

# Study Guide for Thomas Hobbes' On the Citizen

Thomas Hobbes' "On the Citizen" is a seminal work of political philosophy that explores the nature of human society, the role of the state, and the obligations of individuals within a political community. Written in the 17th century, this text remains a cornerstone of modern political thought and continues to shape contemporary debates about the relationship between the individual and the state.



## Study Guide for Thomas Hobbes's On the Citizen

by Lisa Puerto

★★★★☆ 4.3 out of 5

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This study guide provides a comprehensive overview of "On the Citizen," guiding you through its key concepts, historical context, and philosophical significance. By delving into the intricacies of Hobbes' ideas, you will gain a deeper understanding of the foundations of modern political theory and its enduring relevance to our understanding of society and governance.

## Key Concepts

**State of Nature:** Hobbes argues that human beings exist in a hypothetical "state of nature" before the establishment of a political or social order. In this state, individuals are free to act as they please, but this freedom comes at a price. Life is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" due to the constant threat of violence and warfare.

**Natural Rights:** In the state of nature, individuals possess certain fundamental "natural rights," including the right to life, liberty, and property. However, these rights are often violated due to the absence of a common authority to enforce them.

**Social Contract:** To escape the perils of the state of nature, individuals enter into a "social contract" by transferring their natural rights to a sovereign power or authority. This sovereign is tasked with protecting the rights of its citizens and maintaining peace and order.

**Sovereignty:** The sovereign power holds absolute and undivided authority within the political community. Hobbes argues that this authority must be absolute to prevent a return to the chaos of the state of nature. The sovereign is not subject to the law and cannot be punished for their actions.

**Obligations of Citizenship:** Citizens have an obligation to obey the laws established by the sovereign and to contribute to the maintenance of the political community. In return, the sovereign provides protection and security for its citizens.

## Historical Context

"On the Citizen" was written in the wake of the English Civil War (1642-1651), a period of political and social upheaval that deeply influenced Hobbes' thinking. The war highlighted the fragility of political order and the dangers of unchecked individual liberty. Hobbes' work was a response to these events, offering a theoretical framework for establishing a stable and secure political system.

Hobbes' ideas were also shaped by the scientific revolution of the 17th century, which emphasized the importance of reason and logic. Hobbes applied these principles to the study of politics, attempting to create a "science of politics" based on deductive reasoning.

## **Philosophical Significance**

"On the Citizen" has had a profound impact on Western political thought and continues to be debated and interpreted by philosophers and political scientists today. Its key contributions include:

**Grounding of Political Authority:** Hobbes' theory of the social contract provided a powerful justification for the authority of the state. By arguing that individuals voluntarily surrender their rights to a sovereign power, he undermined the idea that political authority is based on divine right or tradition.

**Importance of Order and Stability:** Hobbes placed a high value on peace and order, arguing that it is essential for human flourishing. He believed that the state's primary function is to maintain this order, even if it requires the suppression of individual freedoms.

**Challenge to Natural Law:** Hobbes rejected the traditional idea of natural law, which held that certain moral truths were inherent in nature. Instead, he argued that morality is determined by the sovereign power and is therefore subject to change.

## **Study Questions**

1. Explain the concept of the state of nature according to Hobbes. How does life in the state of nature differ from life in a political community? 2. What are the fundamental natural rights possessed by individuals in the state of nature? Why do these rights often remain unprotected? 3. Describe the social contract as envisioned by Hobbes. What are the key terms of this contract, and what are the obligations of citizens? 4. Explain the concept of sovereignty in Hobbes' theory. Why does Hobbes believe that the sovereign power must be absolute? 5. What are the different obligations of citizens within a political community? How do these obligations contribute to the maintenance of order and stability? 6. Discuss the historical context in which "On the Citizen" was written. How did the events of the English Civil War influence Hobbes' thinking? 7. Explain the significance of Hobbes' rejection of natural law. How does this differ from traditional views of morality? 8. Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of Hobbes' theory of the state. Do you agree with his arguments in favor of absolute sovereignty? 9. Discuss the contemporary relevance of Hobbes' ideas. How do his concepts continue to shape our understanding of political power, individual rights, and the nature of the state?

## **Additional Resources**

\* Hobbes, Thomas. "On the Citizen." Edited by Richard Tuck. Cambridge University Press, 1998. \* Dunn, John. "The Political Thought of John Locke:

An Historical Account of Some Western Political Theory." Cambridge University Press, 1969. \* Skinner, Quentin. "Hobbes and Republican Liberty." Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Thomas Hobbes' "On the Citizen" is a thought-provoking and influential work that continues to challenge our assumptions about the nature of political society. By grappling with its key concepts, historical context, and philosophical significance, you will gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of political thought and the enduring legacy of one of its most enigmatic and provocative thinkers.



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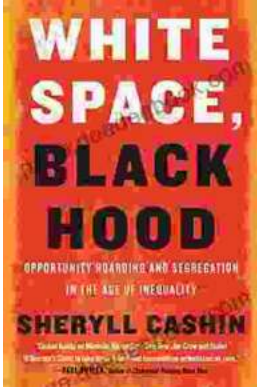
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