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Reason as danger and remedy for the modern subject in Hobbes' *Leviathan*

Abstract The article argues that Hobbes articulates a modern problematic of reason, where the shared rationality of human beings is an integral part of the danger they present to each other, and where reason suggests a solution, the social contract and the laws of nature, enforced and interpreted by absolute sovereign authority. This solution reflects a tension in modern reason itself, since it requires the alienation of self-determination of the rational human subject precisely to preserve the condition for the possibility of the rationality of the rational human subject, i.e. one's life, which is threatened by the very rationality of other human subjects. I discuss interpretations of Hobbes which stress the other motives of conflict, i.e. competition and vanity, and acknowledge that they play a role in the threat subjects present to each other, but argue that the danger presented precisely by shared rationality, which I discuss with some reference to the Hegelian dialectic of consciousness and mutual recognition, has been underplayed by Hobbes' interpretation.

Key words conflict · Thomas Hobbes · modernity · rationality · reason · sovereigns · subjects

Thomas Hobbes is frequently acknowledged as a father of modern political philosophy. Within the canon of modern philosophy more generally, however, Hobbes is typically accorded a secondary role in relation to Descartes, partly because of the dominance of epistemological concerns in contemporary philosophy. When reflecting philosophically on the changes that took place in the transition to modernity, we tend to look to Descartes for epistemology and metaphysics, and to Hobbes, among others, for political and moral philosophy, but this divide is artificial

and to some degree anachronistic, since one of the important changes that took place in early modernity and is still taking place in late modernity is in the very conception of reason, particularly reason as it is involved in and mediated by social relations and structures.

Hobbes' contemporary philosophical significance and relevance in late modernity derives in part precisely from the starkness of his depiction of human life and society. As Louis Roux puts it: 'Hobbes is present among us: his fiery gaze, his dark and loveless world, his universe of war, of death, of commands and prohibitions, his mechanistic and soulless law, everything is there.'¹ It also derives from a problematic inherent within and characteristic to modern thought. Leo Strauss, asking why Hobbes should be and is studied, noted that

Hobbes' doctrine would not be alive . . . if the progress of modernity were separable from the decay of modernity. Modernity has progressed to the point where it has visibly become a problem. This is why respectable people . . . turn to a critical study of the hidden premises and hence the hidden origins of modernity – and therefore to a critical study of Hobbes.²

Agreeing with these two motives for studying Hobbes in late modernity, one can argue a further motive, namely that, in Hobbes' thought, reason itself becomes *inherently* problematic. In *Leviathan's* political theory,³ Thomas Hobbes exhibits a modern political subject whose relationship to reason is complex. Specifically, for Hobbes the human subject is one constituted in significant part by reason, reason both within the individual subject and without the subject, in other subjects. The capacity to reason is not only a specific difference dividing humans from animals. Rather, it is the source of a fundamental, perennial, and intensified threat of conflict and violence that Hobbes' work attempts to definitively understand, articulate, and resolve, *through* the use of reason.

The first part of this paper starts by discussing a longstanding criticism that regards Hobbes' philosophy as simply an apologetics or rationalization for totalitarianism or despotism. I argue that these criticisms neglect a deeper rooting of a despotic or totalitarian mentality within the very structure of modern reason itself and the passions in Hobbes' philosophy. The second part of this paper argues that despite Hobbes' penchant for definition and philosophy *more geometrico*, his work fails to render the term 'reason' as univocal as he would like or pretend, and it is necessary to detail two different senses of reason, a strict form and a looser, wider, and more common form. The third and longest part of this paper indicates how for Hobbes it is not only the passions but also rationality itself that generates and intensifies the danger of the war of all against all. Reason also suggests the Hobbesian solution, the movement to civil society under and guaranteed by sovereign authority. The fourth and final part discusses Hobbes' treatments of the alienation of

the right of the subject and the resulting condition of the sovereign. I argue that, for Hobbes, this alienation itself is required not simply on the basis of preserving life, but also on the basis of rationality itself, where life becomes a condition for the possession and exercise of rationality.

I

Leviathan is not an isolated or limited study. Students of its first two parts know that at first, and in its first part, it appears a farago of quaintly mechanistic physics, anatomy, and psychology, through which a constant thread of a political theory runs, knotted, at parts, into cul-de-sacs of economics, epistemology, theology, and theory of language.⁴ More patient reading of the text reveals an astute mind at work who does not merely aim to resolve the serious political problems of his day by application of a mechanistic and purportedly geometrical method to politics.⁵ Man is in fact a political creature for Hobbes, although not in the same manner as this motif's earlier Aristotelian interpretations which he denounces. As Preston King puts it, 'Politics (as opposed to war) is not natural to men, but merely an accomplishment; man is not born a political animal: force of circumstance compels him to become one.'⁶ Hobbes' understanding of this dimension of human being has implications for every aspect of human nature. The dominance of the political in Hobbes' work, and his understanding of the nature of politics, are consequences of the complex archetectonic of reason permeating his political philosophy.

