

# Hobbes and the Problem of Sour Grapes

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## Abstract

Certain theories of freedom have difficulty dealing with the problem of ‘sour grapes’. The idea that you can make yourself free by changing what you want when you run into limitations (inspired by the fox in Aesop’s fables who, upon finding out that the grapes could not be reached, decided they must be sour). This paper first explores in what (theoretical) situations this problem of preference adaptation pops up. What are the perspectives on liberty that open the door to this particular way of liberating yourself? It then argues how a definition of freedom which allows for a ‘contented slave’ does not align with our common understanding of the concept of liberty. The paper next shows how the classic interpretation of Hobbes’s ideas about deliberation forming the will, and his concept of freedom as nonfrustration make him particularly vulnerable to the issue of preference adaptation and seems to leave him no other choice than to bite the bullet. Finally, the paper explores whether Hobbes’s concept of liberty can be interpreted in way that escapes the ‘sour grapes’ trap, while keeping the rest of his political project alive.

## Introduction

A famished fox saw some clusters of ripe black grapes hanging from a trellised vine. She resorted to all her tricks to get at them, but wearied herself in vain, for she could not reach them. At last she turned away, hiding her disappointment and saying: “The Grapes are sour, and not ripe as I thought.”<sup>1</sup>

As soon as this famished fox from Aesop’s fables realised that she wouldn’t be able to get to the grapes, she changed what she wanted and convinced herself that she wasn’t interested in eating grapes after all, as the grapes were sour. Aesop’s fable about the fox is the origin of the concept of ‘sour grapes’ which is used whenever somebody disparages that which

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<sup>1</sup>Aesop, *Aesop’s Fables*.

they can't have. John Elster calls the process of changing our preferences on the basis of the constraints we encounter "adaptive preference formation."<sup>2</sup>

Philosophical theories that define freedom as the absence of external constraints on that which you want to do (e.g. you are free if, when you want to leave the room, the door is indeed open), often have a hard time dealing with liberation through preference adaptation. When confronted with the image of the contented slave —one that cannot imagine wishing for anything other than the current indentured situation that they are in—, they would have to call this person free.

Even though preference adaptation clearly is a natural psychological phenomenon and sometimes even touted as a path to happiness, the image of the contented slave also shows that a theory of freedom that allows for adapting preferences to make oneself free does not align well with our common intuitive perception of liberty.

Thomas Hobbes likely falls into the 'sour grapes' trap. In *Leviathan* he defines freedom as the absence of external opposition<sup>3</sup> and a free man as somebody who is not hindered to do that which he wants to do.<sup>4</sup> Using Hobbes's view on freedom, you can liberate yourself by changing your will.

This paper concludes by seeing if and how a different interpretation of Hobbes's thinking about liberty or a small concession on Hobbes's part could align him with one or more of the ways of escaping the preference adaptation problem.

## 1. The Problem of Preference Adaptation

In school, whenever I had to do something like memorize the periodic table, my father would say the key thing to doing boring tasks is to think about not so much what you're doing but the importance of why you are doing it. Though when I asked him if slavery wouldn't have been less psychologically damaging if they'd thought of it as "gardening", I got a vicious beating that would've made Kunta Kinte wince.<sup>5</sup>

In *Sour grapes — utilitarianism and the genesis of wants*, Jon Elster delineates the problem of adaptive preference formation by comparing it with other mechanisms of preference change that are closely related to it and are often confused with it.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Elster, "Sour Grapes—Utilitarianism and the Genesis of Wants.", 219.

<sup>3</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 145.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 146.

<sup>5</sup>Beatty, *The Sellout*, 106.

<sup>6</sup>Elster, "Sour Grapes—Utilitarianism and the Genesis of Wants.", 220-226.

According to Elster we need to distinguish adaptive preference formation from the change of preferences that can come about from learning or experience. The former is reversible, whereas the latter isn't. Adaptive preferences are the effect of a limited set of options and not the cause. They are endogenous to a person and can't come from the deliberate manipulation of wants by other people. The changed preferences can't be the result of deliberate character planning (as in the Stoic or Buddhist philosophies). As these are intentional rather than causal and usually upgrade the accessible options, whereas the sour grapes idea is to downgrade the inaccessible options. Finally they need to be kept apart from wishful thinking and other rationalisations. Wishful thinking shapes the perception of the situation instead of the evaluation of the situation.

