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**Interpreting Hobbes's Moral Theory: Rightness, Goodness,
Virtue, and Responsibility**¹

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Abstract

The paper argues that the moral philosophy of Thomas Hobbes is unified by a complex conception of reason that imposes consistency norms of both rationality and reasonableness. **Hobbes's conceptions of rightness as reciprocity, and moral goodness as sociability** belong to an original and attractive moral theory that is neither teleological nor classically deontological, nor as interpreters have variously argued, subjectivist, contractarian, egoist, or dependent on divine command.

Keywords: Hobbes, Rightness, Goodness, Responsibility, Virtue.

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Introduction

More than fifty years ago K. C. Brown wrote “there is still persistent and drastic disagreement... about what [Hobbes] actually meant his theory to be in the first place,” (Brown 1965, p. x) and the situation with respect to Hobbes's moral theory has, if anything, worsened since then. Today we have carefully argued interpretations by respectable scholars finding Hobbes to have no moral theory at all, but only a theory of long-run self-interest.² Equally carefully argued interpretations take Hobbes to be a moral subjectivist,³ projectivist (Darwall, 2000), or prescriptivist (Holden, 2016), a moral contractarian (Gauthier, 1986), an ethical egoist (Gert, 2001),⁴ a rule egoist (Kavka, 1986), a strict deontologist prefiguring Kant (Taylor, 1938), or a virtue theorist (Ewin, 1991; Boonin-Vail, 1994). We have interpretations according to which Hobbes's moral theory is derived from empirical psychology,⁵ independent of psychological theory (Taylor 1938), or analytically derived from definitions of key concepts (McNeilly, 1968; Deigh, 1996; Lloyd, 2009). Moral norms are entirely conventional (Gauthier, 1986), or they depend on divine command.⁶ The range of interpretive disagreement is staggering.

It may be helpful to clarify what we are asking about when asking whether Hobbes has a moral theory. On one influential account, moral theory is the part of moral philosophy that studies substantive moral conceptions by specifying how their basic notions of rightness, goodness, and moral worth are arranged to form a distinctive moral structure, showing how they relate to our attitudes, and what conditions they must satisfy if they are to play their expected role in human life (Rawls, 1975, p. 286). So understood, a moral theory will provide an account of

2. Nagel 1959; Watkins 1973; Hampton 1986. For example, Nagel writes “genuine moral obligation plays no part at all in *Leviathan*” and a Hobbesian man “is susceptible only to selfish motivation and therefore is incapable of any action which could be clearly labelled moral. He might, in fact, be best described as a man without a moral sense,” 69, 74.

3. Tuck 1989. Tuck variously ascribes to Hobbes three quite distinct theories; moral relativism, moral scepticism, and moral subjectivism, xxvi-xxvii.

4. Gert takes Hobbes to hold that morality requires the pursuit of self-preservation and other elements of self-interest, as “rationally required” ends.

5. Strauss, 1965; Gauthier, 1969; Hampton, 1986; Shelton, 1992; Curley 1994; Kavka, 1986 sharply distinguishes Hobbes's descriptive psychological theory from his normative moral theory but attempts to “base” the latter on the former.

6. Martinich, 1992; Byron, 2015; Hood, 1964; Warrender, 1957, who writes that the laws of nature “have obligatory force only when regarded as the commands of God,” 252.

goodness and of rightness and of the priority relation between the two. It will also provide an ideal of moral character, an account of moral responsibility, and an account of how persons can typically be motivated to do what morality requires of **them**. **Once these elements have been specified, it becomes possible to fruitfully address meta-questions about what sort of a theory – error, realist, constructivist, etc. – that theory is.**

1. Morality Requires Reciprocity

Hobbes famously offers the familiar “law of the Gospel; *whatsoever you require that others should do to you, that do ye to them*” (*Leviathan*, 14.5)⁷ as the central principle of morality. He offers this reciprocity requirement in multiple formulations, positive and negative,⁸ in every version of his theory, **and says it is the “core” or “sum” of the law of nature, that it “contains” all the law of nature, or that it just *is* the law of nature.** It entails numerous behavioral requirements (including of gratitude, equity, justice, mutual accommodation) and prohibitions (including of arrogance, partiality, contumely, cruelty), but because every normal adult human is to be held responsible for observing **them**, “**to leave all men inexcusable, they have been contracted into one easy sum, intelligible even to the meanest capacity, and that is *Do not that to another, which thou wouldst not have done to thyself*”** (*Leviathan*, 15.35). The law of nature is the moral law, and the science of it – its casuistry and its derivation – **is “the true moral philosophy”** (*Leviathan*, 15.40).

Hobbes grounds its claim on us in our status as rational creatures. “God himself, *because He hath made men rational*, hath enjoined the following law on them, and hath inscribed it in all hearts: that no one should do to another that **which he would consider inequitable for the other to do unto him**” (*De Homine* 14.5, **emphasis added**). Equity, Hobbes says, the “**law of nature which commands every man to allow the same rights to others they would be allowed themselves . . . is the same which Moses sets down (Lev. XIX.18): *Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself*.** And our Saviour calls it ***the sum of the moral law***” (*Rudiments* 4.12); and **this requirement “is the natural law, having its beginning with rational nature**

7. 14.5. References to *Leviathan* and *De Cive* are by chapter and paragraph numbers.

