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FEATURES:

Leviathan Then And Now

By [Peter Berkowitz](#)

The latter-day importance of Hobbes's masterpiece

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UNTIL RELATIVELY RECENTLY, students of politics and ideas generally regarded Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651) as the outstanding work of political philosophy in the English language. Over the past several decades, however, professors of political science and philosophy have largely relegated Hobbes's masterpiece to the back shelves. At best, they tend to view *Leviathan* as an historical artifact, an early and influential stepping stone on the way to the development of those Kantian-inspired theories — Rawlsian and Habermasian at the forefront — that aim to vindicate the rights-based, progressive welfare state and dominate academic teaching and research.

This demotion of Hobbes's masterpiece is unwarranted and impedes understanding of *Leviathan*. The demotion rests on the assumption, common among today's scholars of political ideas, that after millennia of confusion and error they have at long last constructed the complete and adequate — or soon-to-be-complete and very nearly adequate — theoretical approach to politics. It also is grounded in their belief that the issues of immediate concern to them are alone of moral and political significance, while the issues that occupied thinkers of earlier generations are at best of antiquarian interest. Accordingly, if they turn to it at all, professors tend lazily to ask of Hobbes's *Leviathan* — as they lazily ask, if they turn to them at all, of other classic works of political philosophy — how it anticipated or failed to anticipate the contemporary agenda.

Hobbes on his own terms presents a provocative rival to contemporary perspectives on morals and politics.

An alternative, obscured by today's methodological doctrines and moral blinders, is to read *Leviathan* on its own terms, open to its assumptions and arguments and alive to the possibility that Hobbes's agenda is of interest in its own right. Of course, interest in Hobbes's agenda is not to deny *Leviathan*'s contemporary relevance. To the contrary. To read Hobbes on his own terms is to discover a provocative rival to contemporary perspectives on morals and politics, one that challenges widely shared assumptions about the roots of our rights and calls into question common conclusions about the scope of political authority in a society based on the consent of the governed. At the same time, it is to encounter a complement to contemporary perspectives on the liberal state, one that offers a distinctive and powerful basis for a political order that conforms to reason and secures the conditions under which human beings with differing conceptions of the best life can pursue happiness as they each understand it.

To be sure, what it means to read a thinker on his own terms is subject to dispute. Of the small number of scholars who continue to devote themselves to the serious study of Hobbes, a substantial proportion contend that priority should be given to understanding the historical context in which Hobbes lived and wrote. Despite

their tendency to exaggerate it, they have a point. For example, one is likely to be baffled by the intellectual energy Hobbes devotes to the critique of religion in Parts I and IV of *Leviathan* and to his alternative derivation of the true principles of politics from biblical sources in Part III if one fails to appreciate that he lived in a deeply Protestant political culture, the governing beliefs of which he was forced to pay deference to even as he interpreted them innovatively and elaborated opinions about the natural world and human nature that undermined them. One cannot properly understand Hobbes's critique of Aristotle without being aware that his target was in many cases the decayed version of Aristotelianism — in Chapter XLVI Hobbes mockingly calls it "Aristotelity" — that had prevailed in English universities for centuries, rather than the actual doctrines of Aristotle's *Ethics*, *Politics*, and *Metaphysics*. And one will miss the mixture of bluntness and circumspection with which Hobbes writes about human nature, politics, and ultimate questions if one lacks knowledge of the dangers to which he was exposed during the English Civil War as a defender of the Crown who nevertheless antagonized both sides by criticizing divine-right monarchy as well as parliamentary supremacy.

Hobbes was fascinated by the new science of his day, and counted among his acquaintances Galileo and Descartes.

It is also useful to know that Thomas Hobbes was born in 1588 and died in 1679; that he mastered Greek and Latin as a young man and then went on to be educated at Oxford; and that he regarded Thucydides's *History of the Peloponnesian War* as an invaluable study of human nature and politics and, in 1629, became the first to publish an English translation from the original Greek. One can only benefit from learning that he was fascinated with the modern revolution in philosophy and science through which he lived, and counted among his acquaintances Bacon, Galileo, and Descartes; that his rationalism, which builds on modern philosophy and science, is intended as an alternative not only to classical rationalism, but also to modern skepticism, which, on the basis of the new science, sought to deny that universal principles governed human affairs; and that the language of rights, to which *Leviathan* makes a classic contribution, was in the air in seventeenth-century England. And it is very much worth appreciating that tumult in England impelled Hobbes to flee to Paris in 1640; that with order restored he returned to England in 1651 and published *Leviathan* (though forbidden by the king to publish an English reprint, he published in 1668 a Latin version with slight but sometimes significant differences); and that contemporaries charged him with promulgating an unduly harsh account of human nature and teaching atheism, with the Church in Rome going so far as to ban *Leviathan*, Oxford University condemning and burning it, and the English Parliament coming close to passing a bill declaring it blasphemous, at the time in England a crime punishable by imprisonment. These facts, and a good deal more intellectual and political history, undoubtedly contribute to the understanding of the full force of Hobbes's political philosophy.