In psychology adaptive preference formation is a very real phenomenon. Psychologists call it cognitive dissonance reduction: striving for internal consistency when you hold contradictory beliefs. There even is some evidence that this feature of our cognitive make-up developed quite early from an evolutionary perspective, as nonhuman primates also exhibit decision rationalisation. A 2007 Yale study titled *The Origins of Cognitive Dissonance*<sup>7</sup> showed that both four-year-old children and capuchin monkeys will downgrade how much they desire something after they weren't able to obtain that particular thing at an earlier time.

We can all recognise the very human (not to say primate) trait that the lack of availability of something we initially want, changes our perception of how much we want it. When the person that we are infatuated with tells us that it is never going to happen, we can suddenly see all the person's character traits that would have prevented the relationship from ever working anyway. And when you are living in a tiny apartment without the resources to get something bigger, it is easy to think of all the reasons why having a large house is mostly a burden. Attempting to reduce cognitive dissonance through adapting your preferences is probably a mentally healthy exercise and will likely lead to an increase in happiness. But it would be strange to say that it can also lead to an increase in liberty.

As soon as you define liberty as having the freedom to do what you want or to satisfy your desires, you run into the problem of adaptive preference formation. Isaiah Berlin states this in a clear and concise way:

If degrees of freedom were a function of the satisfaction of desires, I could increase freedom as effectively by eliminating desires as by satisfying them: I could render men (including myself) free by conditioning them into losing the original desires which I have decided not to satisfy. Instead of resisting or re-

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<sup>7</sup>Egan, Santos, and Bloom, "The Origins of Cognitive Dissonance."

moving the pressures that bear down upon me, I can ‘internalise’ them.<sup>8</sup>

Berlin then writes about the slave Epictetus who, by reducing his desires, managed to become freer than his master.

Preference adaptation is not just a philosophical problem. It is something that at least some slaves actually did. When Tocqueville traveled through the United States in the early 1830s he wasn’t sure whether he should call it a proof of God’s mercy or a proof of God’s wrath that:

The negro, who is plunged in this abyss of evils, scarcely feels his own calamitous situation. Violence made him a slave, and the habit of servitude gives him the thoughts and desires of a slave; he admires his tyrants more than he hates them, and finds his joy and his pride in the servile imitation of those who oppress him: his understanding is degraded to the level of his soul.<sup>9</sup>

It would be preposterous to say that an early 19th century slave on a plantation in the Southern US —however much contented— could be free. Clearly changing your desires cannot be a way to liberate yourself. There should be more to freedom than not being frustrated in your wants and desires.

## 2. Hobbes’s Deliberations on Liberty

In his *Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes sets out to describe —starting from first principles— the ‘Artificiall Man’, or the ‘Body Politique’, that is the commonwealth. In doing this, he has laid both the foundation for much of Western political philosophy (in particular the field of ‘social contract theory’)<sup>10</sup> and for liberal thought.<sup>11</sup>

Having lived through multiple civil wars, Hobbes was convinced that the natural condition of man is a war of everyone against everyone. To escape this dreaded predicament he makes the argument that we should covenant with each other and hand over the authority to an absolute and undivided sovereign. This is the only way that we can live secure lives.

Hobbes wrote his *Leviathan* as a reaction to the defeat and execution of Charles I in 1649. He was working on his book *De corpore* at the time, was shocked to see what happened to the king and saw himself forced to postpone that work to write *Leviathan* to “fight on behalf of all kings.”<sup>12</sup> The prevailing idea at the time was that only a republic could provide true

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<sup>8</sup>Berlin, *Liberty*, 31.

<sup>9</sup>Tocqueville, *Democracy in America — Volume 1*, chapter XVIII.

<sup>10</sup>Lloyd and Sreedhar, “Hobbes’s Moral and Political Philosophy.”

<sup>11</sup>Gaus, Courtland, and Schmidt, “Liberalism.”

<sup>12</sup>Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 125–26.

freedom and that living in a monarchy is like living in servitude, if not like living in slavery. If Hobbes were to defend the monarchy he would have to come up with a conception of liberty which would not be affected by the choice for a particular political system.