8. See *Leviathan* 14.5, 15.35, 26.13; *De Cive* 3.14, 4.12; *Elements* I.5.6, II.10.7 Hobbes does not differentiate between positive and negative formulations of the requirement to afford others reciprocal treatment.

itself" (*Rudiments* 17.8, emphasis added). *Qua* rational beings, men are subject to a reciprocity requirement.

As these formulations of the natural law make plain, morality concerns our behavior toward others (those actions that may "redound to the harm or benefit of our neighbors" (*Rudiments* 2.1 note)) and our "manners," (*Elements* I.5.1) which Hobbes defines as dispositions to behave toward others in a way that promotes harmony (virtues) or undermines it (vices). The reciprocity principle suggests a very simple, familiar test of moral permissibility: consider how you would react were you on the receiving end of the action you propose to perform, and if you would blame such treatment as being wrong, you may not permissibly so act (15.35, *De Cive* 3.26).

Because the laws of nature are condensable into this one simple reciprocity principle, no one can plead ignorance as an excuse for immoral behavior (27.4). "The laws of nature are those we are bound to obey *insofar as we are men*" (OL 26.1, emphasis added), and thus bind every competent adult, including sovereigns⁹ and atheists.¹⁰ No one is above the natural law, and its claim on us does not depend on belief in the existence of God. "Only children and madmen are excused from offences against the law natural," Hobbes insists (27.23, emphasis added). It follows that the duty to abide by the laws of nature does not depend on the individual's having promised or covenanted to do so. Ordinary obligations do require an agent's voluntary act of covenanting or vowing,¹¹ whereas the laws of nature not only do not depend on covenant, but they constrain what obligations we can undertake by means of covenants. Hobbes explains, "a covenant, if lawful, binds by the force of natural law . . . if unlawful, bindeth not at all," (14.33) and those who vow to do anything contrary to the law of nature "vow in vain" it being "unjust to pay such a vow" (14.23). The law of nature binds, not as a contractual obligation, but as a natural duty.¹²

2. Moral Casuistry

Hobbesian moral casuistry is a matter of syllogistically discharging the major

9. Sovereigns commit iniquity when they violate the law of nature. 18. 6 and OL 18.6. For discussion of the set of duties under the law of nature particular to sovereigns, see Lloyd 2009, 33–48. Only God may legitimately hold sovereigns to account for their violations of natural law. *Elements* II.9.1.

10. "Unbelief is a rejection of [all of God's laws] except the natural," 26.40, emphasis added.

11. 21.10 "there being no obligation on any man which ariseth not from some act of his own."

12. Additional support for this conclusion appears in Lloyd, 2017.

reciprocity premise by a minor premise specifying something we would blame **others for doing, or for failing to do. Blame is a specific reactive attitude reflecting a belief that the action is wrong. For example,** because I would blame others, who are my equals, for refusing to enter into a peace on equal terms with me when I am willing to do so with them, reciprocity requires that I must do so when they are willing. This reasoning yields the second law of nature. The application of this form of reasoning to establish the right of nature is particularly interesting. Because I would judge everyone to whom I own no special obligations *unreasonable* to blame me for doing what I sincerely believe necessary to save my own life, and for relying on *my own* judgment rather than theirs about what *is* necessary, I must reciprocally allow that they also do no wrong in doing whatever they conscientiously deem necessary to save their own lives. I must grant a universal right to all to act on their own judgment of what is needful for their own survival. The right of nature is thus *not primitive*, but is rather derived from the reciprocity requirement of the law of nature,¹³ and this fact explains why the right is limited to perceived needs of self-preservation. We *would* blame others for seriously harming us **in pursuit of what they acknowledge to be trivial gains or superfluities. In** general, we are inclined to blame others for *every* harm they do to us, so the general principle is that harming others is wrong. But because we would fault others for blaming us for harms we commit out of necessity or for self-preservation, reciprocity also operates to carve out a set of exceptions to that no-harm principle. Far from positing unlimited moral license, Hobbes writes **that “all infliction of harm on men is a violation of natural Law and a wrong against God” except only what is excused as being “done of necessity, or in pursuit of peace, or for self-preservation.”**¹⁴

The remnant of the right of nature retained in civil society in the form of the **true liberties of subjects depends in the same way on the individual’s judgment that** it would be unreasonable to fault her for not resisting what she sees as an urgent

13. Hobbes writes if “every man would grant the same liberty to another, which he desires for himself, as is commanded by the law of nature, that same natural state would return again, in which all men may by right do all things,” Rudiments 10.8.