But familiarity with historical context is one thing. Giving it priority is quite another. No doubt assiduous study of the newspapers, political pamphlets, sermons, and learned treatises of Hobbes's day sheds light on the corners and crevices of *Leviathan*. Such inquiries, however, soon yield diminishing returns. Or rather, scholars betray a tendency to turn the study of historical context into an end in itself, so that *Leviathan* becomes an occasion for learning about the endless intricacies of seventeenth-century political and intellectual history rather than an aid to understanding the intricacies of Hobbes's arguments.

It should be noted, too, that proponents of the so-called contextualist approach are prone to artificially circumscribe the context in which Hobbes wrote. It is certainly important to consider the Crown's and Parliament's positions on the sources and scope of political authority, inasmuch as Hobbes sought to articulate principles for securing peace and prosperity to which partisans on both sides of the English Civil War could subscribe. But those principles, which implied criticisms of both camps, could ultimately prove attractive to all involved, thought Hobbes, because they were universal principles, applicable to all human beings everywhere. Far from reflecting his time in thought, Hobbes offers a correction of it. And instead of confronting the narrow claims of his contemporaries and the contingent features of the English Civil War, he proceeds in *Leviathan* in large measure by addressing the widest claims about nature, human nature, and politics, which means for him those of classical political philosophy and Christianity. Agreeing with the classics and Christianity that morals and politics are governed by universal principles, he believes that both of his most influential predecessors arrived at the wrong principles because of their defective starting points. In short, Hobbes's quarrel with his contemporaries about English politics is a subordinate part of the larger and primary quarrel *Leviathan* conducts with Plato, Aristotle, and Thucydides on the one hand and biblical faith on the other.

FROM THESE PRELIMINARY considerations, one may be tempted to draw the paralyzing conclusion that to

begin to study Hobbes's *Leviathan* one must master not only seventeenth-century English history, but also classical political philosophy and Christian theology. That would be a mistake. In fact, a rudimentary appreciation of history and philosophy allows one to make considerable progress in understanding Hobbes's ideas. And that's because in beginning to study Hobbes's *Leviathan*, the key to progress is the thoughtful reading of his words and the patient puzzling through of his arguments.

This is not to suggest that context doesn't matter. It does. Fortunately, our context, despite the centuries, substantially overlaps with that of Hobbes. We have immediate access to Hobbes's thought because, though he was certainly not a democrat and at most a proto-liberal, he helped lay the intellectual foundations for that form of political society that assumes the natural freedom and equality of all human beings, a political society whose existence we tend to see as natural, whose benefits we often take for granted, and whose preservation we seem to think will take care of itself. But even where his assumptions and arguments depart from familiar ones, they remain accessible without extensive scholarly inquiry because the largest context in which Hobbes writes is that of the human condition. Since debate about the human condition is a permanent feature of the human condition, Hobbes's opinions about, among other things, nature, God, good and evil, the passions, reason, power, authority, freedom, justice, law, virtue, obligation, and sovereignty are intelligible to beginning students of political philosophy, so long as they read attentively and reflect on the conditions of their own experience.

Intelligibility, however, does not guarantee interest. Yet Hobbes's contribution to the permanent debate is of enduring interest because his arguments, though rarely easy to accept in whole or to reject in whole, persistently illuminate. And one of the reasons for this is that Hobbes's thinking exhibits ambiguities and tensions that tend to be suppressed by contemporary thinking but continue to mark our world. Among the most important of these concern the relation between our opinions about nature and human nature.

CONSIDER THE INTRODUCTION TO *Leviathan*. There, Hobbes famously compares the commonwealth or state to an artificial man and describes the workings of both in mechanical terms. He thereby suggests that his reasoning about politics surpasses his predecessors' because of its scientific assumptions and rigor. Indeed, Hobbes's understanding of the natural world reflects modern science's mechanism and materialism. And he certainly seeks to make his reasoning as rigorous as possible, moving from premises of the most general sort about the physical world to conclusions about morals, politics, and religion. For example, he asserts in the Introduction that "life is but a motion of limbs" and stresses in Chapter XLVI that "every part of the universe is body and that which is not body is no part of the universe." This materialism compels him, among other things, to reject as nonsensical the very idea of incorporeal substances — that is, essences, spirit, and the soul — and to reinterpret God as a corporeal being.

Accordingly, Hobbes's mechanism and materialism produce a sharp break with classical political philosophy and Christian faith. For that the world is more than matter in motion is crucial to the thought of both Plato and Aristotle and of biblical faith. Plato and Aristotle argue that the human soul has an incorporeal form or structure; that reason, which can discern that form or structure, outranks desire; that the desires themselves are subject to rank ordering by reason in accordance with the soul's structure; and that a life in accordance with the soul's structure or permanent form is the greatest good. And biblical faith, which also conceives of the soul as immaterial, proclaims that God is an immaterial presence in history issuing commands to, imposing punishments on, and offering redemption for, a fallen humanity.

