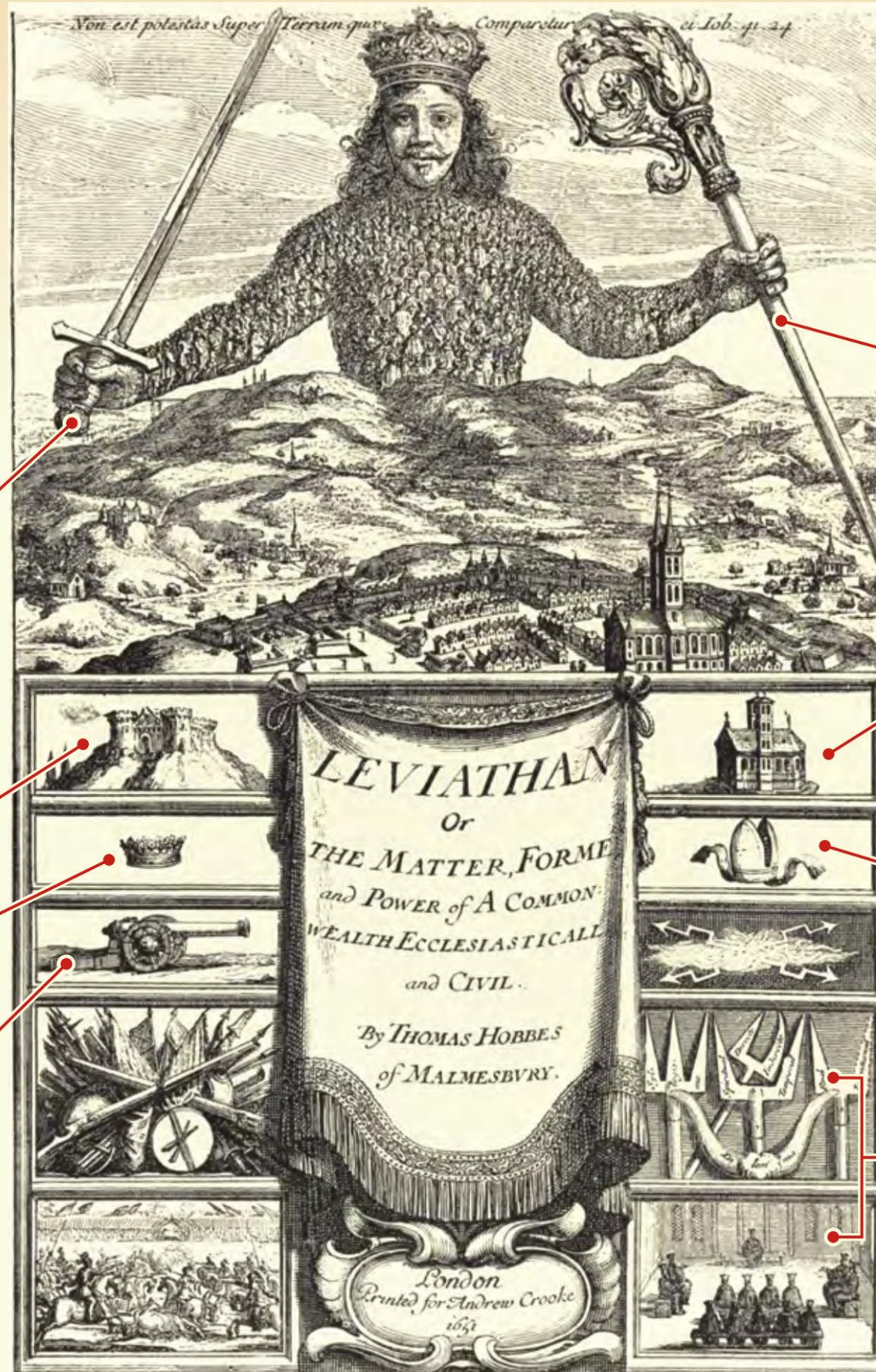


# Leviathan by Thomas Hobbes

Maybe you should judge a book by its cover. **David Tuck** shows how even the frontispiece of this key text can help you understand Hobbes' arguments



## Reading the cover

The engraved title page of *Leviathan* (1651) can be read both vertically and horizontally. Both forms of analysis suggest the same holistic message: that the sovereign (the giant Leviathan figure) governs both the physical and spiritual aspects of society.