14. De Cive 3.27 note, emphasis added. Were these exceptions not allowed by reciprocity, every harmful act would be immoral, even causally necessitated accidents like bumping into another when the bus jolts.

threat to her survival. Those retained rights are nothing more than exemptions from moral blame for doing in extreme circumstances what cannot be approved in ordinary ones, namely **disobeying the sovereign's command**. **They are certainly not** legally enforceable claim rights, nor exemptions from civil punishment, for though **the subject acts blamelessly in refusing the sovereign's command**, the sovereign also acts within its authority in punishing the subject for disobeying. Even when it comes to determining whom we should obey, Hobbes implicitly appeals to **reciprocity**, writing, **"for when we demand that our fellow citizens obey someone's power for our good, we admit by that very demand that his power is legitimate"** (*De Cive* 14.12.). We admit, that is, that we too ought to obey him, because what we demand of others we are required under natural law also to do.

3. Reason as Consistency, Rightness as Reciprocity

Hobbes speaks of the laws of nature as "theorems" of reason. But of what axiom are they theorems? Reason imposes a fundamental requirement of *consistency*. It is contrary to reason simultaneously to hold contradictory beliefs about the same proposition, and it is contrary to reason to hold contradictory reactive attitudes toward the same justifying consideration for **an action**. Hobbes calls it "absurd" for one to approve a consideration as **justifying one's own action while disapproving** that very same consideration as **justifying another's** relevantly similar action. A reason, for a person, is a consideration she takes to justify an action under a fixed description of that action; a consideration that she will offer *to* you but will not accept *from* you is not a reason, at least not coming from her.

Hobbes consistently criticizes those who condemn in others what they approve in themselves. He finds it ironic that Cato should have such a reputation for wisdom, considering that with him "animosity should so prevail instead of judgment, and partiality *instead of reason*, that *the very same thing* which he *thought just* in his popular state, he should *censure* [that is, blame] as unjust in a **monarchical**" (*Rudiments Epistle Dedicatory*, **emphases added**). That a man "gives a different judgment of an action when he does it than when someone else does the very same thing [is among the] obvious signs that what moral Philosophers have **written up to now has contributed nothing to the knowledge of truth**" (*De Cive Epistle Dedicatory*). Hobbes insists that inconsistency in evaluative judgments,

reflecting inconsistency in our reactive attitudes, is contrary to reason, and so, reason requires reciprocity.

Reciprocity is the standard for right action, and violation of it is *always* wrong. However, its theorems, which comprise the particular laws of nature requiring peace-seeking, justice, impartiality, etc., need not be observed *in foro externo* in the social circumstance that no one else is observing them and one's unilateral compliance with them would "assist the wicked" in victimizing oneself (14.36, *De Cive* 3.27). This is an *exemption approved by* the reciprocity requirement rather than a *suspension* of the reciprocity requirement. We would blame those who blamed us for resisting damaging exploitation of our willingness to observe the laws of nature from those who will not reciprocally observe them, and so must allow that all permissibly resist such victimization. Reciprocity licenses only symmetrical behaviors, approving sociability toward those willing to be sociable, and the use of force and fraud against enemies in circumstances of war (14.4). "Reason," Hobbes writes, "and the law of nature *over and above* all these particular laws, doth dictate this law *in general*" that we need only observe "those particular laws" when we do not expect to be harmed by "the neglect thereof in those toward whom we observe them" (*De Corpore Politico* 1.4.10, emphasis added). Reciprocity, then, is an immutable requirement of reason that requires actual performance everywhere and always, even as it explains why theorem laws of nature mandating particular types of behavior sometimes bind only in the inner court of conscience.

Not everything contrary to reason is wrongful, for mere errors of calculation, and failures to fit means to ends are contrary to reason. But contrariety to reason is necessary for moral wrongness – "we ought to judge those actions only wrong, which are repugnant to right reason" (*De Cive* 2.1) – and culpable fault (immorality) is a matter of being "blameable with reason" (*De Cive* 14.17). Blameworthiness, rather than mere incorrectness, characterizes wrongness; whatever is not wrong is permissible, blameless, and allowed as right (*Elements* 14.6, *De Cive* 1.7). Reason thus involves both *rational* requirements of consistency, such as that he who wills the end must will the means necessary to produce that end, and *reasonable* requirements of consistency, such as that one must allow to others whatever one requires for oneself. The reasonable requirement of reciprocity, which constrains pursuit of self-interest, is justified as a requirement of reason, but it is not justified

instrumentally by application of a rational means/ends principle. Reason imposes co-equal and independent requirements of reasonableness and rationality, neither derived from the other, and each mandating a kind of consistency.¹⁵

4. Deriving the Laws of Nature

Reason itself does not dictate ends. In order for there to be a universal moral duty to seek peace, each person *must fault others* for not seeking peace (and so be bound by reciprocity to do so herself). What, considering Hobbes's insistence on the idiosyncratic diversity of the objects of our passions, reflecting differences in our bodily constitutions, upbringing, education, and experience (*Leviathan* Introduction. 3), could form a universal basis for faulting others' unsociable behavior? One popular suggestion among interpreters has been a posited *alpha* desire in all people to avoid their own temporal bodily death, which desire is supposed to arise inexorably from biological processes. Hobbes's position was more subtle. The desire for temporal bodily self-preservation is natural (*De Cive* Epistle Dedicatory) and blameless (*De Cive* 1.7), but often not dominant in socialized people. Hobbes recognized ambitious rebels, glory seekers, religious martyrs, gentlemen dueling for their honor, and many ordinary folk who wish to achieve salvation or to avoid damnation as caring more to achieve those ends than they do for their temporal bodily survival, and so as willing to risk, or sometimes even to sacrifice, their lives to satisfy their transcendent interests.¹⁶ Nor did he think all motivation is necessarily self-interested; all of one's interests are interest of oneself, but they are not all interests *in* oneself – in one's own health, wealth, reputation, or pleasure. Hobbes recognized desires of the self in things like the welfare of loved ones and the flourishing of causes.¹⁷