But this dramatic break with his predecessors reflects only a part — albeit an important part — of *Leviathan*. Notwithstanding the reductive implications of his mechanism and his materialism, Hobbes also articulates in the Introduction severe limits to understanding morals and politics in terms of physics and geometry. These limits challenge the ambitions of today's political scientists to achieve a thoroughly scientific understanding of politics and exhibit important continuities between Hobbes and his pre-modern predecessors.

While emphasizing in the Introduction the scientific dimensions of his political theory, Hobbes gives pride of place in it to the humanistic dimension. In particular, he argues that political knowledge is ultimately rooted in the capacity to know oneself, which is to say that it is fundamentally and irreducibly Socratic. The student of politics, Hobbes teaches, must understand the universal passions that move human beings. Of course, men and women, within and across cultures, desire a diversity of objects: this possession or that parcel of property, this public honor or that person's love, a life lived in devotion to these or those articles of faith. But, argues Hobbes, the forms or kinds of passions — fear, pride, envy, anger, lust, and the like — as well as the human faculties — perception, imagination, memory, understanding, reason, and so on — are universal. To determine what forms

of political society are necessary and appropriate, the structure and operation of the passions and of the faculties must be understood. However, the principal means for acquiring knowledge of the passions and the faculties is not the rigorous new science, but rather old-fashioned and imprecise introspection and observation. To gain the crucial facts on which political science rests, Hobbes insists, one must read in oneself the passions and faculties at work and, through the knowledge such reading yields, infer what must be at work in other men in like situations. Introspection, though, is not only vital to the discovery and verification of the passions that move, and the faculties that guide, all men. It is also, Hobbes declares, the hardest knowledge to acquire and the most indispensable part of political science. According to the concluding words of the Introduction, it is the final test of a science of politics worthy of the name: "when I shall have set down my own reading orderly and perspicuously, the pains left another will be only to consider if he also finds not the same in himself. For this kind of doctrine admitteth no other demonstration."

THE CENTRAL LINE of argument in *Leviathan* exhibits the interplay of Hobbes's physics and the opinions about human nature he acquires through introspection. To see this, it is useful to consider key points in Chapter VI, "Of the Interior Beginnings of Voluntary Motions, Commonly Called the Passions, and the Speeches by which they are Expressed"; Chapter XI, "Of the Difference of Manners," where he examines the desire for power and sources of its satisfaction; and Chapter XIII, "Of the Natural Condition of Mankind, as Concerning their Felicity, and Misery," in which he introduces his account of the state of nature and the state of war.

In the course of explaining in Chapter VI that the passions should be understood in terms of appetites and aversions, Hobbes declares that good and evil themselves are really nothing more than names for what we like and dislike:

For these words of good, evil, and contemptible are ever used with relation to the person that useth them, there being nothing simply and absolutely so, nor any common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves, but from the person of the man (where there is no commonwealth), or (in a commonwealth) from the person that representeth it, or from an arbitrator or judge whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up, and make his sentence the rule thereof.

That there is no "common rule of good and evil to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves" does not follow from introspection: No amount of careful reading of the operation of our passions and faculties will establish whether moral standards exist apart from human beings. Rather, the conclusion follows from Hobbes's materialist metaphysics, which rules out of existence moral and political standards or ends that human beings have not themselves asserted or fashioned, and entails that the satisfactions of our desires cannot be anything but fleeting because they cannot point to anything enduring.

Accordingly, Hobbes observes in Chapter XI, "the felicity of this life consisteth not in the repose of a mind satisfied." In contrast to the classical and Christian worlds, Hobbes's world does not provide human beings a form of completion or perfection, or, in this life, even an intimation of completion or perfection. But Hobbes does clarify why completion or perfection is a vain dream:

For there is no such *Finis ultimus* (utmost aim) nor *Summum Bonum* (greatest good) as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers. Nor can a man any more live, whose desires are at an end, than he whose senses and imaginations are at a stand. Felicity is a continual progress of the desire, from one object to another, the attaining of the former being still but the way to the latter. The cause whereof is that the object of man's desire is not to enjoy once only, and for the one instant of time, but to assure forever the way of his future desire. And therefore, the voluntary actions and inclinations of all men tend, not only to the procuring, but also to the assuring of a contented life, and differ only in the way; which ariseth partly from the diversity of passions in diverse men, and partly from the difference of the knowledge or opinion each one has of the causes which produce the effect desired.

In other words, the passions must accommodate themselves to the absence of utmost aims and greatest goods.

And so the passions, if Hobbes's introspection and observation are to be trusted, do:

I put for a general inclination of all mankind, a perpetual and restless desire of power after power,

that ceaseth only in death. And the cause of this is not always that a man hopes for a more intensive delight than he has already attained to, or that he cannot be content with a moderate power, but because he cannot assure the power and means to live well which he hath present, without the acquisition of more.

Rejecting the aristocratic notion that by virtue of birth or upbringing the passions of rulers — and clergy and landed aristocracy — are loftier than those of the common people, Hobbes advances a democratic thesis: The same logic applies to the passions of all men in all strata of political society alike. All are impelled to constantly acquire more if only to secure what they already have.