Hobbes has often been maligned as an apologist for totalitarianism and despotism. Two representatives of this long-pedigreed position suffice here to exemplify this interpretation. Hannah Arendt, for instance, in her work, *The Origin of Totalitarianism*, writes, somewhat hyperbolically:

It is significant that modern believers in power are in complete accord with the philosophy of the only great thinker who ever attempted to derive public good from private interest and who, for the sake of private good, conceived and outlined a Commonwealth whose basis and ultimate end is accumulation of power. . . . There is hardly a single bourgeois moral standard which has not been anticipated by the unequalled magnificence of Hobbes' Logic.⁷

Sheldon Wolin similarly argues that 'Hobbes was the first modern in whom a despotic mentality was at work,' writing that 'Hobbes' despotic mentality is revealed in the several departments of his theory, not just in his political writings: in his thinking about human nature, physical nature, knowledge, scientific inquiry, and thinking itself.'⁸ I would like to argue here that this genre of criticism does not go far enough, because

it does not recognize that Hobbes develops and articulates a *necessarily* totalitarian or despotic problematic inherent to human reason in modernity. My intention here is to clarify and articulate Hobbes' position on reason, violence, and sovereignty, not out of agreement with Hobbes, but because in my view many criticisms of his philosophical position fail to fully grasp the cogency of the problematic he develops. In his thought, reason is not simply employed and appealed to in order to justify a political philosophy enamored with authority invested with absolute power. Put another way, Hobbes' conception of reason is not *merely* a rationalization for despotic power or totalitarian rule. Instead, Hobbes reveals an absolute need of this sort rooted in the very structure of human reason itself.

To be sure, the passions also play a central role in Hobbes' theory of human nature and conflict, and as Leo Strauss points out, for understanding the human propensity toward conflict, the most important among these are vanity and the fear of violent death. Strauss' interpretation, both representative and generative of many related interpretations, highlights the role of vanity. 'In four different arguments,' he writes,

Hobbes does not tire of designating the characteristic difference between man and animal as the striving after honor and positions of honor, after precedence over others and recognition of this precedence by others, ambition, pride, and the passion for fame.⁹

He goes on to argue:

The antithesis from which Hobbes' political philosophy starts is thus the antithesis between vanity as the root of natural appetite on the one hand, and on the other, fear of violent death as the passion which brings man to reason.¹⁰

This type of interpretation rightly emphasizes the often overlooked importance of vanity in generating the danger that human beings pose to each other, a source of intensified danger irreducible to mere economic competition over similarly desired objects. But, it overlooks the fact that within Hobbes' theory there is yet another source and intensifier of conflict: human reason itself plays a central role in generating the endemic danger Hobbesian subjects pose to each other.

It is easy to get a mistaken impression from the mechanistic psychology and theory of action developed in ch. 6, offering explanations of the passions in terms of their objects and their basis in appetite, aversion, and contempt, that Hobbes' view of the human subject is simply that it is a mechanism like any other, so that all the roots of human conflict would lie ultimately in the passions and their fundamental bases, reason figuring in merely instrumentally. Strauss, among others, argues persuasively, however, that the mechanistic or 'geometric' material, incorporated

into Hobbes' thought later than the working out of many of his main themes, is not the sole basis for his political thought, so that Hobbes could arrive at similar arguments and a similar view of human nature without assuming mechanist reductionism.¹¹ Rather than focusing on resolving the issue of whether reduction to mechanism is in fact absolutely central to Hobbes' thought, however, we should note what a mechanistic treatment of phenomena allows Hobbes.

First, it allows him to dispense, as he in fact does, with any previous psychologies and doctrines about the passions, reason, and action. It thus serves the polemical or rhetorical purpose¹² of undermining appeals to philosophical or religious authorities or traditions, and is thereby proto-typically modern.¹³ As C. Fred Alford puts it, 'Only when men understand themselves as machines, Hobbes argues, do all those transcendent values that men have shown themselves to die for disappear.'¹⁴ Second, reduction to mechanism allows Hobbes to treat all phenomena as fundamentally of the same order, homogeneous, capable of being brought within a single comprehensive explanation. This can, however, have an implication other than merely that of simple reductionism. If Hobbes maintains it is possible to give a systematic account of all human phenomena by recourse to combination of a few basic affects applied to different objects and in different interpersonal contexts, he nevertheless does not view reason as a mere epiphenomenon, and reason can be understood to be just as real and pervasive as the most basic passions. Accepting, for the moment, Hobbes' assertion that 'reason in this sense, is nothing but *reckoning* (that is, adding and subtracting) of the consequences of general names agreed upon, for the *marking* and *signifying* of our thoughts',¹⁵ this means that, since reason is fundamentally characteristic of human beings, nearly everything they do, think, or feel, will be potentially affected to some extent by reason.

II

Reasoning for Hobbes, is a capacity to draw inferences, and these take several forms, varying in their degree of rigor and commonness. One characterization of reason runs:

The use and end of Reason, is not the finding of the sum, and truth of one, or a few consequences, remote from the first definitions, and settled significations of names; but to begin at these; and proceed from one consequence to another.¹⁶

This is reason in the strictest sense for Hobbes, which is supplemented by other mental capacities, including memory, experience, fancy, and judgement. Earlier in ch. 2, Hobbes picks out the characteristic of human beings as a general capacity to draw inferences.