There is, however, one universal, inescapable desire no human agent can fail to have. Agents *must* want the conditions necessary for achieving their ends to obtain. Agents desire not just particular objects, but the conditions for satisfying whatever

15. Contrary to the views of Gauthier 1969, Hampton 1986, and many others. Although Rawls 2007, 65–6 is correct to describe the laws of nature as reasonable principles, he errs in holding that in Hobbes “the grounds [sic] of the Reasonable is the Rational.”

16. For the concept of a transcendent interest, and documentation of Hobbes's appreciation of it, see Lloyd 1992.

17. For a complete discussion of this issue, see Slomp 2019..

future desires they may have, Hobbes writing that “the object of a man’s desire is . . . to assure forever the way of his future desire”(11.1). This explains our perceived need to accumulate “power after power” (11.2). If we see that our ability to do whatever we from time to time may most want to do is impeded by a condition of universal war because of things like the interference of others and our insecure control of resources, we will necessarily “abhor” that condition. We will converge on the judgment that avoidance of that condition is “agreeable to reason in the actions of common life,” we will demand that other people do what is necessary to avoid that condition, and we will fault them for refusing to do so.

Attempted derivations of the laws of nature based on the desire for self-preservation typically assume that peace is necessary for any individual’s self-preservation, and that in order to achieve peace it is necessary that every individual follows the laws of nature. Yet, it is simply not true that peace requires every agent always to follow every law of nature; all peaceful states contain some ingrates, promise-breakers, and immodest and self-partial people, as Hobbes acknowledged. Nor is it true that others will follow the laws of nature only if one does so oneself.¹⁸ The reason that any given person should follow the laws of nature cannot be that his doing so is *necessary* to prevent the existence of general warfare. He is just not that important. What *is* true is that if *no one* follows the laws of nature, peace cannot be achieved. It is necessary for avoiding general warfare that some *critical mass* of humanity observes the laws of nature, and so, because each deems that good, each must demand that *other* people around herself should observe those laws. Then, by reciprocity, reason requires her to observe them herself toward those people. The reciprocity requirement of morality gives individuals no *asymmetrical* option of personal exemption; either they demand that everyone follow natural law or they exempt everyone else along with themselves. They cannot rationally do the latter. Thus the reason they should act as the laws of nature require is not that doing so is instrumentally necessary to achieve self-preservation or any other particular end; it is rather that it is right (accords

18. It is not even true that unless I follow the laws of nature, I will be evicted from society into a state of nature. I might be fined or jailed, but more likely, I will join all those other people in society who sometimes act immorally but suffer no consequences at all. There is such a thing as successful wickedness, and it is not as rare as we might hope.

with reason) that they should do what they require others to do as necessary to achieving what they as rational agents *must* deem good.

To ground the derivation of the particular laws of nature on contingent desires that individuals may or may not have would undermine the *scientific status* of **Hobbes's moral philosophy, which he advertises as its greatest virtue.** A psychological minor premise must be imported into the derivation from the reciprocity rule of the law of nature to seek peace, but that premise is required by **Hobbes's method of proof to be a postulate of a necessary desire.** It is not only *not necessary* that people most desire their bodily self-preservation, it is often flat out false. Hobbes denies that there is any particular *finis ultimus* or *summum bonum* for humans (11.1). It is, however, both true and necessary that we, *qua* rational agents desire that the conditions necessary for the effective exercise of our agency obtain. We must desire the ordered social environment that general adherence to the laws of nature creates, because without it we can expect to be crossed at every turn, and we want to assure forever the way to our future desire (11.1). It is bad enough that inescapable natural evils interfere with us – sickness and accidents, and natural disasters. We cannot want to heap man-made evils (so-called moral evils) like being victimized by murder, enslavement, and pillage on top of those natural impediments to our doing whatever it is we most want from time to time to do. We have to demand general adherence to those laws of nature that create a navigable space in which we reasoning agents can act.

5. Goodness as Sociability

In *Leviathan* Hobbes writes that “moral philosophy is nothing else but the science of what is good and evil in the conversation and society of mankind,” (15.40) and that “good and evil are names that signify [indicate] our appetites and aversions. . . [concerning] what is conformable or disagreeable to reason in the actions of common life”(15.40). Names are marks or signs used for personal recall and for communication with others. These particular names, “good” and “evil,” in their moral sense apply to our sociable behavior – how we treat each other and how we organize our shared social environment. The standard requiring conformity to reason is objective insofar as it makes moral good and evil not reducible to the speaker's attitudes; but deciding whether that standard has been met is a matter of judgment, and no single person's

reason, nor any group's reasoning, is guaranteed infallibly to track "right reason." People frequently disagree about the justifiability of arrangements that mutually affect them, which fact Hobbes lists as one of the reasons men cannot live peacefully without government.¹⁹ In general,

divers men differ... [in their judgment] of what is conformable, or disagreeable to reason in the actions of common life. Nay, the same man in divers times differs from himself, and one time praiseth (that is, calleth good) what another time he dispraiseth (and calleth evil); from whence arise disputes, controversy, and at last war (15.40).