Hobbes advances a democratic thesis: The same logic applies to the passions of all men in all strata of political society.

And all are imperiled by the shared quest to acquire: “Competition of riches, honour, command, or other power, inclineth to contention, enmity, and war; because the way of one competitor to the attaining of his desire is to kill, subdue, supplant, or repel the other.” The fundamental political challenge is to discover a solution to the destabilizing and indeed deadly competition to which men’s universal passions dispose them.

To meet the challenge, Hobbes seeks first to bring into focus the extremity of man’s natural condition. Accordingly, in Chapter XIII he introduces his famous teaching that the state of nature is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Despite its miserableness, the natural condition is also one of fundamental equality and unlimited freedom, though not in the familiar senses since Hobbes grounds natural freedom and equality not in justice, which he subsequently explains applies only within political society, but in its absence.

In the state of nature, each is equal in the sense that each is similarly vulnerable to injury and violent death at the hands of another. This fundamental equality is a result of the passions that move men — competition, diffidence or distrust, and glory — combined with the unlimited freedom they enjoy in the state of nature, which reflects the lack of a common standard or authority. Because good and evil have no independent existence, because there is no utmost aim or greatest good, each in the state of nature has an unlimited right to all things, up to and including the limb and life of another. And because there is no recognized, common authority to keep individuals in line, each can and must fully exercise his right to preserve himself, which is always the fundamental human imperative. In such a condition, even the weakest are capable of dealing a deadly blow to the strongest. Human equality so understood is nothing of which to be particularly proud. And the natural freedom in which it is rooted is of small value because it guarantees the constant fear of violence by others, all of whom possess the same unlimited right to all things. Consequently, the state of nature is, equally for all, a state of war, “and such a war as is of every man against every man.”

Beginning with Rousseau, critics have objected that Hobbes’s depiction of the state of nature is speculative, ahistorical, and anthropologically ignorant. It is said that he provides little historical evidence to back up his claims; overlooks the forms of culture and social organization that antedate, and serve as preconditions for, the state; and ascribes to individuals in the state of nature vices that are actually acquired in modern bourgeois society. But to dwell on these points, none of which is without merit, is to miss the larger import of Hobbes’s account, which is not meant to provide a historical template of how commonwealths come into being.

Outside the law and beyond the political order, the preeminent human passions come to the fore and produce chaos.

The state of nature, Hobbes declares in Chapter XIII, is “an inference made from the passions.” The aim of the inference is to show how the passions operate without legal and political constraints to keep them in check. Outside the law and beyond the political order, the preeminent human passions — to stay alive, to acquire wealth and property, to achieve honor or esteem in the eyes of others — come to the fore and produce chaos, which frustrates any and all of the reasonable desires that individuals may have, above all the desire to preserve their lives, which is the precondition for satisfying all other desires. To those who doubt his inference from the passions, Hobbes appeals not to history but to contemporary realities. To demonstrate our abiding distrust of others, he points to our tendency within society to secure precious or private belongings from even our friends and close family members. And to illustrate the consequences of the absence of a recognized legal and political authority — the very definition of a state of nature — he invokes the harsh realities of civil war.

Understanding the misery of the state of nature and its causes — “sown into the fabric of human nature” as James Madison puts the matter in a related context in Federalist No. 10 — brings into focus the goodness of peace. Peace is not merely the absence of fighting but a condition in which men are not disposed to use violence to achieve their goals. Peace is not a greatest good but the condition for the achievement of any and all goods. And peace leads to prosperity because it allows men to preserve their gains, develop their talents, and plan for the future.

Once Hobbes establishes the central features of nature and human nature and the desirability of peace, he proceeds to the main task of Leviathan, which is to set forth the principles of the properly constructed commonwealth. Such a commonwealth takes human beings as they are — creatures of passion and pride, endowed with reason but easily deflected from its course by a self-interest that they tend to conceive too narrowly and shortsightedly, and by irrational fears for their eternal salvation. And Leviathan spells out the beliefs, rules, and institutions that reason prescribes for the fashioning of a commonwealth that, by taking the broad and long-term view of self-interest, can secure peace. In particular, Hobbes argues that it is reasonable for men to covenant with each other to transfer a substantial portion of their naturally unlimited right to all things to an absolute and indivisible sovereign (who, Hobbes allows, may be one, or few, or many, though he recommends a monarch). This transfer requires individuals to give up the use of their private judgment in public matters and empowers the sovereign to enforce contracts, make and implement laws, settle disputes, and generally defend subjects from each other and from external threats. The substantial limitation on natural freedom that the establishment of the sovereign entails, contends Hobbes, represents an expression, and a weighty increase in the value, of individual freedom, and the cardinal imperative of rational self-interest.

IN SKETCHING THE lineaments of the properly constructed commonwealth, Hobbes accomplishes a variety of auxiliary tasks. Of particular salience to contemporary debates in moral and political philosophy are the foundation for natural freedom and equality that he discovers in the humbleness of the human condition; his analysis of the laws of nature, the virtues, and their intimate connection; and his account of the sources and limits of sovereignty.

