Hobbes on the Signification of Moral Language

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1. Introduction

Signification is the central semantic notion in Hobbes's philosophy of language, but discussions of language and signification are not merely technical for Hobbes. He prominently and repeatedly criticizes others for linguistic errors. Sometimes he says they use terms that are "insignificant", lacking signification.[1] Elsewhere he rejects various claims as "absurd", a criticism that is related to Hobbes's views about truth.[2] Both sorts of criticism tend to focus on what we might call metaphysical views, views about incorporeal substances or essences or universals. Does what Hobbes says about language and its signification also have implications in the moral realm?

There's a straightforward sense in which it must do, for several of the 'metaphysical' claims and arguments Hobbes criticizes in these ways are connected to moral and political claims. Discussions of incorporeal substances are closely tied to discussions of religion, and 'free will' is among the names criticized as insignificant. There are also more direct connections though. In this paper I consider ways in which the notion of signification is at work in Hobbes's philosophy of moral language. This can help illuminate what Hobbes thinks about such language: both what he thinks about its general character, and also what he thinks about some particular bits of language, such as 'good' and 'evil'.[3]

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[1] On Hobbes on signification, see among others Abizadeh (2015), Duncan (2011), Hungerland and Vick (1973), Martin (1953), and Pécharman (2004).

[2] On Hobbes on absurdity, see among others Duncan (2016), Engel (1961), and Martinich (1981: 404-11).

[3] Thus my approach to Hobbes's theorizing about moral language is quite different from that of, say, Holden (2016), who discusses Hobbes's work in terms of more recent notions such as error theory and prescriptivism.

First, however, I want to argue for the more modest claim that, for Hobbes, the philosophy of moral language is part of the general philosophy of language.[4] It might seem that Hobbes's discussion of moral language is just a separate thing from his other discussions of language. Those general discussions tend to focus on descriptive assertions, rather than any features of language we might distinctively associate with normativity. Moreover, the best-known discussions of moral language are not in the chapters discussing the philosophy of language – for example a well-known discussion of 'good' and 'evil' appears in chapter 6 of *Leviathan* on the passions, not chapter 4 on language.

However, the technical terminology of Hobbes's philosophy of language, in particular the notion of signification, still occurs throughout his particular discussions of moral language. We can moreover find Hobbes treating moral language in a way that suggests it is straightforwardly part of his more general philosophy of language. We see this fairly clearly in the 1641 *Elements of Law*. Chapter 5 of that work is where Hobbes gives his basic account of language, and there he uses "injustice" as an example of a name that signifies a privation (EL 5.3) – i.e. the lack of justice – and uses 'charity' and 'virtue' in giving examples of when one name comprehends another (EL 5.10). In the discussion of passions that begins in chapter 7, there is repeated mention of signifying, of what is a name of what, and of what is called what.[5] Moving towards more political concerns, we can find Hobbes

[4] This might sound obvious. But one can easily find discussions of Hobbes's views about moral language that make no reference to his more general views about the workings of language. Though one might find some acknowledgement that Hobbes, say, tended to talk about signification rather than meaning, it is less common to find acknowledgment of a Hobbesian theory of signification – or at least to find acknowledgment that it is particularly relevant to what is said about moral language. Thus, for example, Darwall (2000) uses 'signify' in a relevant sense only once outside quotations – and in that case it is not treated as something that Hobbes theorized about in any notable way, but instead glossed as "enter into an account for" (Darwall 2000, 330).

[5] These different terms all appear, in this case, to be different ways of talking about the same relation.

talking about the signification of 'aristocracy' and 'oligarchy' (EL 20.3). So it appears that what Hobbes says about signification applies across the range of moral and political terms.[6] Though Hobbes may have extra things to say about the functioning of moral language, he does so in the context of his more general theorizing about language.

The main discussion of the paper begins in section 2, which I look at Hobbes's argument, towards the end of chapter 4 of *Leviathan*, that much moral language has an inconstant signification. After advancing my own reading of that passage, I then in section 3 consider two alternative readings. In section 4 I turn to the earlier *Elements of Law*. We can find several key elements of Hobbes's theory of inconstant signification in that earlier text – it is not just an idiosyncratic feature of one passage in *Leviathan*. Section 5 then looks at a well-known passage in *Leviathan* on 'good' and 'evil'. This passage mirrors an earlier discussion in the *Elements of Law*, and I argue that it should be understood in the light of the inconstant signification theory. Finally, section 6 discusses various strategies Hobbes suggests for avoiding the problem of the inconstant signification of moral language.