Even if people were conscientiously trying to judge what comports with reason in their common business, disagreement would **remain because people's appetites and aversions infect their use of the terms "good" and "evil,"** and these passions differ widely across persons and even within persons over time (15.40). Hobbes **observes that people tend to "call good" whatever *they personally* desire, approve, or will,**²⁰ regardless of whether their judgments track conformity to reason in the actions of common life. This is understandable, because we make evaluative judgments in other areas of life in which mere personal preference is an appropriate standard, and these may easily spill over into an area in which it is not. There is a common non-moral use of "good" and "bad" to pick out what is (un) pleasing, (un)desirable, or (not)useful to oneself without regard to sustaining society as reason directs. Hobbes observes that *whatever* a person wills "seems good" and is pleasant to her (*Rudiments* 1.2).

People sometimes unwittingly substitute their personal tastes for standards of good and evil. Hobbes criticizes the "schools of the Grecians" as unprofitable precisely because "their moral philosophy is but a description of their own passions... they make the rules of good and bad by their own liking and disliking," resulting in "the subversion of commonwealth."²¹ Further, people may purposely manipulate moral language in pursuit of personal gain; **unlike sociable creatures that lack words, "men can represent to others that**

19. Unlike humans, naturally sociable creatures "do not see, nor think they see, any fault in the administration of their common business; whereas among men there are very many that think themselves wiser, and abler to govern the public, better than the rest" (17.9).

20. 6.7; Cf. De Cive 1.10 "whatever anyone wants seems good to him precisely because he wants it".

21. 46.11. See also De Cive 3.32 "whenever someone dislikes another person's good action, he applies the name of some vice related to it; likewise wickedness that pleases is given the name of a virtue."

which *is good in the likeness of evil, and evil in the likeness of good*" (17.10, emphasis added). And of course, anyone may err in a judgment of what **comports with reason in the actions of common life. We find then in Hobbes two uses of 'good': as revealing the speaker's favor toward whatever is the object of her will, and to indicate her judgment that something conforms with what reason requires in the actions of common life (moral goodness). The first** has no normative implication in Hobbes; on it the good is not something that *ought* to be pursued, for one may will a course of action which reason condemns, such as revenge, or rebellion. The second does have normative implications because it is linked to right reason, but we should expect widespread disagreement in those judgments of goodness.

We are now in a position to consider the relation of the good to the right in **Hobbes's moral system. Goodness is not prior to, nor conceptually independent of, rightness. Goodness is conformity with reason's requirement in the domain of sociability, that is in the actions of common life, and what reason requires in that domain is reciprocity, but reciprocity is the primary principle of rightness. To be blameless with reason, hence right, action must conform to the reciprocity principle. Thus, goodness cannot be characterized independently of rightness, let alone as prior to it. Just as the reasonable and the rational, so the right and the good, both proceed from and express reason. This does indeed preclude understanding Hobbes's moral theory as teleological or consequentialist.**

6. Character and Virtue

Hobbes distinguishes between the justice of an action and the justice of a person, explaining that refraining from all unjust actions is neither necessary **nor sufficient for being a just person. The "virtue of manners" possessed by the just person involves a consistent concern to act justly, a specific set of reactive attitudes concerning injustice, and being motivated directly by considerations of justice.** Hobbes takes justice to be one of the two central virtues, charity being the other, and it plays an important role in his argument for the immorality of political disobedience. There is, though, no reason to suppose he would not extend his distinction between the morality of actions and the morality of persons to cover cases other than justice, including modesty, gratitude, sociability, or equity. Action that conforms to the requirements of

natural law will be right action, but if the actor was not motivated by the rightness of the action but instead by fear of punishment or hope of gain, that action was no evidence of a good moral character. Conversely, a person motivated in the right way and with the right attitudes who sometimes slips up in action through error or weakness may still count as virtuous. In the English *Leviathan* Hobbes writes that a just or righteous man

is he who taketh all the care he can that his actions may all be just; and an unjust man is he that neglecteth it. . . . a righteous man does not lose that title by one or a few unjust actions that proceed from a sudden passion or mistake of things or persons; nor does an unrighteous man lose his character for such actions as he does or forbears to do for fear, because his will is not framed by the justice, but by the apparent benefit of what he is to do (15.10).