Generally, defenders of liberal democracy argue that our natural right to freedom, shared equally by all, is rooted in a faculty or capacity, usually reason, that sets human beings apart from and elevates them above nonhuman animals. Others in the liberal tradition speak more simply of the dignity of man. But in the nineteenth century the liberal tradition’s classic natural-rights teaching was battered by the Marxist critique, which reduced morality to ideology, and Nietzsche’s critique, which reduced morality to power. Taking these criticisms to heart and then some, the liberal tradition grew timid about asserting the rationality of natural right. This timidity opened the door to liberal relativism — the doctrine that we should embrace the value of diversity because all views about morals and politics are equally valuable — which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century. This in turn paved the way for liberal relativism’s renegade offshoot, liberal postmodernism, which asserts that we should embrace the value of diversity because all views about morals and politics are equally devoid of value. Both forms of contemporary liberalism represent influential rivals to the classical liberal natural rights teaching. But neither liberal relativism nor liberal postmodernism, both of which, like Hobbes’s political theory, are based on the rejection of the idea of an ultimate aim or greatest good, calls into question Hobbes’s grounding of the foundation of freedom and equality in the indignity and inefficacy of man’s natural condition.

Another respect in which Hobbes shows that the absence of metaphysical foundations for moral and political life does not leave moral and political life bereft of foundations is in his derivation of the laws of nature. Just as he infers the natural condition of mankind or the state of nature from the passions, so too he infers or derives from the state of nature 19 laws of nature that men must abide by to maintain the state. A law of nature, Hobbes quickly notes after introducing the notion in Chapter XIV, is less a law than “a precept or general rule, found out by reason, by which a man is forbidden to do that which is destructive of his life or taketh away the means of preserving the same, and to omit that by which he thinketh it may be best preserved.”

The first law of nature commands men to always seek peace. The second instructs men how to establish it.

These precepts or general rules begin with the first and fundamental law of nature, which commands men to always seek peace. The second law of nature instructs men how to establish peace: Each ought to covenant with all others who also seek peace to lay down his right to all things and be “contended with so much liberty

against other men, as he would allow other men against himself.” The third law of nature requires men to do justice, or perform their covenants, provided that a sovereign has been erected to enforce compliance. The laws of nature also include rules of conduct requiring gratitude, or one’s interest in never giving cause for regret to a person who has conferred a benefit on one; complaisance, or one’s interest in accommodating oneself to others; pardon, or one’s interest in forgiving others their offences in anticipation of one’s own future need for forgiveness; mercy, or the judicious practice of revenge, which is one’s interest in punishing not with a view to the greatness of the evil inflicted but the good that the punishment will produce; the rejection of contumely, or one’s interest in not declaring or displaying hatred for another; modesty, or the avoidance of pride, which is one’s interest in acknowledging one’s equality with others; the resistance to arrogance, or one’s interest in refraining from claiming rights that one refuses to grant to others; and equity, or one’s interest in judging others fairly. The 19 laws of nature conclude with rules that crystallize one’s interest in the fair use and distribution of public goods and private property, and the formal adjudication of disputes.

These laws of nature, Hobbes proclaims in Chapter XV, are “immutable and eternal.” This is the language of classical and Christian political philosophy, but the laws of nature, in Hobbes’s analysis, are not immutable and eternal in the classical or traditional Christian sense. It follows from his metaphysics that they do not reflect a universal conception of human flourishing, perfection, or salvation. But they do reflect, contends Hobbes, the lower, this-worldly good of peace, and the universal facts about human nature. They are immutable and eternal in the sense that conformity to them is everywhere and always rationally desirable. And this is because conformity to them everywhere and always secures and preserves peace or civil society, the precondition for satisfying the widest variety of human desires. Failure to make the laws of nature generally applicable will everywhere and always tend to undermine civil society and lead to a war of all against all.

Thus Hobbes reconceives the laws of nature as a form of rational or enlightened self-interest. At the same time, he stresses in Chapter XV the extent to which they comport with Christian moral teaching by asserting that they amount to a version of the Golden Rule: “Do not that to another, which thou wouldst not have done to thyself.” This formulation also indicates his departure from Christian moral teaching, for Hobbes slightly but significantly revises Jesus’s teaching — “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you” (Matthew 7:12). Whereas Hobbes’s formulation instructs in the harms one should avoid inflicting, Jesus more demandingly imposes an obligation to confer goods on another. Yet the two formulations have a common consequence. Whether phrased negatively or positively, whether reflecting the goal of peace and security in this world or ultimate salvation in a world to come, the admonition to govern one’s conduct according to a principle by which one would have others govern their conduct requires disciplining the passions to achieve ends prescribed by reason — in a word, virtue.

INDEED, VIRTUE IS another major aspect of Hobbes’s political theory, one that contemporary readers also tend to neglect. Hobbes’s theory provides a rebuke to the dominant forms of contemporary moral and political philosophy, most of which proceed as if an adequate account of law, rights, and justice can be elaborated that ignored or denied virtue’s claims. And it represents an additional respect in which Hobbes’s political philosophy both interestingly overlaps with and importantly deviates from classical and Christian teaching.