2. *Leviathan* 4 and inconstant signification

Consider first the final paragraph of chapter 4 of *Leviathan*, the chapter on language.

> The names of such things as affect us, that is, which please, and displease us, because all men be not alike affected with the same thing, nor the same man at all times, are in the common discourses of men, of *inconstant* signification. For seeing all names are imposed to signifie our conceptions; and all our affections are but conceptions; when

[6] There are also relevant texts in *De Cive*. See *De Cive* 1.7 on the signification of 'right', *De Cive* 14.16 the signification of 'sin', and *De Cive* 15.16 on signs of honour. Perhaps such examples – where moral terms are used in examples of some general feature of language – become less frequent in Hobbes's later work, but they do not disappear entirely. "Who is a good man?" is used as an example of a question in *De Corpore* 3.1.

> we conceive the same things differently, we can hardly avoyd different naming of them. For though the nature of that we conceive, be the same; yet the diversity of our reception of it, in respect of different constitutions of body, and prejudices of opinion, gives every thing a tincture of our different passions. And therefore in reasoning, a man must take heed of words; which besides the signification of what we imagine of their nature, have a signification also of the nature, disposition, and interest of the speaker; such as are the names of Vertues, and Vices; For one man calleth *Wisdome*, what another calleth *feare*; and one *cruelty*, what another *justice*; one *prodigality*, what another *magnanimity*; and one *gravity*, what another *stupidity*, &c. And therefore such names can never be true grounds of any ratiocination. No more can Metaphors, and Tropes of speech: but these are less dangerous, because they profess their inconstancy; which the other do not (L 4.24).[7]

This passage suggests a host of questions. To help me address them, let me first say something about Hobbes's theory of the signification of names.

I am interested here in the signification of names, rather than sentences, utterances, or any larger unit. Hobbes's notion of a name is quite wide-ranging: 'just' is a name, as is 'justice', as is 'Thomas Hobbes', as is 'incorporeal substance'. In trying to understand what Hobbes thinks names signify, we find two main candidates: names might signify the objects named, or they might signify some related mental thing (an idea, a conception, a phantasm, or something of the sort). On the first theory, 'Hobbes' would signify Hobbes himself, while on the second, 'Hobbes' would signify the speaker's idea of Hobbes. In effect, Hobbes

[7] Whelan (1981), arguing for the importance of the role of language in Hobbes's account of conflict, draws attention to the inconstant signification passage, saying that it "concerns a generally unconscious phenomenon" (62), and suggesting that equivocation is "perhaps more sinister" (62). Whelan is surely right that inconstant signification is just one among several problems of language use that Hobbes points out. But I suggest it deserves more attention than he gives it.

equivocates between the two theories. In places where he states his theory of the signification of names, he says he holds the second theory, the idea theory. But in almost all the other places where he talks about what a name signifies, he talks as if he held the other theory, on which a name signifies the object that it names.[8] So we should expect talk of signification in the above passage to be about a relation between a name and the thing it names. And we do see, in the passage, that one of the things signified by a name is the thing that is called by that name.

In this passage, Hobbes discusses the signification of a particular group of names. These are described at first as "names of such things as affect us, that is, which please, and displease us". Later, the names of virtues and vices are given as examples. There is thus a question about just how much of our language Hobbes takes himself to be describing here. I will largely stick, in this paper, to the discussion of names of virtues and vices. However, the issue of the scope of this criticism will recur in the final section.

One thing to notice is that there appear to be two different views about the signification of those names in the passage. At first their signification is said to be "*inconstant*", suggesting it is shifting, changing, and unreliable. At least, it is said to be such "in the common discourses of men", suggesting that perhaps this inconstancy can be eliminated. Later in the passage, however, a more detailed theory is sketched, on which such names have a double signification: they "besides the signification of what we imagine of their nature, have a signification also of the nature, disposition, and interest of the speaker".

[8] Here I follow and rely upon the arguments of Duncan (2011). One notable exception to the general pattern described is the argument of L 5.19 that some names are insignificant because there is no possible conception associated with them: e.g., one cannot conceive of a round quadrangle, so 'round quadrangle' is insignificant. For a different recent reading, see Abizadeh (2015).

Inconstant signification and double signification are not the same thing. A word might have a single signification but also an inconstant one – say, it signifies one external object any time it is used, but the same speaker uses it to signify different objects at different times. And a word might have a double signification, but in a constant and reliable way. For example, 'virtuous' might (though Hobbes denies this) both reliably signify a certain group of actions, and also reliably signify the speaker's positive feelings about those actions.