Here Hobbes seems to accept the Aristotelian view that “**mistake of things or persons**” – cases in which one simply does not realize what one is actually doing – **do not count against one’s character, and suggests that neither may immoral actions done in the heat of passion.** The latter view, however, seems not to be **Hobbes’s considered position, for he elsewhere insists that we are to be held responsible for willingly doing things that may weaken our ability to do as natural law requires, as habitually indulging our passions may be expected to do²².** He insists that during the period between learning a law (which in the case of the laws of nature coincides with the advent of reason) and performance of the violation, the **person should have “rectified the irregularity” of his passions, and so heat of passion is no excuse (27.33). This more stringent standard is reflected in the corresponding passage of the Latin *Leviathan*.** There he writes that when the terms ‘just’ or ‘unjust’ are attributed to persons as opposed to actions they refer to a custom or habit, as a virtue or vice. Thus a man who has a constant will to give everyone what he has a right to, even if his actions have sometimes been unjust, is still just, provided he loves justice, himself condemns what he has done unjustly, even if he did it secretly, wishes he had not done it, and if he has done any harm, makes amends as far as he can. On the other hand, an unjust man is one who

22. Rudiments 3.25: Hobbes specifically condemns drunkenness on the ground that “he who knowingly or willingly doth aught whereby the rational faculty may be destroyed or weakened, he knowingly and willingly breaks the law of nature. For there is no difference between a man who performs not his duty, and him who does such things willingly as make it impossible for him to do it.”

neglects justice, even if, from fear or some other unworthy cause, he has never done injury to anyone (OL 15.10).

Hobbes's distinction here between worthy and unworthy causes of action is interesting. He specifies it in stark terms in the passage A. E. Taylor famously cited as evidence that Hobbes endorsed a strict deontology foreshadowing Kant's:²³

Although a man should order all his actions so much as belongs to external obedience just as the law commands, but not for the law's sake, but by reason of some punishment annexed to it, or out of vain glory; yet is he unjust (*Rudiments* 4.21).

An action's cause matters to the assessment of its moral worth and of the character of the agent. Hobbes suggests further that motivation by a sense of duty more reliably produces conformity to moral requirements than does fear of (uncertain) punishments in his response to the question "if men know not their duty, what is there that can force them to obey the laws? An army you will say. But *what shall force the army?*" (*Behemoth* 59, emphasis added) Presumably, nothing but an internal sense of duty.

It is telling that Hobbes's conception of the person of morally virtuous character departs from the traditional conception that included courage, fortitude, and temperance as among the cardinal virtues. He declines to afford those admitted excellences of character the status of moral virtues because, although they reliably **redound to the benefit of the individual who has them, their effect on social harmony** may be negative rather than positive. He writes that these are not virtues of citizens as citizens, but as persons, for these virtues are useful not so much to the state as they are to those individual persons who have them:

For just as the state is not preserved save by the courage, prudence, and temperance of good citizens, so it is not destroyed save by the courage, prudence, and temperance of its enemies... [G]ood dispositions are those which are suitable for entering into civil society; and good manners (that is, moral virtues) are those whereby what was entered upon can be best preserved (*De Homine* 13.9)

23. Taylor 1938. Like Taylor, van Mill 2001 attributes to Hobbes a concern for autonomous agency, which, on van Mill's account, requires reasoned control of the passions, excision of fear as a motive, and compliance with disinterested norms (the laws of nature) in pursuit of worthy ends within a coherent life plan. Van Mill sees the laws of nature as rules of thumb for securing the social conditions necessary for the exercise of rational autonomy.

Hobbes here confirms that morality is not aimed at nor justified by serving the narrow self-interest of the individual, but comprises norms that establish and maintain a desirable social environment. Attributes advancing personal gain will **not be moral virtues unless they reliably advance social harmony, nor “should one demand that the courage and prudence of the private man, if useful only to himself, be praised or held as a virtue . . . by any other men whatsoever to whom these same are not useful”** (*De Homine* 13.9).

A virtuous person has the sensibilities, motivations, and habits that enable her to cooperate with others in sustaining a desirable social environment that should allow all to pursue their permissible ends without interference. This involves resisting her natural impulse to insist on her own private judgment as against others, holding her ego and prideful self-partiality in check, playing by the same set of rules she imposes on others, and doing so from a sense of duty rather than from fear of punishment. Hobbes illustrates his ideal of the virtuous person –whom he **terms a “generous nature”**– by his friend Sidney Godolphin. Godolphin had many personal excellences including native intelligence, eloquence, education, and **breeding (all “powers” on Hobbes’s theory), but his moral virtue consisted in his combination of principled willingness to defer to the state’s command with his willingness to risk his life for his country.**²⁴ Hobbes concedes that generous natures **are “rare” to find. Particularly rare is the judicious and courageous person who will forego acting on his personal conscience and defer, as a matter of principle, to what he may deem the erroneous conscience of his sovereign.**

7. Motive and Responsibility

Motivation matters to moral character, but it plays a different and arguably more important role **in Hobbes’s moral theory in determining ascriptions of responsibility.** Hobbes concedes that right-thinking Christians will not and **should not obey the sovereign’s command if doing so entails the sacrifice of their eternal prospects. Because Hobbes identifies** the effort to obey the laws of nature as one of the two necessary conditions for salvation (*Leviathan* 43.4, 43.5), it is crucial to his project of persuading his Christian readers to obey the

24. *Leviathan. A Review and Conclusion*.4: “I have known clearness of judgment and largeness of fancy, strength of reason and graceful elocution, a courage for the war and a fear for the laws, all eminently in one man, and that was my most noble and honored friend, Mr. Sidney Godolphin.”

sovereign that he shows how their duty to obey the laws of nature is **compatible with their duty as subjects to defer to their sovereign's commands** to perform even actions that they believe to violate (and which may truly violate) the laws of nature.