He managed to accomplish this by separating the liberty to act in a particular way from the power to perform the action involved. In the classic interpretation of Hobbes, he has a purely external (and negative) perspective on liberty and can't see how internal limitations can affect freedom:

Liberty, of Freedome, signifieth (properly) the absence of Opposition; (by Opposition, I mean the externall Impediments of motion;) [...] For whatsoever is so tyed, or environed, as it cannot move, but within a certain space, which space is determined by the opposition of some externall body, we say it hath not Liberty to go further.<sup>13</sup>

And he distinguishes freedom from having the power to act:

But when the impediment of motion, is in the constitution of thing it selfe, we use not to say, it wants the Liberty; but the Power to move; as when a stone lyeth stil, or a man is fastned to his bed by sicknesse.<sup>14</sup>

Just to make it absolutely clear that it is only external impediments that can put limits on liberty, Hobbes writes about the sailor who very willingly throws his goods into the sea to save himself. He considers that a free action. This leads him to the following definition of a free man:

A Free-Man, is he, that in those those things, which by his strength and wit he is able to do, is not hindred to doe what he has a will to.<sup>15</sup>

This is obviously a very limited definition of freedom. You can't lose your freedom because you are scared to do something (not even when somebody threatens you with a weapon) and you can't lose your freedom through being domineered. Hobbes even thinks it is an abuse of the concept of freedom to apply it to anything that isn't a physical body. Only things that are subjected to motion can be hindered. To put it simply: you can literally decrease the liberty of a prisoner in jail by making his jail cell smaller. To be free does not require you to have a choice.

There is another way that Hobbes talks about liberty in *Leviathan*. This has to do with the act of deliberating. He makes an etymological error and suggests that to deliberate comes

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<sup>13</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 145.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 146.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid.

from de-liberate or to make unfree (the word actually comes from *librare*, to weigh)<sup>16</sup>:

[It] is called *Deliberation*; because it is a putting an end to the *Liberty* we had of doing, or omitting, according to our own Appetite, or Aversion. [...] Every *Deliberation* is then sayd to *End*, when that whereof they Deliberate, is either done, or thought impossible; because till then wee retain the liberty of doing, or omitting, according to our Appetite, or Aversion. In *Deliberation*, the last Appetite, or Aversion, immediately adhaering to the action, or to the ommission thereof, is that wee call the WILL; the Act, (not the faculty,) of *Willing*.<sup>17</sup>

According to Hobbes the will is at the end of the deliberation process when the different passions have done their bidding. The will is then the same thing as the intention to act.

If you combine both of these conceptions of liberty, it leads to the very non-intuitive idea that in Hobbes's view only stupid or irrational people can be unfree. Who else will form the intention to do something that they can't do? If you are rational, then you will adapt your preferences to your situation. So you can be free even in jail, as long as you make sure that you don't want to go anywhere. A classic example of sour grapes.

### 3. Attempting to Save Hobbes

But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness. I want sin.<sup>18</sup>

Before we discuss whether Hobbes can be saved from his self-induced sour grapes situation, we need to first discuss whether he would like to be saved. Even though Hobbes himself acted as if his definition of a free man is completely obvious ("this proper, and generally received meaning of the word"<sup>19</sup>), his perspective was actually quite controversial, also in his time. Skinner calls the contention that a free-man is simply someone who is physically unimpeded from exercising their powers at will "sensationally polemical"<sup>20</sup> and according to Pettit, Hobbes's contemporaries thought his account of freedom was "strange to the point of being barely credible" and his definitions "so at variance with common usage that his readers were often deeply exasperated."<sup>21</sup>

So it could be argued that Hobbes would be more than happy to bite the sour grapes bul-

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<sup>16</sup>Pettit, "Liberty and Leviathan.", 133.

<sup>17</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 44.

<sup>18</sup>Huxley, *Brave New World*, 219.

<sup>19</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 146.

<sup>20</sup>Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 151.

<sup>21</sup>Pettit, "Liberty and Leviathan.", 132.

let. His way of looking at freedom served a particular purpose: to show that there can be freedom without independence, that it is possible to live in a monarchy and still be free. However, it must also be said that Hobbes has a very realistic (and empirical) perspective on human nature. His whole project exists for people to not only be secure but to lead meaningful and productive lives. It is hard to imagine that Hobbes would just accept the paradox that only the stupid and irrational can be unfree. It is worthwhile to see if there is a way to interpret his thinking on freedom that might solve the sour grapes problem while at the same time not implying that you can only have liberty in a free state.

Generally there are at least three potential solutions in solving the problem of preference adaptation: (I) by aligning what somebody wants to do with what they ought to do, (II) by enlarging a negative concept of freedom to include not just being free to do what you want to do, but to also include whatever you *might* want to do or (III) by requiring that your tastes are shaped by yourself rather than have them be shaped by outside agents.<sup>22</sup> The first (Rousseauian) solution is too normative to mesh well with Hobbes's thinking. But the two latter solutions hold the potential to help Hobbes out.