Hobbes, I take it, is arguing that the names of virtues and vices have significations that are both double and inconstant. He starts with the thought they are inconstant, gives us a short argument, then presents the double signification view, then returns to the characterization as "inconstant". What then is the double signification? That is, what is the first signification, what is the second, and how do they relate?

We are dealing with "words; which besides the signification of what we imagine of their nature, have a signification also of the nature, disposition, and interest of the speaker; such as are the names of virtues, and vices". Roughly then, the first signification is about the thing, and the second signification is about the speaker. Suppose we consider one of Hobbes's examples – "one man calleth *Wisdome*, what another calleth *feare*". The two speakers are describing, I take it, something that could be described in either way. Perhaps they are describing someone's motives for action, in avoiding a confrontation. The first speaker says the retreat was done from wisdom, the second that it was done from fear. So 'wisdom' in the mouth of the first speaker signifies this motive (and similar motives in other cases in which the speaker applies the same name). This is the first signification: it is the thing named by the term. 'Wisdom' also signifies the speaker's "nature, disposition, and interest". The relatively more cautious speaker calls this wisdom, while the less cautious one

calls it fear, and their uses of 'wisdom' and 'fear' are signs of their differing mindsets.[9] Moreover, the two significations have a further relation, in that differences in the "nature, disposition, and interest" of the two speakers are an important part of why they disagree about whether to describe the particular case using 'wisdom' or 'fear'. Here is one reason to call the significations inconstant – they are inconstant between speakers, because of their different mindsets.[10]

Perhaps a similar theme, although the details are not easy to follow, is present in this argument from the passage: "seeing all names are imposed to signifie our conceptions; and all our affections are but conceptions; when we conceive the same things differently, we can hardly avoyd different naming of them". Here, it would appear, Hobbes begins from his explicit theory of signification, that names signify conceptions. Part of the story, which fits well with the story about double signification, is that we name things differently because we conceive them differently – one observer reacts positively to an action and calls it brave, another reacts negatively and calls it foolhardy. Hobbes also says that our names are imposed to signify our conceptions, and that our affections are conceptions. Does this all fit together into an argument that much moral language, such as the names of virtues and vices, must have double and inconstant significations? It seems not. Even if all names signify conceptions, and affections are conceptions, that does not guarantee that all names signify (or have anything else to do with) affections. Perhaps though, Hobbes's aim is simply to remind us that conceptions (affections included) play a role in the process of naming. The imposition of names on objects depends on our conceptions (including our affections), and

[9] It is hard to describe the speakers' differences without using language that is subject to the same phenomenon.

[10] Hobbes says we are "not like affected" by the same things. They affect us in different ways, and we have different affects in response to them.

thus acts as a sign of (signifies) what they are. Thus as people's conceptions differ, so to do their practices of naming.

In response to Hobbes's story about double and inconstant signification, someone might reply that all is nevertheless well. Granted, some people might use the terms with inconstant or unusual significations, influenced by their emotional attitudes. But people use words in odd ways all the time, and we do not usually take this to undermine the use of those words. If I confused 'continent' and 'compliment' and announced that Antarctica was a compliment, this might cause some small confusion or amusement, but would not cause widespread problems. Hobbes clearly thinks that something different is going on with talk of virtues and vices though. Why?

One difference would lie in the double and inconstant signification happening all, or almost all, the time. That would cause far more confusion. It might indeed happen inevitably, as the internal differences between us cause us inevitably to use the external language differently. Perhaps Hobbes also suggests that there is just not – or usually not, or at least not always – a correct signification against which to judge the various uses – there is just the variety.

How one gets from speaker signification to expression signification in Hobbes's system – from what some individual speaker signifies by using a word to what the word signifies – is itself worth asking. Indeed it is somewhat puzzling how that happens.[11] But however Hobbes does think this process works, surely it is not helped by all the speakers doing different things. So we might think that this is really where the problem arises: that the differences between speakers mean we cannot have constant expression signification.

[11] On this connection see Abidazeh (2015, 12-4) and Hungerland and Vick (1973; 1981).

