

## Book Review: Life Lessons from Hobbes by Hannah Dawson

*Born in Wiltshire in 1588, Thomas Hobbes was an English philosopher whose masterpiece, *Leviathan*, established the foundation for Western political thought and inspired both hate and awe. He revealed the darker side of human nature and the value of authority, but he also showed us how to flourish, how to be fearless and free, so that our lives need not be 'nasty, brutish and short'. This short and accessible guide from *The School of Life* series presents insights from his greatest work. Reviewed by **Jacob Phillips**.*

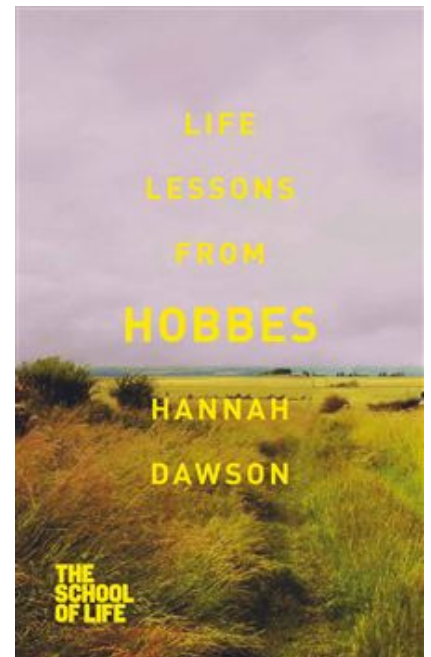


**Life Lessons from Hobbes. Hannah Dawson. Pan Macmillan. September 2013.**

### Find this book:

Some classic figures of the British philosophical tradition have resurfaced in recent discussions, and not just in the philosophy departments of universities. Examples include the frequent references to Edmund Burke in the discussions surrounding David Cameron's so-called 'Big Society', or the ever-present name of Adam Smith, cropping up regularly in the wrangling over Thatcher's legacy after her death last year. At first sight, Thomas Hobbes, although undoubtedly a solid figure of the British philosophical canon in the Academy, appears rather more obscure for the mainstream of public life.