Near the end of Chapter XV, Hobbes makes the connection between the laws of nature and virtue explicit:

all men agree on this, that peace is good; and therefore also the way or means of peace (which, as I have shewed before, are justice, gratitude, modesty, equity, mercy, and the rest of the laws of nature) are good (that is to say, moral virtues) and their contrary vices, evil.

Lest one doubt the importance he attaches to virtue because he places reference to it in parentheses, Hobbes immediately adds that “the science of virtue and vice is moral philosophy; and therefore the true doctrine of the laws of nature is the true moral philosophy.” The science of virtue and vice, moral philosophy, and the doctrine of the laws of nature are one and the same for Hobbes, or, rather, are different aspects of one and the same inquiry, because understanding one’s rational self-interest and, once understood, acting on it, does not come easily to creatures of passion and prejudice.

Given the significance he explicitly attaches to virtue and the significance conferred on it by the logic of his argument, it should be no surprise that, rather than thinking that readers would overlook the place of virtue in his political theory, Hobbes worried that his virtue teaching would cause him to be mistaken for a follower of Aristotle. Thus, in Chapter XV, he is at pains to point out that whereas Aristotelian thinkers “acknowledge the same virtues and vices,” they praise them not “as the means of peaceable, sociable, and comfortable living,” but

rather “place them in a mediocrity of passions (as if not the cause, but the degree of daring, made fortitude; or not the cause, but the quantity of a gift, made liberality).” Unfortunately, Aristotle’s original doctrine is scarcely recognizable in this description, which blurs where Hobbes’s teaching converges with and diverges from Aristotle.

Courage for Hobbes is the hope of averting hurt through resistance. It is unrelated to nobility or any higher end.

Whatever was true of Aristotle’s followers in the universities of Hobbes’s day, Aristotle neither teaches that virtue represents some ordinary or middling degree of passion, nor separates virtue from its cause or aim. Moral virtue, according to Aristotle’s Ethics, represents an extreme of excellence, between two defective extremes or vices. The classic case is fortitude or courage. It avoids the excesses of cowardice, or too much fear of death in battle, and recklessness, or too little fear, enabling one to face death in battle nobly. Courage for Aristotle is determined not by quantity of daring but by the extent to which daring is governed by virtue’s goal — a well-lived or excellent life.

The pertinent difference between Aristotle and Hobbes concerns the legitimate end or ends that moral virtue serves. For Hobbes, the sole legitimate end of the moral virtues is the self-preservation of the individual through the creation and preservation of a secure political society. Accordingly, courage for Hobbes is the hope of averting hurt through resistance. It is unrelated to nobility or any higher end. For Aristotle, in contrast, courage (along with the other moral virtues), while contributing to the preservation of political society, is indissolubly bound up with nobility of character and the perfection of the soul.

Several misconceptions, rooted in contemporary passions and common prejudices, impede scholars’ appreciation of the centrality of virtue, both to Hobbes’s thought and our politics. Jealous of their right to decide what is good and evil for themselves and convinced that the sole task of political theory is to elaborate abstract and impartial rules to organize a society of free, equal, and diverse individuals, today’s scholars tend to insist upon a rigid opposition between a morality of rules or laws, or for that matter a utilitarian morality grounded in rational self-interest, and a morality of virtue, as if the alternatives were mutually exclusive. They assume that the very notion of virtue entails a monolithic and dogmatic conception of human excellence. And they believe that to grant the moral and political significance of virtue entails that the job of the state is to inculcate it.

Study of Hobbes’s virtue teaching can help liberate from these ill-informed opinions and equip one better to think through today’s moral and political challenges. His fundamental break with Aristotle should not be allowed to obscure a crucial continuity that has contemporary implications: The ancient and the modern agree that adherence to the rules and practices on which political society depends requires specific qualities of mind and character, qualities that, left to themselves, will not develop spontaneously and so must be cultivated. Moreover, appreciation of virtue’s indispensable role is compatible with a variety of opinions about human perfection and ultimate salvation, including rejection of both. And one can recognize that morals and politics depend on virtue while insisting that teaching it is a task that belongs to the private sphere, not to the state.

It must be said, however, that while he establishes the formal necessity of virtue to a society grounded in man’s natural freedom and equality, Hobbes does not explain well how self-interest will be enlightened, so he furnishes no adequate account of how the necessary virtues will be cultivated. However, his successors in the liberal tradition — thinkers of the stature of Locke, Kant, and Mill — did explore the variety of beliefs, practices, and institutions that, without unduly impinging on freedom, could foster the virtues on which freedom depends. Generally speaking, it fell to more conservative members of the liberal tradition — Adam Smith, Edmund Burke, and Alexis de Tocqueville — to examine the vices that free societies tended to generate and the countervailing measures that they must adopt in order preserve liberty. Despite the resources within the liberal tradition, contemporary academic political philosophy has been slow to appreciate virtue’s contribution to liberty and liberty’s contribution to vice, and negligent in explaining how free societies, consistent with their principles, can provide for virtue’s acquisition and vice’s amelioration.