That said, though it seems most natural to talk about third-person cases of the phenomenon Hobbes is discussing, there seem also to be first-person cases. Thus I might be unsure whether a term for a virtue or a vice is the best description of my own motives – say, whether my action was done from sensible caution or excessive timidity – and apply different descriptions to the same action at different times, depending on my current mood. In this way even one speaker's use of these words may be inconstant in the way seen in the initial example above.[12] So the problem is not simply that of getting from speaker signification to expression signification, though that is surely a key part of what is going on here.

All of this is subject, of course, to the qualification that Hobbes is talking about what usually happens, what goes on "in the common discourses of men". That suggests – though it does no more than that – that there is a possibility of something different going on in other discourses. I return to that issue in section 6 below. For now, I turn to look at two alternative explanations of what Hobbes is doing here.

3. Two alternative readings

3.1 Pettit on indexicals

Phillip Pettit discuses this sort of Hobbesian text in his book *Made with Words* (Pettit 2008, 51-2 and 85-7). The phenomenon Hobbes points to, Pettit describes in terms of indexicality, saying that one "source of equivocation to which Hobbes gives importance, though not under any single name, might be described as evaluative indexicality" (Pettit 2008, 51). However, though the double signification theory we have seen makes the signification of a

[12] Here compare Irwin: "If Hobbes is right about the connexion between judgments of goodness and apparent pleasure, judgments about goodness vary not only among different people, but also within a single person at different times" (Irwin 2008, 115).

moral term depend in a way on the speaker, it is not exactly an indexical theory. For one thing, a Hobbesian theorist about language does not need to think that an indexical has a double signification, rather than a single signification that depends in some way on the speaker. When I use 'I', it appears to exactly signify one thing, me. One might perhaps say that the signification of 'I' is inconstant, in that I use it to signify myself and you use it to signify yourself. But it is not double and inconstant – it does not, in Hobbes's picture, work in the same way that the names of virtues and vices work.[13] So I conclude that Hobbes does not think these names are indexical terms, though they have something in common with them.[14]

3.2 Alexandra on double signification

Andrew Alexandra (1989) offers a different account of what Hobbes means by saying some terms have inconstant signification: "Following Frege, we could say that they have a sense, they are meaningful, but that their reference changes according to the identity of the utterer and his time of utterance" (Alexandra 1989, 38). Thus, I take it, the sense of good would be expressed by a phrase such as "the object of my appetite", and this would determine its reference in particular uses. But that theory, although trying to capture the same phenomenon as Hobbes was, is doing so in a rather different way. Hobbes talks of two significations, but they do not stand in the relation of sense and reference, or description and

[13] Perhaps one could concoct a 'Hobbesian' theory of indexicals on which they have a double and inconstant signification. But I do not see that Hobbes did so, or that this is how a Hobbesian theory must go.

[14] Moreover, as Pettit himself notes, it is not immediately clear why there should be any conflict between users of these terms, if they are indexical. Apparently conflicting uses of indexicals are often not actually in conflict. So if I say "I am in Malmesbury" and you say "I am in Cape Town", there is no conflict between our statements. See Pettit (2008, 52).

thing that satisfies it. The two significations are both of the same semantic type – they are both significations – unlike sense and reference, which have different roles.

The relation between Hobbes's two significations seems better described as causal, than as the relation between sense and reference. The speaker's mindset, which is one of the things signified by the term, is one of the causes of their applying the term to the thing they name with it, which is the other signification.

That said, and though Hobbes makes no difference of semantic type between the two significations, they do appear to play different roles. Most centrally, it appears that the external signification of the names enters into the determination of the truth conditions of the sentences, but the internal one does not.[15] Hobbes's account of truth is extensional. In the basic model, a sentence 'S is P' is true if and only if the things signified by S are all among the things signified by P.[16] Applying this model to what Hobbes says about names of virtues and vices, we might seem to have a choice of which signification to use. If I say, for example, "That action was brave", 'brave' signifies two things. First, it signifies various actions in the world, which are similar to each other and to which I apply this name.[17] Secondly, it signifies something about my state of mind, which causes me to group this with the other actions I call 'brave', rather than, for example, with the actions I call 'foolhardy'. It must be the first of these significations that enters into the evaluation of the truth conditions for the sentence. The relevant question is whether that action is among the brave actions, not whether that action is among the states of my mind that lead me to call certain actions brave. Thus, the two significations play different roles in this case.

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[15] For the avoidance of confusion – one should not think of the two things signified as the descriptive and normative components of the signification.
[16] [Removed for review]
[17] [Removed for review]

4. Good, evil, and double signification in the *Elements of Law*

I turn now to one of Hobbes's earlier works, the *Elements of Law*. First, consider a discussion of "good" and "evil" there.