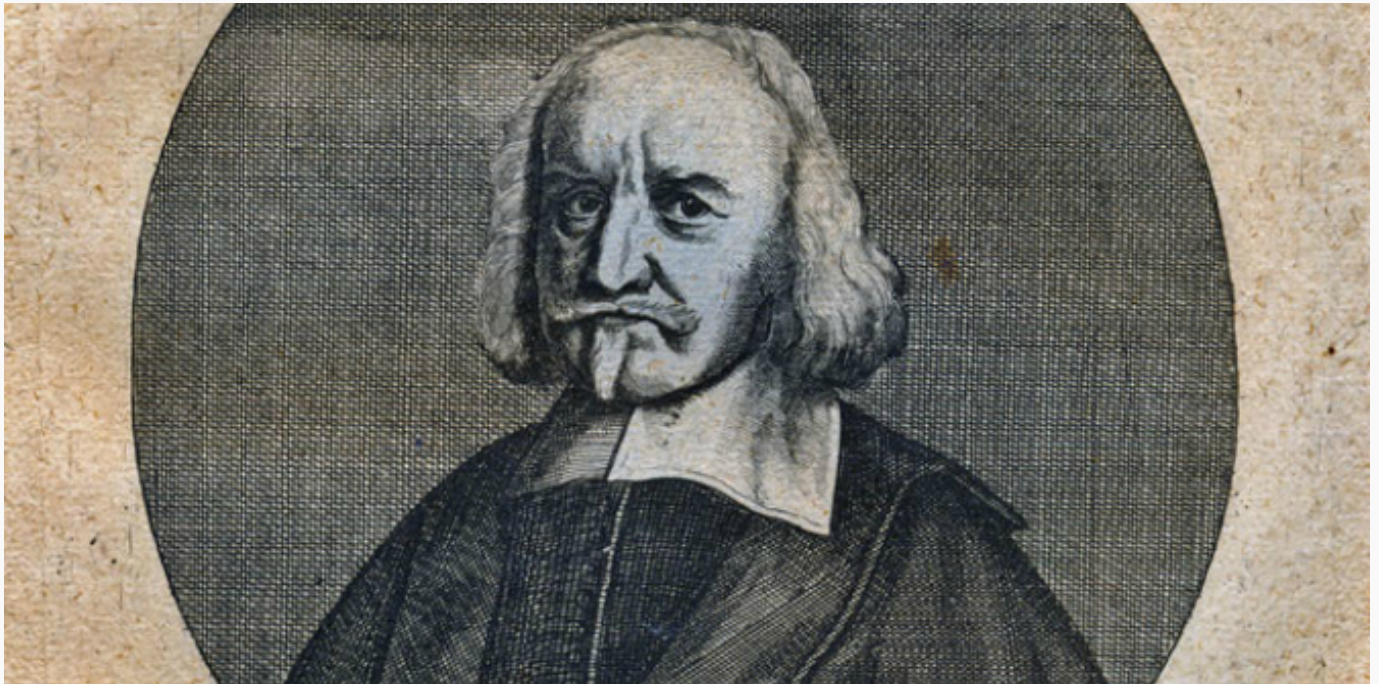
When one engages with some of the ideas in this book, it will come as no surprise that he is not invoked as a source of inspiration for many public figures today. Hobbes famously argued that human life is 'nasty, brutish and short', and as a result, only a totalitarian state can ensure order, and save us from our treacherous fellow citizens. There are of course very few voices today in the West who will challenge a commitment to democracy *tout court*. Yet, Hobbes was one of its greatest opponents, just as the so-called Mother of Parliaments in Westminster was being formed against the background of the English Civil War. Moreover, the British philosophical tradition is known for the pragmatic, empirically and practically-orientated tenor of many of its key figures. Hobbes' however, exhibits a slavish devotion to rigid deductive reasoning, which seems rather out of step with this, and not in keeping with the inductive inclinations of someone like J. S. Mill, nor indeed the luminaries of British scientific reasoning, like Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton or Charles Darwin. Taking all this together then, we might expect Hobbes to be relegated to the background in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as an historical oddity for university textbooks, rather than a presence we should expect to grace the contemporary world, as do other established figures of the British tradition.



Nonetheless, there are other ways in which we can detect implicit Hobbesian-type thinking underpinning quite mainstream ideas. Examples could include the undeniably cynical view of human nature that underlies the theories behind neo-liberal economics, which are getting ever more entrenched after the global economic crisis. Or one could even point to Hobbes' undying devotion to the role of a sovereign monarch, and the fact we are living in a time of when the Royal Family are enjoying unparalleled popularity. Moreover, regarding Hobbes' uncompromising allegiance to the deductive method, it is, of course, Anglo-American analytic philosophy which holds this mode of reasoning in the highest possible regard. Maybe, therefore, although Hobbes' name has passed out of mainstream of public life, in fact he is actually lurking surreptitiously, just below the surface.

This certainly seems to be the case with another key issue of the day, which is given some attention by Hannah Dawson in *Life Lessons from Hobbes*. This is the issue of how far citizens should be willing to go in conceding freedom to state authorities in the name of order, security and safety. Dawson provides ample examples from recent history that illustrate this difficult problem – like the issues surrounding the dialogue between the Taliban

and the countries engaged in military action in Afghanistan. This may offer security, but seems to undercut the whole rationale behind the conflict itself. An even more high-profile example from recent months involves the clearly Hobbesian dynamic surrounding the issue of Edward Snowden's release of US secret service data to the global media. The discussions around this go right into what Hobbes challenges us with: is protection from potential wrongdoing worth forfeiting our freedom for?



