writings as advocating for a centralized form of government in the form of absolute monarchy. Herein lies the greater point of the historical significance of the Hobbes-Bramhall debate for political science: Theory does not always translate properly into practice.

What's the point in piecing together how a sixteenth-century theologian and political theorist compare to Isaiah Berlin's theory? The larger point about Bramhall and Hobbes' writings on liberty is that they were limited to metaphysical presumptions about man. Metaphysical inquiry, leading to philosophical affirmations about human nature, does not guarantee *practical* knowledge of politics to assert the just form of government. The flaw in the reasoning of *political* proponents of positive liberty—people we might identify today as progressives or liberals from the likes of French Enlightenment philosophers—is that their ultimate goal is to achieve a government that permits personal liberation from every form of duty or obligation, inevitably resulting in the oppression of liberty of others.

The fact that Hobbes and Bramhall chose to side with monarchism, even if it did not perfectly align with their metaphysical concepts of liberty, raises a question of applicability: To what extent are metaphysical truths on the concept of freedom directly functional and useful for political systems? Berlin himself chose a practical answer, describing the ideal of freedom as choosing ends “without claiming eternal validity for them.”[42] The historical and political pressure of the time when the Hobbes-Bramhall debate was taking place demonstrates how this answer might be the most realistic for political theorists and the surest way to evade utopian temptations. Both Hobbes and Bramhall, after all, can be interpreted as having practical political motives for their Royalist support. For Bramhall, the monarchy was the best way to secure the authority of the church, and therefore sustain the influence of clergymen. In 1630, in fact, Bramhall argued in the Irish High Court that clergymen were “useful to the ends of government” and “helpful for the security of princes and states.”[43] Hobbes reversed this direction and viewed the Commonwealth and the church as organs that could not sustain themselves without the civil sovereign; yet, Hobbes’ ideal of absolute monarchy was never actualized. He would have to wait until 1660 for the monarchy to be restored, but, perhaps to his chagrin, he felt comfortable enough to publish *Leviathan* in 1651 in England after the Commonwealth was established, living peacefully under this regime.[44]

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5 Goldie, "The reception of Hobbes," p. 590.

6 Chappell, *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity*, p. xii.

7 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.

8 Thomas Hobbes, "Of Liberty and Necessity," § 29; in Chappell's book, *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity*, p. 39.

9 Chappell, *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity*, p. xii.

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34 Isaiah Berlin, "*Two concepts of liberty*": an inaugural lecture delivered before the University of Oxford on 31 October 1958, (Oxford: 1958), pp. 15, 29.

35 Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty,' p. 22, emphases added.

36 *Ibid.*, p. 25.

37 *Ibid.*, pp. 29-33.

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

40 Hobbes, "Of Liberty and Necessity," § 29; in Chappell's book, *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity*, p. 38.

41 Berlin, "Two Concepts of Liberty," p. 19. Hobbes proposes absolute monarchy in chapters 17-19 of *Leviathan*.

42 Berlin, 'Two Concepts of Liberty,' p. 33.

43 Jackson, *Hobbes, Bramhall, and the Politics of Liberty and Necessity*, p. 6.

44 Ibid., p. 2.

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Hobbes and Bramhall debated the relationship between freedom and necessity in the seventeenth century. Not much has changed since. We used this session to introduce some vocabulary and talk about the logic of compatibilism. Hobbes and Bramhall. Bramhall was an incompatibilist, meaning he thought that freedom of action and responsibility for actions are incompatible with the causal determination of the will. Since he believed that the will is free, he was a libertarian. Hobbes could not imagine anything happening without a cause. He also thought that causes make their effects necessary. So he was THOMAS HOBBES AND THE DEBATE ON FREE WILL His present-day significance for ethical theory. H. Van den Eenden. Introduction. In this paper I want to discuss the contribution Hobbes made to ethical theory, in his controversy with John Bramhall, concerning the problem of volitional determinism versus indeterminism. It contains the initial theses of Hobbes, the replies of Bramhall, and the subsequent replies of Hobbes. In this formula the book gives a fair idea of the steps in which the controversy was fought out. For the reader who is mainly interested in the basic propositions and the fundamental arguments of the opponents, however, the book is rather long-winded and tedious, from time to time even annoying. Questions = Hobbes, The Questions concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance Clearly Stated and Debated between Dr Bramhall, Bishop of Derry, and Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury, EW, v. Rawdon Papers = The Rawdon Papers, consisting of Letters on Various Subjects, Literary, Political, and Ecclesiastical, to and from Dr John Bramhall, Primate of Ireland, including the Correspondence of Several Most Eminent Men During the Greater Part of. Thurloe State Papers = A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe, ed. T. Birch (London, 1742; 7 vols.). Treatise = Hobbes, A Treatise of Liberty and Necessity, EW, iv, 239-78. Vindication = Bramhall, A Vindication of True Liberty from Antecedent and Extrinsic Necessity, BW, iv, 3-196. Start by marking Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity as Want to Read: Want to Read saving! Want to Read. This volume presents the famous seventeenth-century controversy in which Thomas Hobbes and John Bramhall debate these questions and others. The co Do human beings ever act freely, and if so what does freedom mean? Is everything that happens antecedently caused, and if so how is freedom possible? Is it right, even for God, to punish people for things they cannot help doing? This volume presents the famous seventeenth-century controversy in which Thomas Hobbes and John Bramhall debate these questions and others. Cambridge University Press, 1999 (Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity, Vere Chappell, ed.) This volume presents an exchange between Hobbes and the Anglican cleric John Bramhall. Hobbes and Bramhall debate questions such as whether human beings can act freely, what freedom means, whether freedom and material determination can coexist, and how divine punishment can be justified. This volume, edited by Vere Chappell, includes complete texts of their initial letters, selections from their subsequent replies to one another, and excerpts from other works of Hobbes that touch upon necessity