When subjects institute a sovereign by authorizing it and/or transferring their right of self-government, they agree not to hold it liable for any errors in judgment it may make and not to treat any harms it does them as actionable injustices.²⁵ But they do *not* thereby become morally responsible for the actions it commands.²⁶ Hobbes argues that when a subject does what her sovereign commands, despite her disapproval of the commanded action, only because she acknowledges her duty to **obey the sovereign, responsibility for the subject's obedient action belongs to the sovereign and not to the subject. He explains that the subject obeying his sovereign's command to act is the *cause* of the action but not the *author of the action*: "The author of a deed is he who commands that it be done; the cause is he through whose powers it is done."²⁷ An action belongs to the person who commands it:**

[W]hat so ever a subject... is compelled to do in obedience to his sovereign, and doth it not in order to his own mind, but in order to the laws of his country, that action is not his, but his sovereign's.²⁸

Hobbes explains that when the subject obeys the sovereign's command "under terror of his laws" to act wrongly, we "cannot from thence argue that he approveth it, but [only] that he doth it for fear, and that ***it is not his act, but the act of his sovereign***" (45.22, emphasis added).

The general principle Hobbes concludes is that "the external actions done in obedience to [laws], without the inward approbation, are the actions of the sovereign, and not of the subject, which is in that case but as an instrument, without

25. Based on the principle "no wrong is done to a consenting party"; De Cive 3.7, Leviathan 18.6.

26. For elaboration of the argument I offer below, see Lloyd 2017.

27. OL xlvi.22. In fact, Hobbes implies the stronger claim that one is author of an action *only if* he commands that it be done: people do many "things which God does *not command*, nor is *therefore* author of them," L xxi.4, (emphasis added). This stronger claim implies that in a natural person "authoring" his own actions, his will is his command, so to speak, to himself.

28. 80 L xlii.11, emphasis added. OL is even more explicit: "if someone is a subject, as Naaman was, and is compelled by his king to do something, whatever it is, in such a way that he does it not of his own accord, but in obedience to the laws of his country, it is not his act, nor is it to be imputed to him, but to the king, i.e., it is an act of the commonwealth, and is to be imputed to the laws; and that it is not he, but his king, who has denied Christ."

any motion of his own at all; because God hath commanded [subjects] to obey them [the sovereign's laws]" (42.106).

An individual is morally responsible only for her own acts. Whether some deed **she performed at her sovereign's command is the sovereign's act rather than her own act** depends on her motive in performing it. If she disapproves of the action and does it only because her sovereign commands it, or only because she fears the **sovereign's punishment for disobedience, then the act is the sovereign's and not hers**. If instead she does the act because she personally judges it to be the right thing **to do on the merits, the action is hers as well as the sovereign's**. Hobbes assigns responsibility for an action to the person whose "natural will" it expresses, writing that "to make a particular man unjust, which consisteth of a body and soul natural, there is required a natural and very will."²⁹ Subjects are artificial persons duty-bound to act on whatever the public (sovereign) wills; but they are simultaneously natural persons with their own natural wills, upon which alone moral responsibility depends. Hobbes insists that only God can search hearts, or perceive the motives that decide questions of moral responsibility and moral virtue.

8. Moral Motivation

What can motivate moral behavior on Hobbes's theory? Hobbes acknowledges that people could be motivated simply by their recognition that **an action is morally required, that they could act, that is, "for the law's sake"; but he finds this sort of internal motivation rare**. If it were true that cheaters never win, narrow self-interest might suffice to motivate conformity with the laws of nature; but Hobbes concedes that the wicked do sometimes prosper in this life. Fear of divine punishment might motivate moral behavior, if such punishments were not so remote and so uncertain due to the prospect of **divine forgiveness. Considering the benefits to others** of our acting morally, our concern for the welfare of others, which Hobbes recognizes under the heading **benevolence or charity, might motivate us; but most people's benevolence is limited**.³⁰

One tremendously powerful source of motivation that might be harnessed to

29. Elements II.2.4. See Lloyd 2016 for discussion of this position.

30. And in any case, as Slomp 2019 shows, benevolence may equally motivate misguided persons to attempt to advance others' interests by immoral means.

provide a more reliable support for moral action is the human desire to elicit others' admiration and to avoid their contempt. Hobbes lays it down as a basic feature of human nature that each man cares very much that others should value him at least as highly as he values himself (13.5), which is a high bar to set because each also thinks himself wiser than most other men.³¹ **He goes so far as to say that men's voluntary encounters all seek either advantage or "reputation and honour among their companions" (*De Cive* 1.2).** In a civil society, where the natural laws bind *in foro* externo and are determinately specified by civil law, what morality requires is public knowledge. Everyone knows that everyone else knows that it is contrary to reason to do oneself what one would condemn in others. Because we know that the lawbreaker must demand that we observe the laws of nature, and know he knows that reciprocity is required, we will rightly conclude that he, in breaking them, is ***not governed by his own reason***. Whether his failure is due to hypocrisy, weakness of will, or a childish or bestial lack of reason, it gives us grounds to look down on him as inferior in reason to ourselves; and he can anticipate that we will do so. The **motivation to conform to reason's requirements (of rightness as reciprocity and goodness as sociability)** might thus be provided by the natural human concern for **status**. Further, Hobbes's insistence that **"all the mind's pleasure is either glory (or to have a good opinion of oneself), or refers to glory in the end," (*Rudiments* 1.2)** suggests that we desire the good opinion of others largely as evidence for a case we are trying to build in our own mind for our own value. The pleasure of self-admiration is what we crave, and moral behavior may become an important requisite to enjoying that.³²