> Every man, for his own part, calleth that which pleaseth, and is delightful to himself, GOOD; and that EVIL which displeaseth him: insomuch that while every man differeth from other in constitution, they differ also one from another concerning the common distinction of good and evil. Nor is there any such thing as *agathon haplos*, that is to say, simply good. For even the goodness which we attribute to God Almighty, is his goodness to us. And as we call good and evil the things that please and displease; so call we goodness and badness, the qualities or powers whereby they do it. And the signs of that goodness are called by the Latins in one word PULCHRITUDO, and the signs of evil, TURPITUDO; to which we have no words precisely answerable (EL 7.3).

The terminology here is of *calling things* something. But despite Hobbes's using that terminology, rather than talking about signification, we see here much the same basic picture we saw at the end of *Leviathan* 4. Two central points from that discussion are present here. The first is that the word-thing relation is inconstant, and the second is that this results from some other difference between the speakers, here described as a difference in their "constitution". The notion of a double signification seems to be absent. Despite that, what is said here appears to address Hobbes's main aims in introducing the double signification view: to acknowledge the ways in which people use very different moral language about the same thing, and to show the reasons for those differences.

The notion that some moral or political terms might have a sort of double signification is again present elsewhere in the *Elements of Law*, when Hobbes discusses the terms "oligarchy" and "aristocracy":

> If the major part of a certain number of men named or distinguished from the rest, be supposed to involve the wills of every one of the particulars, then they are said to be an OLIGARCHY, or ARISTOCRACY; which two words signify the same thing, together with the divers passion of those that use them; for when the men that be in that office please, they are called an aristocracy, otherwise an oligarchy (EL 20.3).[18]

In this case, Hobbes clearly states that each of the terms has two significations. Both "aristocracy" and "oligarchy" signify some group of men. Each also signifies the attitude of the speaker towards that group, be it positive or negative.

Then, again without the explicit talk of double signification, but with the central theme of inconstant signification that results from a difference in the nature or attitudes of the speakers, we find this in chapter 27:

> It remaineth therefore, that they [the authors of sedition] be such, as name things not according to their true and generally agreed-upon names; but call right and wrong, good and bad, according to their passions, or according to the authorities of such as they admire, as Aristotle, Cicero, Seneca, and others of like authority, who have given the names of right and wrong, as their passions have dictated; or have followed the authority of other men, as we do theirs. It is required therefore in an author of sedition, that he think right, that which is wrong; and profitable, that which is pernicious; and consequently that there be in him *sapientiae parum*, little wisdom (EL 27.13).

[18] Compare L 19.2.

Aspects of this passage echo other passages we have seen. But elsewhere one might get the impression that people talk in all sorts of ways, and there is no right answer. Here there is a right answer, which the seditious have missed, led astray by their passions or their reading. That rightness arises, Hobbes says just above, from "general agreement".[19]

Taken together, these passages show that the double and inconstant signification theory, or at least all the parts of it, are in the *Elements of Law* as well as in chapter 4 of *Leviathan*. That was not a theory that Hobbes idiosyncratically advanced in one passage. Rather, he seems to have held it for some time.

5. Good and evil in *Leviathan*

In chapter 6 of *Leviathan*, we find a passage that seems to be a direct successor of the one from EL 7.3 quoted above.

> But whatsoever is the object of any mans Appetite or Desire; that is it, which he for his part calleth *Good*: And the object of his Hate, and Aversion, *Evill*; And of his Contempt, *Vile* and *Inconsiderable*. For these words of Good, Evill, 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 Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the Person of the man (where there is no Common-wealth;) or, (in a Common-wealth,) 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 (L 6.7).

Not only is this a successor of the EL 7.3 passage, it also comes only a few pages after the double and inconstant signification passage at the end of *Leviathan* 4. So it seems reasonable

[19] On this and other Hobbesian views of how and when we can avoid inconstant signification, see section 6.

to suspect that some version of that story might be at work here. Though Hobbes does not talk here of a double signification, notice how two central elements of that story are present here: there is variation in the way words are used, and that variation is caused by differences in the natures of the speakers. We can trace these two ideas through a variety of passages in Hobbes's work. This prominent passage is no different in that regard.[20]

Someone might suggest, however, that the passages from chapters 4 and 6 of *Leviathan* are actually working in rather different ways.[21] The former appears to describe a situation we might find ourselves in, using words in inconstant ways. The latter seems to contain a very strong denial of objective good ("There being nothing simply and absolutely so; nor any common Rule of Good and Evill"). Given this difference, should we not think of the arguments of the two passages as working in fundamentally different ways?