LIKE HIS ACCOUNT of the laws of nature and of virtue, Hobbes’s analysis of sovereignty provides pertinent lessons for contemporary morals and politics. One is that in modern natural rights theories, the enjoyment of freedom is inseparable from the performance of duty. This is thrown into sharp relief by Leviathan, which understands man’s natural and inalienable rights very narrowly and sovereignty very broadly. For Hobbes, the fundamental natural right is not freedom of speech or religion or association, but the rudimentary right to

preserve one's life and limb by whatever means necessary. In the absence of a common authority, any and all means are necessary, which makes freedom destructive. The establishment of a state in which the sovereign exercises absolute and indivisible power is, argues Hobbes, the best means of preservation. But how can an individual, whose natural freedom to all things is unlimited, be obliged to obey a sovereign, let alone an absolute and indivisible sovereign, whose power extends to governing men's opinions by determining the moral, political, and religious doctrines that are fit to be taught? Hobbes's answer is that obligation — like virtue — is grounded in enlightened or rational self-interest but made effective through passion.

Fear, Hobbes declares in Chapter XIII, is “the passion to be reckoned on”: It is the sovereign's sword that ensures that subjects will comply with their obligation to honor contracts and respect the law. But the cause of compliance is one thing, the logic of obligation is another. Obligation, argues Hobbes, is grounded in the individual's rational decision to transfer a portion of his freedom to the sovereign. By an act of private judgment, the individual agrees to restrict the use of his private judgment in public matters in a society where all others have, in the same way, rationally restricted theirs. This self-imposed constraint — whether it comes from an initial decision to join with others or to tacit recognition of a common authority — is, argues Hobbes, an expression of freedom. By authorizing the sovereign to act in his name, the individual owns all of the sovereign's decisions, even those that in the short term he finds disagreeable or burdensome. It is also an enhancement of freedom because in Hobbes's view a powerful sovereign is the only means prescribed by reason for avoiding the misery of man's natural condition.

But even fear of the sovereign's sword cannot dissolve the impediments to acting on the basis of rational or enlightened self-interest. Since, despite one's obligation to obey them all, there is a constant temptation to disobey this or that inconvenient law, Hobbes underscores in Chapter XVIII that obligation involves the discipline of passion:

all men are by nature provided of notable multiplying glasses (that is their passions and self-love), through which every little payment appeareth a great grievance, but are destitute of those prospective glasses (namely moral and civil science), to see afar off the miseries that hang over them, and cannot without such payments be avoided.

Moral and civil science, or the science of virtue and vice, show how we ought to conduct ourselves, or how we would conduct ourselves if we understood our self-interest well. Complicating matters for moral and civil science is Hobbes's contention in the Introduction, vindicated by his extended argument, that moral philosophy and political science can't get launched without Socratic self-knowledge or virtue.

Hobbes's analysis of sovereignty also has striking implications for contemporary debates about the responsibility nations have to protect citizens — their own and those of other nations — from humanitarian disasters as well as from genocide, war crimes, and other crimes against humanity inflicted upon them by their rulers. The standard view, which has undergirded the international order for more than 350 years, was formalized in 1648 in the Peace of Westphalia, which brought the European Wars of Religion to an end and inaugurated the era of the modern nation-state. It holds that states are responsible for their own citizens, and while toleration is owed dissenting faiths, within its own boundaries a state's sovereignty is complete. Though never consistently honored in practice, this was taken to mean that one sovereign state may not meddle in the internal affairs of another.

The standard view is widely associated with Hobbes's state of nature teaching as applied to the international order — lacking a commonly recognized coercive power, states are in relation to each other in a condition of war — and with his doctrine that the sovereign is absolute and indivisible. In the aftermath of World War II and the creation of the United Nations, the standard view slowly became subject to discussion. In the 1990s the view began to emerge among international human rights lawyers and liberal internationalists that there exists a general responsibility among nations to protect citizens — their own and those of other nations — from natural disasters, and extreme crimes by their rulers. Those who support the view today that states have a responsibility to protect commonly assume that their doctrine represents a substantial departure from the standard view associated with Hobbes.

Only an agreed upon sovereign with absolute and indivisible powers can protect subjects from each other and from foreign threats.

In fact, Hobbes's political theory shows why sovereignty, though absolute and indivisible in its proper sphere, is in the end limited by the power that brings it into being and maintains it, namely, each individual's natural and inalienable right to self-preservation. And this limitation illuminates both the good reasons that states have for respecting the claims of national sovereignty, and the conditions under which rulers surrender the right to govern their people and other nations become free to intervene.