9. The Philosophical Status of Hobbes's Moral Theory

What should we conclude from this effort to gather Hobbes's moral theory? First, he does have a recognizably moral theory. That theory is prescriptive, governs actions affecting the interests of other people, and imposes constraints on the pursuit of self-interest (as is typical of moral theories). In it the right depends on an idea of conformity with reason, where reason requires consistency in evaluative attitudes, expressed as a dictate of natural law. Moral

31. "such is the nature of men that they will hardly believe there be many so wise as themselves" 13.2.

32. For development of the idea that the Hobbesian desire for glory, or self-admiration, may under certain social conditions be tapped to provide a motive for moral behavior see Lloyd 2019.

good and evil are determined by their conformity to that same reciprocity requirement of reason in the actions of common life, rather than by personal feelings of appetite or aversion. Hobbes's theory does not *reduce* morality to personal profit or enlightened self-interest. Although morality never demands disastrous self-sacrifice from us, and conforming to its demands often does benefit us, the reciprocity constraint it imposes on us is neither justified in terms of self-interest, nor guaranteed never to cross it. The moral theory is thus not any form of ethical egoism, direct or indirect (rule).

We also see that moral normativity does not depend on any facts about what God commands. The normativity of the laws of nature does not depend on their being *literal law*, and so does not depend on their being the commands of one whom we are formerly obligated to obey. That is not to say that moral norms are not *also laws laid down by God to his subjects; some clearly are so in God's prophetic kingdom*, as Hobbes explicitly aims to demonstrate in every version of his political theory. The laws of nature would make an equally strong claim on us even if God did not command their observation, because they make a claim on us *in virtue of our human nature as agents in pursuit of ends justified by reasons. That means that Hobbes's is not essentially a divine command theory of morality. Our account also explains why the normativity of natural laws does not depend on their having been embedded into positive law by a civil sovereign, nor on our having entered into some enforceable contract to observe them. It follows that Hobbes is not a moral contractarian, and that it is not the case that all morality is conventional. The requirements of the laws of nature are not voluntary obligations, but natural duties.*

Hobbes's theory is also not intuitionist, because the rules of morality are not presented entire to our minds and apprehended by some (mysterious) faculty of moral intuition. They are theorems, derived by reasoning from the content of the **concept of 'accordance with reason'** and the basic social conditions for agency, along with our own reactive attitudes. This makes Hobbes a *constructivist* about the *content* of practical reasons, and a *constitutivist* about the *authority* of practical reason.³³ **Hobbes's moral theory does see the value of a virtuous character**, but it is

33. 90 For insightful analysis of the moral theory herein described, see Noah Smith, "Review of Morality in the Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes," *Notre Dame Philosophical Review*, 2010.

not a virtue ethic that identifies right action by what the good person would do, rather than by independently ascertained moral rules. To make some theory a virtue ethic it is not enough that it applauds and encourages the acquisition of virtuous character traits. **What matters is what comes first, conceptually. In Hobbes, the reciprocity rule for right action comes first, and a virtuous person is one who is reliably motivated in the right way to do what the rule requires.**

A projectivist account of moral rightness according to which our judgments of moral right project those reactive attitudes through which we hold one another responsible, is ruled out because wrongness requires more than the mere fact of blaming: it requires that actions be “blameable *with reason*”; and as we have seen, reason requires that our reactive attitudes be *consistent* over a given action type. A projectivist account of goodness is similarly ruled out because goodness likewise involves conformity with reasonable standards. We have found that moral judgments enjoy a modest degree of objectivity, because even though they are always *perspectival*, that is, made from the agent's perspective, only *consistent* sets of reactive attitudes can constitute moral judgments. That makes moral judgments more than mere projections of our *actual* reactive attitudes. It would be more accurate to say that moral judgments are picked out by *idealized* sets of consistent reactive attitudes of blaming, from the perspective of the agent.

Hobbes developed an original and distinctive moral theory according to which perspectival applications of reciprocity establish moral norms for each individual. Happily, humans and their social circumstances are enough alike that there is substantial convergence among their norms, and complete convergence on a basic norm, reciprocity, which, he argues, entails a duty to defer any remaining moral disputes to a sovereign adjudicator. His is a provocative and productive idea that might bridge the gap between—or counteract the excesses of—the Kantian demand for universality, and the ethical egoist's demand for exclusive attention to his own interests (Lloyd 2009, 231). It is a moral theory worth further investigation.

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