I think the passages are working in a more similar way than that suggests. Granted, there are differences. For instance, Hobbes moves from using examples of thick terms in chapter 4 to thinner ones of chapter 6. That in itself does not change the argument though. In addition, in chapter 6 (and indeed in EL 7.3) Hobbes mentions a possible objection to his double and inconstant signification view. This is the objection of someone who suggests there is an object in the world that solves the problem: something that is simply good, or a "common rule" of good and evil. The idea would be, perhaps, that all uses of "good" would

[20] Lloyd (2013, 133) argues that one should not take L 6.7 to show Hobbes was a "value subjectivist", for doing so "mistakes Hobbes's critical observation on what he regards as a *misuse* of language for a normative endorsement". See also Lloyd (1992, 255-60), where she argues that "the misuse of words to stand for our appetites (especially this misuse of evaluative terms) is ... an important cause of disorder" (260). She points also to the way Hobbes criticizes Aristotle and others for "their error in measuring good and evil by their own liking and disliking" (133). However, in that criticism Hobbes says that to "define good and evil by the appetite of men" is done "well enough, as long as we consider them governed every one by his own law" (L 46.32). That suggests the relevant Aristotelian use of language is less like a misuse, and more like an accurate description of one state we might be in.

[21] [Removed for review]

signify this object, removing inconstancy and ambiguity.[22] Thus, the notion of objective goodness is itself brought in to the discussion as a possible way to resolve the problem about signification. Hobbes, of course, denies that there is any such object, and thus does not take this strategy to be a serious contender.

6. Strategies for avoiding these problems

Appeal to such an object, the thing that is simply and absolutely good, is one of a series of strategies Hobbes considers for resolving the problem of the inconstant signification of moral terms. In looking at such strategies, we can distinguish two sorts. Some strategies offer principled solutions, on which the inconstant signification will be removed. Others offer practical solutions, on which the inconstancy might still in principle continue, but is suppressed or managed in practice. In this section, I consider six strategies – most of them suggested by Hobbes himself – for addressing the problem of inconstant signification.

Strategy 1 is the one mentioned above: appeal to something that is simply good, or a "common rule" of good or evil. The idea is that there is something independent of human decisions, desires, and practices that can be used to fix the signification of moral terms. There are no doubt various ways in which one might work out the details of such a view, but Hobbes does not consider them, as he is convinced there is no such thing in the world.

Strategy 2 is a second principled solution. This is the strategy of resolving the problem about language by finding clarification in the realm of ideas. Compare Hobbes here to Spinoza. He too acknowledges that there are conflicts arising from the use of language, saying indeed that "most errors consist only in our not rightly applying names to things" (*Ethics* 2p47s). But Spinoza also sees a straightforward way out of such problems – for on his

[22] Alternatively, they might all be guided by the common rule.

view, people have the ideas right, and apply the words wrongly to them. Hobbes doesn't see this solution as available. Indeed probably he could not, given how little of our mental life he thinks can be explained by ideas alone, in the absence of language.[23]

Strategy 3. General agreement. As I noted above, Hobbes says in EL 27.13 that things have "true and generally agreed-upon names". This remark suggests a further strategy for dealing with some cases of inconstant signification: relying upon general agreement. The seditious authors Hobbes discusses there have gone wrong, in part, because they have failed to use words in the ways generally agreed upon, which (implicitly) is something we ought to do, unless we aim to introduce confusion (which itself is something we ought not to do). Why, however, should general agreement have any authority here? We might think it has a sort of practical authority, such that if there is a general agreement, we ought to stick with it, to avoid confusion. But suppose I think that people generally misname a certain case: say, they call it "treason", when I think it ought to be called "whistleblowing". I might have a reason for my disagreement (that is not the desire to cause confusion), for I might think that the case is more relevantly similar to the other cases called "whistleblowing" than to the others called "treason". And if I have this reason, I have a good reason to name the case differently.[24] Probably it is a good idea, other things being equal, to use words in the ways generally agreed upon. But many of the difficult cases just are those in which people do not think that other things are equal. So this potential practical strategy has limited application. These difficulties might indeed be, I speculate, the reason why this suggestion seems not to appear in *Leviathan*. Nevertheless, we find at least three other suggestions there.