Credit: [Stifts- och landsbiblioteket i Skara](#) CC BY 2.0

This is indeed the tension underlying Dawson's third chapter, 'On Being Free'. Locating this firmly in the post-9/11 stand-off over rights or security, Dawson is uneasy about the Hobbesian claim that we must sacrifice some of our freedoms to the state to be safe, but admits that ultimately he poses an unavoidable question for liberalism: '[i]f we all had the right to do whatever we pleased, we would end up killing each other'. (p. 34) Hobbes saw our submission to the authority of the state as something to be celebrated, as it is precisely this which ensures our security. But, as Dawson draws out, Hobbes does not see this as a simplistic loss of freedom, but rather a winning of true freedom, properly understood. That is, the relative security of a strong state ensures the flourishing, or 'living well' of its citizens, which untrammelled rights would severely impinge. Again, Dawson locates this in our contemporary situation, mentioning the recent spate of internet hate crimes involving comments and tweets by anonymous trolls. So-called 'freedom of speech', in this instance, is something destructive for the well-being of others. But, crucially, Hobbes sees this forfeit of 'natural rights' for security and true freedom as strictly conditional. If the ruling powers do not ensure proper security, Hobbes sees us as justified in seeking other rulers. Dawson presents this view with clarity and succinctness, stating that liberty 'constitutes both the purpose *and the limit* of obligation'. (p. 40)

Given that Hobbes is often lurking unnamed beneath the issues surrounding such events, he is an apt subject for [the Life Lessons series](#). These books are published by the School of Life, a rather unique organisation which exists to encourage critical inquiry with philosophical wisdom and cultural expression, for the purpose of fostering constructive living and self-knowledge in modern society. This series is aimed at introducing philosophical figures to inquisitive readers who may not have a specialist philosophical background. Although the cards are certainly stacked against the possibility of bringing Hobbes to life for the contemporary reader, Hannah Dawson does an admirable job in achieving this difficult task. She writes in clear, straightforward prose, with numerous apposite examples from the contemporary world. Hobbes' own prose – notoriously laboured and characterised by lumbering, and lengthy, 16<sup>th</sup> Century-style sentences – is printed here at length, in a way which it keeps it fully accessible and is not off-putting to the uninitiated. It is a rare thing indeed to read a primer on a strange and apparently impenetrable philosophical figure, which quotes at length from primary sources while staying readable and engaging. Even the further reading suggestions at the back of the book are quite outstanding in this regard,

including an impressive list of recent films and cultural expressions which involve Hobbesian tensions and dilemmas.

Moreover, Dawson avoids anything like trying to attempt a facile recovery of those ideas of Hobbes' which are so unpalatable to the popular mind of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. What she does instead is show that – despite our undoubted aversion to notions like an absolute monarch with total power of his or her subjects – that the arguments beneath this seemingly untenable position can frequently be encountered in the most unexpected of places. The blurb on the *Life Lessons* series tells us that the series exists to show how wise people from the past have urgently important and inspiring things to tell us. I think regarding this volume that is not strictly the case, but this makes it all the more impressive. *Life Lessons from Hobbes* shows us how close society can be to that which it most detests. This is exactly the sort of brutal – but honest – disclosure that is very much in the difficult spirit of Thomas Hobbes, and yet manages not to follow his troublesome positions to the letter.

---

**Jacob Phillips** is doing a PhD at King's College London. His research interests include human subjectivity in continental philosophy and systematic theology, German philosophy, the role of the humanities in contemporary society and the academy in public life. He enjoys reading and writing more broadly on various aspects of art, literature, philosophy and religion. [Read more reviews by Jacob.](#)

### ***Related***

[Reading List: is philosophy still relevant?](#) In "Philosophy and Religion book reviews"

[Book Review: Life Lessons from Bergson by Michael Foley](#) In "Keith Ansell-Pearson"

[Book Review: Machiavelli, Hobbes, and Rousseau, edited by John Plamenatz, Mark Philp and Z.A. Pelczynski](#) In "Mark Fisher"

- Copyright 2013 LSE Review of Books