In Hobbes's political theory, the individual's natural and inalienable right to preserve himself by all means necessary both justifies the erection of a sovereign power and sets firm limits on it. Only an agreed-upon sovereign with absolute and indivisible powers, argues Hobbes, can protect subjects from each other and from foreign threats. But in the end, the subject's obligation to obey runs no further than the sovereign's capacity to protect. To be sure, Hobbes understands subjects' obligation broadly. Disagreements with the sovereign about taxes and road construction would not qualify as reasons to resist, even if one thought that the sovereign's actions or inaction threatened one's livelihood and hence one's self-preservation. In general, disputes over what we would today call policy could never, in Hobbes's world, justify disobedience. Even differences of opinion about how to interpret Holy Scripture, which one might think implicate one's eternal salvation, would not dissolve sovereignty as Hobbes understands it.

But, as he makes clear in Chapter XIV, direct and immediate threats to life and limb are another matter:

no man can transfer or lay down his right to save himself from death, wounds, and imprisonment (the avoiding whereof is the only end of laying down any right), and therefore the promise of not resisting force in no covenant transferreth any right, nor is obliging.

In Chapter XXI, Hobbes clarifies the extreme conditions that absolve subjects of their duty to obey the sovereign:

The obligation of subjects to the sovereign is understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth by which he is able to protect them. For the right men have by nature to protect themselves, when none else can protect them, can by no covenant be relinquished. The sovereignty is the soul of the commonwealth, which, once departed from the body, the members do no more receive their motion from it. The end of obedience is protection, which, wheresoever a man seeth it, either in his own or in another's sword, nature applieth his obedience to it, and his endeavor to maintain it. And though sovereignty, in the intention of them that make it, be immortal, yet is it, in its own nature, not only subject to violent death by foreign war, but also through the ignorance and passions of men it hath in it, from the very institution, many seeds of a natural mortality by intestine discord.

Hobbes's account of sovereignty's mortality suggests that it can be dissolved not only by war and political strife, but also by natural disasters. Since sovereignty dies when subjects find themselves, in relation to each other and the sovereign, in a state of nature, or a condition in which no recognized authority is capable of enforcing law and preserving life, there is no reason to exclude from the causes that extinguish it earthquakes, tsunamis, and the like, which can bring disorder, injury, and loss of life as great as civil war.

Sovereignty is for Hobbes absolute in the sense that within its proper domain it is inviolable, and beyond it there is no appeal. Yet its domain and life are limited, and sovereigns can lose, squander, or destroy it. Accordingly, from Hobbes's perspective, there is nothing in principle to bar one nation from coming to the aide of another people who have been so grossly brutalized by their government, or brutalized by a natural disaster, that they find themselves thrown into the natural condition of mankind, without a sovereign to protect them. In these circumstances, a nation that came to their rescue would not violate sovereignty but operate in a vacuum created by sovereignty's dissolution.

It should be emphasized that this describes less a responsibility to protect — a euphemism that implies a moral imperative without being too overt about it — than an interest nations may have in intervening. From Hobbes's perspective, any obligation (such as the 19 natural laws) must stem from a reasoned calculation of an individual's long-term interest in preserving a stable political order.

Our globalized world may present such an interest. In it, national economies are increasingly intertwined, and weapons of increasingly catastrophic power and increasingly small size can be all too easily transported across


borders and dispersed around the world. As a result, the security of individuals in many, if not all, nations may have become inseparably bound up with a stable international order. Where the threat to the international order is sufficiently grave and sovereignty has been forfeited by inaction or incompetence or nullified by a government's violently turning on its own people, states may reasonably perceive a national interest in intervening abroad to head off humanitarian disaster or thwart crimes against humanity. Indeed, in the context of twenty-first century politics, such interventions from Hobbes's perspective might even rise to the level of an obligation. To be sure, such an obligation would be grounded in interest, not in the presumed disinterestedness of modern humanitarianism — but an obligation, from Hobbes's perspective, all the same.

LIKE ALL MASTERPIECES of political philosophy, *Leviathan* abounds in ambiguities and is riven with tensions. Of particular interest is Hobbes's derivation of a morality and politics of natural right from man's humble origins. On the one hand, he sketches a grim account of man's natural condition. In it, man is solitary, bereft of metaphysical supports, inclined to misunderstand his interests, prone to violent conflict, and impelled by fear and ignorance to put his trust in superstition, but capable of overcoming his passions, empowering his reason, and preserving himself by conforming to laws of nature that require, among other things, the authorizing of an absolute and indivisible sovereign. On the other hand, Hobbes's properly constructed state reflects man's natural freedom and equality, expresses his reason, depends on moral virtues that overlap considerably with Christian and bourgeois morality, yields peace and prosperity, and, though Hobbes did not draw the inference, is capable in a world made small by revolutions in transportation and communication, of justifying foreign interventions to bring the suffering and slaughter of innocents to an end. Like all masterpieces of political philosophy, the ambiguities and tensions inhering in *Leviathan* result not from the author's failure to think clearly about morals and politics but from the clarity he brings to thinking through the ambiguities that abound in, and the tensions that rive, our world.

Peter Berkowitz is the Tad and Dianne Taube Senior Fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at www.PeterBerkowitz.com. This is a version of an essay that introduces Regnery's forthcoming Gateway edition of *Leviathan*.

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