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[23] Most notably, for Hobbes it is language that enables universal thought.
[24] If I do not, I still have a good reason to say that although the claims usually made about treasonous acts apply to all the other cases, they do not apply to this one, which is itself a potentially confusing situation.

Strategy 4. Use Hobbes's definitions. Perhaps we could all speak in a more constant way if, say, we all began from and stuck to some agreed definitions. Maybe that is what some of Hobbes's own definitions, such as the definitions of names for the passions in chapter 6 of *Leviathan*, are supposed to help us achieve.[25] It is not always clear that this is how the definitions are intended. Consider though, as an example, the discussion at the beginning of chapter 25 of *Leviathan*. "How fallacious it is", Hobbes says there, "to judge of the nature of things, by the ordinary and inconstant use of words". Those problems are to be avoided by accepting some Hobbesian definitions of key notions: in this case, of 'command' and 'counsel', 'exhortation' and 'dehortation'.[26] As a strategy for getting everyone to use words in the same way, this has a certain obvious problem. Why, someone might well ask, should I use words in the way Hobbes says I ought to? Just because Hobbes says so? That seems hardly enough reason. Moreover, Hobbes himself denies there is some objective standard he has access to, which is driving these new definitions.[27] That is, here too we appear not to have the possibility of any principled solution. And Hobbes did not have the political power

[25] Early on, we see Hobbes introduce a linguistic dimension to his discussion of the passions. The very title of L 6 tells us that it is about the passions "and the speeches by which they are expressed". There are several other examples scattered throughout the chapter. The common description is in terms of *calling* and *being called*. The language of signification is not entirely absent though. Thus towards the end of the chapter Hobbes says: "These formes of Speech, I say, are expressions, or voluntary significations of our Passions: but certain signes they be not; because they may be used arbitrarily, whether they that use them, have such Passions or not" (L 6.56). These are names that signify things, where those things are passions. And to 'express' a passion appears to be to voluntarily signify it. Thus, for example, weeping may be a sign of (thus, signify) sudden dejection, and in some sense expresses it, but "sudden dejection" is the name that signifies (and in this sense expresses) sudden dejection.

[26] This is related to Hobbes's frequent strategy of using terms that were familiar from previous debates, but redefined, often somewhat radically, in his own way. Hobbes's use of the language of natural law provides one example.

[27] Someone might suggest that other parts of Hobbes's account, his laws of nature, determine the signification of moral language. But what the laws determine is not what the moral words signify, but what the moral rules are. That determination actually depends on the stability of the language used to express the laws. So the laws are not the right kind of thing to provide a principled solution of the problem of inconstant signification. Moreover, even if they did so, they would only solve the problem for a limited group of terms.

to produce a practical solution by simply making others use words as he does. So though the strategy of 'use words as Hobbes does' might solve the problem if everyone did so, there seems no reason to expect people to do so, and indeed no reason to say they are wrong in failing to so do.

Strategy 5. Use a specially appointed judge. Consider again something Hobbes says in L 6.7:

> these words of Good, Evill, 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 Evill, to be taken from the nature of the objects themselves; but from the Person of the man (where there is no Common-wealth;) or, (in a Common-wealth,) 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 (L 6.7).

Here Hobbes describes two ways to do things differently. One of those is to have the use of words governed by "an Arbitrator or Judge, whom men disagreeing shall by consent set up, and make his sentence the Rule thereof". That is, two or more people might agree that some one person should judge which way to use a word, and agree to use the word as that judge decides. This strategy, though it might have its difficulties of implementation, would surely work in some cases. But it is also limited, for it is only a strategy for some cases. There is no reason given to think that people would or should always appoint a judge in this way. So although this is a useful practical strategy, it could not eliminate the inconstant signification with which Hobbes is concerned.[28] And if we suspect that Hobbes would have been

[28] Peters also focuses on L 6.7. He notes that on Hobbes's view, "good" "implies a relation to the emotions, desires, or interests of the person who uses it (1979, 161-2), but also implies that there are features in the object in virtue of which the application of 'good' is

particularly concerned about cases of inconstant signification that gave rise to dispute and conflict, the limits of this strategy seem even greater. For those seem to be exactly the cases in which disputants will be less likely to seek a judge, to agree on who the judge should be, or to follow the judge's ruling.