The second (Berlinian) solution initially seems impossible to align with Hobbes's distaste for the republican point of view. Hobbes railed against the "Democraticall writers" of his time who were of the opinion that those who live in a popular common-wealth enjoy liberty and those who live in a monarchy are slaves.<sup>23</sup> To defend the concept of liberty inside a monarchy he needed to make clear that to be free of subjection to arbitrary power isn't a necessary condition to being free. He does that by saying that to be a free-man is to be free from being externally impeded. Skinner summarises this as follows:

The contrast he draws between himself and the theorist of republican liberty is [...] that, whereas they take it to be a necessary condition of being a free-man that we should be free from the possibility of arbitrary interference, he treats it as as a sufficient condition that we should be free from interference as a matter of fact. [...] Hobbes is denying that the mere fact of living in dependence on the will of others plays any part in limiting the freedom of the free-man.<sup>24</sup>

Hobbes then makes it clear that you always have the liberty to not obey the laws if you want. Obeying the law is in that sense a voluntary act. The threat of not being protected by a sovereign can't be seen as limiting your freedom. The fear of what would happen if you disobey the sovereign doesn't impede your liberty. "Feare, and Liberty are consistent" as Hobbes writes.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Parijs, *Real Freedom for All*, 18-19.

<sup>23</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 226.

<sup>24</sup>Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty*, 154-155.

<sup>25</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 146.

This particular way of reasoning against republicanism does not preclude Hobbes from making a small concession to Berlin through expanding his concept of liberty from purely freedom of action to one that includes a freedom of choice. We know from his philosophical discussion with bishop Bramhall that Hobbes explicitly did not make this concession:

[A person] may deliberate of that which is impossible for him to do, as in the example he alleges of him that deliberates whether he shall play at tennis, not knowing that the door of the tennis-court is shut against him; yet it is no impediment to him that the door is shut till he have a will to play, which he has not till he has done deliberating whether he shall play or not.<sup>26</sup>

But the fact is that he could have made this concession without losing the distinction between external limitations and internal limitations (like fear), and so without losing the argumentative ammunition he needs to defend a monarchy.

The third way of escaping the problem of sour grapes takes a more positive approach to liberty and says that freedom requires autonomy. This approach can potentially help Hobbes too. Is it possible to find this more positive approach to freedom in Hobbes's writing?

In *Liberty, Rationality, and Agency in Hobbes's Leviathan*<sup>27</sup> David van Mill argues against the traditional interpretation of Hobbes's concept of liberty as a purely negative freedom and replaces it with what he calls 'Hobbes's "extended" theory of freedom,' the idea that Hobbes discusses many other conditions of freedom besides the absence of external impediments.<sup>28</sup>

Hobbes is usually seen as only discussing freedom as the lack of external impediments, but Van Mill shows quite a few cases in *Leviathan* where Hobbes seems to realise that there can also be internal impediments to liberty. For example when Hobbes writes that idiots, children and crazy people are not obliged by the law<sup>29</sup>, he links freedom to responsibility and rationality, and thus introduces internal considerations into the question of liberty.<sup>30</sup> Or when Hobbes writes:

The Liberty of a Subject, lyeth therefore only in those things, which in regulating their actions, the Sovereign hath praetermitted: such as is the Liberty to buy, and sell, and otherwise contract with one another; to choose their own aboad, their own diet, their own trade of life, and institute their children as they

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<sup>26</sup>Hobbes and Bramhall, *Hobbes and Bramhall on Liberty and Necessity*, 81.

<sup>27</sup>Mill, *Liberty, Rationality, and Agency in Hobbes's Leviathan*.

<sup>28</sup>Ibid., 48.

<sup>29</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 187.

<sup>30</sup>Mill, *Liberty, Rationality, and Agency in Hobbes's Leviathan*, 57-58.



themselves think fit; & the like.<sup>31</sup>

Van Mill then writes that this statement “means that liberty exists where the law is silent and that within this realm, freedom includes the liberty to *choose*.”<sup>32</sup> In cases like these, according to Van Mill:

Hobbes is using the term *liberty* in a more conventional sense that his strict definition allows for because he is talking about civil liberties rather than whether one is being impeded or not by physical external barriers. [...] The liberty of the subject actually has very little to do with the absence of external obstacles. What Hobbes is really concerned with is not unimpeded movement, but “a right or liberty of *action*.” [...] Clearly Hobbes thinks that civil society limits absolute freedom, but that this is necessary for a more worthwhile bounded liberty.<sup>33</sup>

Van Mill then argues that Hobbes was primarily interested in promoting the development of rational individuals as a necessary precondition for a society at peace, so that we might live autonomous lives. It might seem difficult to show that Hobbes was concerned with autonomy. He is mostly depicted as somebody who saw humans as survival machines, pursuing immediate gratification, with reason being the slave of the passions. Van Mill tackles this problem by focusing on Hobbes’s thoughts on rational agency.

