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# Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity

Edited by  
Vere Chappell

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*Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity*

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# *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity*

EDITED BY

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## Abbreviations

1st	First (unauthorized) edition of Hobbes's <i>Of Liberty and Necessity</i> (1654)
AV	Authorized Version (of the Bible)
<i>Def.</i>	First edition of Bramhall's <i>A Defence of True Liberty</i> (1655)
<i>DNB</i>	<i>Dictionary of National Biography</i>
ed.	Editor (of this volume)
<i>EW</i> <sub>4</sub>	Volume 4 of <i>The English Works of Thomas Hobbes</i> , edited by William Molesworth (1840)
<i>EW</i> <sub>5</sub>	Volume 5 of <i>The English Works of Thomas Hobbes</i> , edited by William Molesworth (1841)
MS	Harleian Manuscript of Hobbes's <i>Of Liberty and Necessity</i>
<i>ODEE</i>	<i>Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology</i>
<i>OED</i>	<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>
<i>Ques.</i>	First edition of Hobbes's <i>The Questions concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance</i> (1656)
<i>W</i> <sub>1</sub>	First edition of Bramhall's Works (1676)
<i>W</i> <sub>3</sub>	Third edition of Bramhall's Works (1842–4)



## Introduction

In 1645 the Marquess of Newcastle invited two of his acquaintances, Thomas Hobbes and John Bramhall, to have a philosophical discussion at his house in Paris. The three men were Englishmen, forced to live abroad by the Civil War at home; all three were prominent supporters of the by-then losing Royalist cause. Newcastle had been a commander in the Royalist army; Bramhall was not only a bishop in the Anglican Church but a forceful advocate of the King's position on matters of church governance; and Hobbes was a well-known political theorist whose recently published *De cive* was widely read as a defence of the English monarchy.

The subject set for the discussion was human freedom, on which the Marquess knew his guests had sharply different views; the discussion in fact became a debate between the two. After the event, Newcastle asked them to send him written statements setting forth their positions. Bramhall responded with a 'discourse' on liberty and necessity; and he must have sent a copy to Hobbes as well, for the latter's 'treatise' *Of Liberty and Necessity* followed Bramhall's work point for point, criticizing it in addition to presenting and defending his own views.<sup>1</sup> Bramhall responded in turn with *A Vindication of True Liberty from Antecedent and Extrinsic Necessity*, which was both a point-by-point defence of his original position against Hobbes's criticisms and a critical attack on Hobbes's position.

This might have been the end of the Hobbes–Bramhall debate on freedom but for a later event that none of the participants foresaw. Neither author had intended his written statement to be published. But a French friend of Hobbes's asked for a copy of his manuscript so that he might read it. This

<sup>1</sup> I call these two works Bramhall's 'discourse' and Hobbes's 'treatise' for convenience. Their authors did sometimes so refer to them, but these labels were not part of their titles.

friend knew no English, so he asked a young Englishman, apparently with Hobbes's permission, to translate it for him. This young man, one John Davies of Kidwelly, made a copy of the manuscript for himself, without Hobbes's permission; and several years later, in 1654, he published the work, with a polemical preface praising Hobbes and excoriating 'priests, jesuits, and ministers'. Bramhall, who was of course a priest, felt betrayed, sure as he was that Hobbes must at least have known his treatise was to be published. So Bramhall responded by publishing his earlier *Vindication*, with the title *A Defence of True Liberty from Antecedent and Extrinsicall Necessity* (1655). Hobbes then responded with *The Questions concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance* (1656), and Bramhall in turn with his *Castigations of Mr Hobbes* (1658). Hobbes at that point chose not to answer back again; but even so, the original debate between the two authors had become an extended controversy.

This volume presents a major portion of that controversy. It contains the complete texts of Bramhall's original discourse and Hobbes's treatise, together with substantial selections from Bramhall's *Defence* and Hobbes's *Questions*. It also includes a few excerpts from four of Hobbes's other works: *The Elements of Law*, *Leviathan*, *De corpore*, and *De homine*.

The Hobbes–Bramhall controversy over freedom is a striking episode in the history of early modern philosophy. Both authors speak and argue with force and ingenuity; each has a knack for making his own position seem attractive and the other's not; and their opposition to one another is unyielding. Furthermore the subject of their dispute is of central importance, not only for our understanding of ourselves but for the conduct of our lives. Narrowly construed, the question between Hobbes and Bramhall concerns the nature of human freedom – the freedom with which, they both agree, human beings sometimes act. But the answer to that question depends upon our own nature, and the nature of the world within which we act – and also, at least for these two authors and for nearly all of their contemporaries, upon the nature of God and of our relation to him.<sup>2</sup> And on the other hand, our view of human freedom has implications for our conception and practice of morality and politics. Nor is this a question of merely historical interest. Philosophers, theologians, and scientists today are still very much concerned with it, to a significant

<sup>2</sup> Hobbes as well as Bramhall takes the Bible to be an important source of evidence or authority in deciding not only ethical and political issues but also metaphysical ones such as that concerning the nature of freedom and whether human beings have it.

extent in the same terms as those in which Hobbes and Bramhall confronted it.