Strategy 6. Rely on the sovereign. This is the other strategy described in L 6.7. The rule of how to use the words is to be taken "(in a Common-wealth,) from the Person that representeth it". So the sovereign, or their appointed representative, could resolve disputes. This resembles the previous strategy, but with additional authority behind the judge, and with the possibility for the judge (the sovereign) to insist on a resolution, even though the speakers do not seek out someone to resolve the situation of inconstant signification. In this way Watkins (1989, 109-11) focuses on the contrast between language use in the state of nature and in a Hobbesian commonwealth, relying heavily but not solely on L 6.7. The use of moral language in the state of nature involves "merely pretentious projections" of the speakers' appetites (Watkins 1989, 109). The messy linguistic state is resolved, on Watkins's reading, by the presence of a sovereign, who will "allocate the names 'good', 'evil', 'right', wrong', etc., to specified classes of actions" (Watkins 1989, 111). Watkins apparently takes all moral language to be so regulated, which I suggest is more than Hobbes envisions, and more than is perhaps possible. Recall again that the class of terms that have double and inconstant signification is a broad one, including not just all the names of virtues and vices, but also all "names of such things as affect us" (L 4.24). Comprehensive legislation here would require legislating about, at least, all the terms that Hobbes defines in *Leviathan*, and probably many

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"appropriate" (162). That is, Peters sees that there is a dual aspect to this account of how 'good' works, though he does not describe it in terms of double signification.

more. Those definitions would have authority behind them.[29] But we might wonder, simply practically, whether any actual sovereign could legislate about all the cases, and enforce that legislation.

None of the strategies discussed in this section seems to be enough on its own to solve the problem of the double and inconstant signification of moral language. Perhaps, of course, no one strategy was meant to work on its own. Rather, the idea might be that the combination of them solves the problem, say with a sensible adherence to generally agreed uses solving many problems, and the sovereign intervening in particularly problematic, potentially seditious cases. One does wonder, however, whether such a combined strategy would actually cover all the cases. Perhaps Hobbes just needs it to be practically likely that it would. That would leave him, perhaps, with a practical solution, but no principled one.[30]

7. Persistent problems

There seems then to be no principled solution, in Hobbes's system, to the problem of the double and inconstant signification of the names of virtues and vices. Hobbes thinks that, outside of a properly constituted commonwealth, moral and political discourse is a treacherous, shifting, unreliable thing, and that this can have dangerous political consequences, as the seditious use language to their own ends. If there were a principled solution within the Hobbesian commonwealth, that danger would largely have gone away. But if there is no principled solution, merely a series of incomplete practical ones, the picture

[29] Strictly speaking, they need not all be definitions. There might also be, say, injunctions to stop reading a particular text in a particular way. Cf. the discussion in L 39 of how to understand scriptural uses of 'church', an issue that had clear political consequences.

[30] The idea that Hobbes's philosophy of language yields a system that is, in principle and always, unstable and problematic, has been widespread ever since the seventeenth century. However, those criticisms have usually been based on the notion that Hobbes's nominalism goes too far. [Removed for review.]

seems rather to be one of a structure that is always in danger of collapsing, as the shifting sands it was built on are always in danger of moving, the building being shored up in a piecemeal way as problems emerge.

Hobbes does seems to have worried a little himself about problems of this sort persisting, even in a properly constituted Hobbesian commonwealth. We see examples of this in chapter 26 of *Leviathan*, on civil laws. Noting the need for all laws to be interpreted, Hobbes draws particular attention to problems arising from the "divers significations of words" (L 26.21, and see L 26.26). Hobbes does argue that the sovereign can ultimately solve all such problems in the law, if only "by the legislative power" (L 26.21). This suggests a confidence that the sovereign can solve any such problem if need be – including perhaps the more general problem, not just the problem in the law.

Notice, however, what would be happening in this case. The sovereign, seeing problems in the interpretation of legislation, would be introducing more legislation to provide clarification. Much as this might help at the time, it would ultimately just provide more legislation, which would have its own problems of interpretation. It would not be written in a magical new language that lacked those problems. No doubt the sovereign could legislate again if that happened. But still we are in the realm of practical solutions, not principled ones. Nothing the sovereign does using the legislative power can make the problem disappear completely.[31]

Hobbes's position is presumably then not that all such problems are always absent in a commonwealth, but that they can be resolved if it becomes necessary to do so. And presumably he also thinks that this resolution by the sovereign can happen quickly, efficiently, and (of course) be enforced powerfully enough to prevent the disruptive

[31] See L 30.22 on the ambiguities of laws.

consequences of inconstant signification. Thus, what begins as an issue of language use becomes a question of power, its extent, and the possibilities of its imposition.

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