In the introduction to *Leviathan* Hobbes already makes it clear that he thinks that humans as a species are rational: “*Art* goes yet further, imitating that Rationall and most excellent worke of Nature, *Man*”<sup>34</sup> He is convinced that humans can only understand themselves through rational introspection. Hobbes makes a distinction between “*Trayne of Thoughts Unguided*” and “*Trayne of Thoughts Regulated*”<sup>35</sup> and wouldn’t have done that if he didn’t want to argue that the latter is the preferred version. Just from the title of chapter 8 it is evident that Hobbes values intellectual virtues. In that chapter he also makes it clear that when passions are unguided and out of control they are a form of madness.<sup>36</sup> Van Mill writes that these “passages all point to the conclusion that Hobbes thought that unguided and untempered passions are inconsistent with rational action.”<sup>37</sup>

To live a contented life you would need to achieve a balance between the passions so that you can reason your way to the best course of action. As Hobbes says in chapter 8:

[Without] Steddinesse, and Direction to some End, a great Fancy is one kind

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<sup>31</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 148.

<sup>32</sup>Mill, *Liberty, Rationality, and Agency in Hobbes’s Leviathan*, 59.

<sup>33</sup>*Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>34</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 9.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 20-21.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>37</sup>Mill, *Liberty, Rationality, and Agency in Hobbes’s Leviathan*, 86.

of Madnesse; such as they have, that entring into any discourse, are snatched from their purpose, by everything that comes in their thoughts [...] Which kind of folly, I know no particular name for.<sup>38</sup>

About which Van Mill writes: “Perhaps lack of agency is an adequate name for such a condition.”<sup>39</sup> to then suggest that “Hobbes believes we must rationally order our passions, thoughts, desires and actions in order to live a fulfilling life.”<sup>40</sup> and that having to choose between our passions means that we must display some of the attributes of autonomy. Thus Van Mill would argue that Hobbes’s perspective on our human nature would obviate the sour grapes problem.

## Conclusion

This paper first distinguished preference adaptation (sour grapes) from other mechanisms of preference change like wishful thinking and deliberate character planning. Preference adaptation is a common psychological phenomenon and likely a mentally healthy exercise. However, even though it might make you happy, it is hard to argue that it makes you free.

The most clear example of this is the nearly paradoxical situation of the contented slave. If freedom consists in being able to do what you desire, then slaves could free themselves through desiring nothing more than the lives they are already living.

Hobbes, in defense of a monarchical system of governance, defines the concept of liberty in *Leviathan* in a strictly external and negative fashion. Internal limitations (like fear) can’t affect freedom, it is just the absence of external opposition which makes you free. Hobbes also looks at the deliberation process and defines the will as the intention to act: the last appetite or aversion right before the action.

This makes Hobbes particularly vulnerable to the sour grapes problem and its extended version: the idea that only idiots and irrational people form the intention to do something for which there are external limitations. Rational people would only act in ways that are congruent with their options.

Assuming that Hobbes wouldn’t just bite the bullet (or eat the sour grapes if you will) there are three classic escapes: taking a normative approach, expanding liberty to include freedom of choice, and requiring autonomy. This paper explored whether Hobbes’s writing could be interpreted or slightly adapted to be aligned with the latter two options.

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<sup>38</sup>Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 51.

<sup>39</sup>Mill, *Liberty, Rationality, and Agency in Hobbes’s Leviathan*, 94.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

It was first made clear that it would have been possible for Hobbes to slightly expand his concept of freedom and not just talk about external impediments to motion (having the ability to act), but also to include external impediments to choice as limiting liberty. Doing that would still allow him to argue against the republicans and for a monarchy.

Finally this paper explored Van Mill's analysis of Hobbes's concerns with autonomy. Van Mill makes a strong case for extending the Hobbesian concept of freedom to also include internal constraints and opportunities. By showing how Hobbes embraces the concept of agency, he shows how we can rationally give up a little bit of freedom to be able to self-realise, lead autonomous lives and avoid the sour grapes trap.

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