Hobbes argued that without the structure of government, humans would live in a violent state of nature. To avoid this, the people agree to a social contract that establishes a sovereign with absolute power (the Leviathan) to provide supreme authority and ensure societal order.

This social contract is symbolised in the illustration of the monarch's body, made up of a patchwork of the numerous figures within society: gentlemen, women, religious figures, farm workers and soldiers. The engraved image deliberately contrasts the concerns of the physical world (the images in the bottom-left column) with that of the spiritual world (the images in the bottom-right column). The image is therefore an allegorical representation that tells a story about the location of power within society.

The Leviathan wields a sword, symbolising legitimacy and power within society.

The castle symbolises that the Leviathan reigns supreme within society.

The crown symbolises the power and legitimacy of the Leviathan: he is the state.

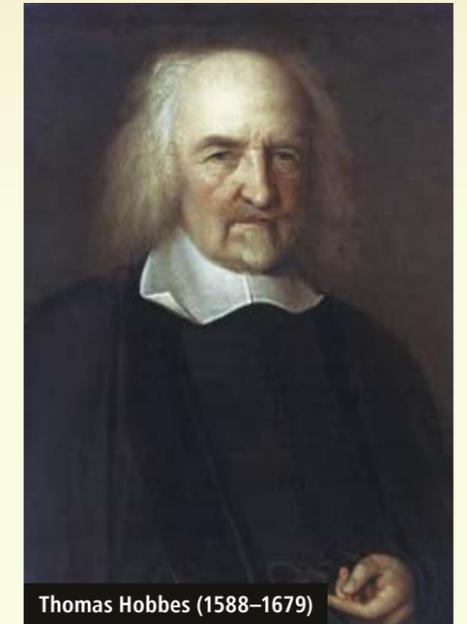
While the cannon represents the physical possibility of war, the thunderbolts (opposite) represent a spiritual counterpart. Jove (or Zeus in Greek mythology) used thunderbolts to strike down his enemies. This is a metaphor for the Leviathan having the power of excommunication: condemning his physical enemies to an eternity of spiritual torment in hell.

The Leviathan holds a crosier, a stylised staff carried by high-ranking churchmen. This symbolises that the monarch also controls the church. By wielding both sword and crosier, the Leviathan has state legitimacy over the physical and spiritual realms of society.

The church symbolises that the Leviathan has autonomy over religion. Hobbes viewed the practices of religion (ceremony, rituals and structure) as being created by man rather than being divine. The control of both castle and church shows the Leviathan's dominance over the physical and spiritual aspects of society.

The mitre is an elaborate tall folding cap worn by senior clergy. When juxtaposed with the crown it symbolises the end of the destructive conflict between church and state as both are now under the authority of the Leviathan.

The last two pictures in the left-hand column (the weapons of war and a detailed portrayal of a battle) show violent conflict. The last two pictures in the right-hand column show conflict caused by theological dispute. The trident, the two-pronged forks and the bull's horn represent scholastic jargon. The final picture is a clerical disputation: arguments about religious intricacies and practices. Hobbes believed that theological dispute was often the cause of war.



Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679)

## What does it mean?

The overall message of the pictures is one of Erastianism: the belief that the state should have supremacy over the church in ecclesiastical matters. Hobbes believed that giving the Leviathan dominion over both the physical and spiritual world would act as an antidote to war and unrest in society, as it would prevent disagreements over religion. As Justin Champion argued in 'Decoding the *Leviathan*' ([www.tinyurl.com/jc-on-hobbes](http://www.tinyurl.com/jc-on-hobbes)), Hobbes suggests an 'unambiguous resolution to the destructive conflict between church and state'.

David Tuck is head of politics at Stamford School and an experienced author.

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