Neither Hobbes's nor Bramhall's view of human freedom is wholly original. Hobbes is a determinist: he thinks that everything that happens, including every human action, is the necessary effect of antecedent causes. Bramhall, by contrast, thinks that some human actions are not necessitated by antecedent factors; these are the free actions we perform. Hobbes agrees that there are free actions; but he conceives freedom in such wise that it is logically consistent with necessity: his position is that which philosophers today call compatibilism. Freedom in Bramhall's view, however, is inconsistent with necessitation; he is an incompatibilist. An incompatibilist has two alternatives: accept necessity and forgo freedom or keep freedom and reject necessity. Since it is the latter that Bramhall opts for, his position is called libertarianism.<sup>3</sup>

But Hobbes was hardly the first determinist, or the first compatibilist, in the history of philosophy; nor was Bramhall the first libertarian. Positions of both these kinds had frequently been held by ancient and medieval philosophers, and both were being advocated by other thinkers in the early modern period, theologians as well as philosophers. Hobbes's view of freedom and necessity was quite similar to that of the Protestant Reformers, Luther and Calvin among others. And Bramhall's view was close to that of the most influential Catholic thinkers of the day, namely the Jesuits, who followed Molina and Suarez. It must not be thought that all Protestants were determinists and all Catholics libertarians. On the Catholic side, for example, there were the Jansenists, implacable opponents of the Jesuits on the matter of human freedom and necessity. And among Protestants, the followers of James Arminius had rejected the determinism of the orthodox Calvinists in Holland and developed a view of freedom that was much like that of the Jesuits. This Arminian position had also become influential in Stuart England, especially among the clergy. Bramhall himself was often identified as an Arminian.

Hobbes, of course, was more than merely a determinist, and Bramhall more than a libertarian, even in the works comprising their controversy

<sup>3</sup> Actually, an incompatibilist has a third alternative, since he may reject both freedom and necessity. And similarly, a compatibilist need not be a determinist, and need not allow freedom. For compatibilism and incompatibilism are views about the logical relationship of freedom and necessity; whether everything is necessary or whether there is freedom is another question. As a matter of historical fact, it is true that most compatibilists have been determinists and have believed in freedom, as Hobbes does; and that most incompatibilists have been libertarians, as Bramhall is.

over freedom. Each set his view of liberty, necessity, and their relation to one another within a comprehensive psychology and cosmology, and related it to distinctive ethical, political, and theological theories, though both Hobbes and Bramhall sought to stay within a broadly Christian, indeed Protestant, framework. And it is in these surrounding areas that some of the sharpest differences between Hobbes's and Bramhall's thinking are to be found – and also where their most original ideas emerge.

There are not, to be sure, very many original ideas to be found anywhere in Bramhall's thinking. His philosophical views in general are traditional and orthodox, replicating to a large extent the Aristotelian Scholasticism of the High Middle Ages, though sometimes with modifications introduced in the sixteenth century. Even Bramhall's theological views were largely those of the Scholastics – except where those had been rejected by the Protestant Reformers, for Bramhall was a fierce critic of 'Papism' in his writings and sermons. One valuable feature of Bramhall's contributions to the controversy with Hobbes, especially for modern readers, is their explanations of Scholastic ideas and terms, often done more simply and clearly than those of the Scholastics themselves.

There is more originality in Hobbes's contributions. For one thing Hobbes was a metaphysical materialist. Whereas most of his contemporaries acknowledged the existence of immaterial as well as material beings, Hobbes thought to reduce all things, including human minds, to matter. Such a position was no novelty in ancient times, but few thinkers in the mid seventeenth century maintained it, and virtually no Christian did. Being a materialist required Hobbes to develop a whole new psychology, since on the prevailing view the human mind or soul is an immaterial substance with special powers that can only be exemplified in such a substance. This is a task to which Hobbes devoted considerable effort. And apart from his materialism, Hobbes had already constructed a distinctive political philosophy, quite different from the views prevailing at the time; and some of these come into play in his treatise as well.

The most important part of Hobbes's materialist psychology for his view of human freedom concerns desire (or appetite) and will. These are the powers that have traditionally been taken to be most closely involved in the motivation of action: people perform actions because they will to perform them, and they will to perform the actions they do because they desire (or want) the things they think those actions will bring them. In the traditional psychology, maintained by the Scholastics and by Bramhall, desire and will