The train of regulated thoughts is of two kinds; one, when of an effect imagined, we seek the causes, or means that produce it: and this is common to man and beast. The other is, when imagining any thing whatsoever, we seek all the possible effects, that can by it be produced; that is to say, we imagine what we can do with it when we have it. Of which I have not at any time seen any sign, but in man only.¹⁷

Reason in the strict sense, however, differs from the other mental capacities in that it is deliberately employed and, as Hobbes puts it, 'attained by industry.'¹⁸ Not all human subjects possess or employ reason in the strict sense to the same extent. Although Hobbes maintains, 'all men by nature reason alike, as well, when they have good principles',¹⁹ reason in the strictest sense is not employed by most people. '[T]he most part of men, though they have the use of reasoning a little way, as in numbering to some degree; yet it serves them to little use in common life.'²⁰ As Johnston dryly remarks: 'When we do misreckon, the results can be spectacular.'²¹

Reasoning, both in this strict sense Hobbes has defined and the other, looser and broader sense he will employ and rely on, is indispensable to political life. This takes place in two corresponding ways in *Leviathan*. First, Hobbes' own project is an attempt to supply a fundamental rationality to politics hitherto lacking or only dimly grasped. In the chapter on 'Counsel' he writes, self-referentially, 'When for the doing of any thing, there be infallible rules (as in engines, and edifices, the rules of geometry), all the experience of the world cannot equal his counsel, that has learnt, or found out the rule.'²² The laws of nature or reason laid out in *Leviathan* ch. 14–15, as well as the detailed and systematic discussions of the remainder of part 2, are purported to embody or provide such infallible rules, and they express reason in the strict sense used by Hobbes in his derivation of the laws of nature. Second, there is a broader use of reason to mean the human mental capacities that lead humans to the laws of reason and the social contract, and this broader sense reflects Hobbes' reliance on a looser notion of reason, which could be called 'rationality' in general.²³ This looser and broader notion of reason is of course not entirely different from the stricter and more circumscribed notion. Presumably Hobbes' own use of reason in the stricter sense both reflects and is reflected by reason in the looser sense. To be sure, Hobbes contrasts reason in the strict sense with prudence and experience in the course of defining his terms, but he makes (what would be inconsistent) recourse to the looser sense of reason in other passages, most notably in his discussion of defect of reasoning as a cause of crime in ch. 27, and by faulting previous philosophers in ch. 5 for not reasoning in the way that Hobbes presents himself as doing, 'begin[ning] his ratiocination from definitions, or explications of the names they are to use'.²⁴

This interpretation is in partial agreement with George Shelton's, which argues that Hobbes

wants to get away from Reason, capitalized as a faculty, to the kind of calculation in which we regularly engage prior to acting. For Hobbes, reasoning should not be transformed into something remote from everyday life but must be recognized as a process which is an intimate part of that life.²⁵

What Shelton calls 'reason' is what, for the purpose of being able to maintain a vital distinction here, I call reason in the looser or wider sense, or 'rationality.' David Boonin-Vail is representative of an alternate approach in interpreting all references to 'reason' in Hobbes as reason in the strict sense, arguing that 'we must remember that, for Hobbes, reason is definitively human only in the sense that all have the capacity to develop and perfect it'.²⁶ Boonin-Vail rightly calls attention to the fact that in Hobbes' view, most people rarely reason in this strict sense, but it seems fairly clear that Hobbes' accounts of both the dangers of the state of nature and of the movement out of the state of nature through the laws of nature involve subjects reasoning in some way.²⁷ To be sure, one can contend that Hobbes' own reconstructions and rearticulations of these in *Leviathan* are the product of Hobbes' use of this rare reason in the strict sense, but this contention already presupposes that reason in the loose sense has been and is continually employed by human subjects. In short, rational subjects, whether in the state of nature or taking part in the commonwealth, may not possess reason in the sense of an infallible science, but certainly do reckon, i.e. possess and use reason in the looser sense.

III

Within the Hobbesian state of nature, reason in the strict sense, acquired by industry and application, is not present. Indeed, the natural near-equality of all humans does not involve reason in the strict sense, since there is little possibility for its development. He famously claims that in the state of nature

there is *no place for industry*; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea; no commodious building; no instruments of moving; *no knowledge of the face of the earth*; *no account of time*; *no arts*; *no letters*; *no society*; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, poor, nasty brutish, and short.²⁸
[emphasis added]

Given the requirements of what Hobbes calls science and what is here called 'reason' in the strict sense, it should be clear that that form of

human practice, or 'Industry' will hardly be common, if even possible.²⁹ Reason in the looser sense, is however, present in and employed by human subjects in the state of nature, who are more or less equivalent to each other. In noting this Hobbes explicitly contrasts the two types of reason, writing:

as to the faculties of the mind, (setting aside the arts grounded upon words, and especially that skill of proceeding upon general, and infallible rules, called science; which very few have, and but in few things; as being not a native faculty, born with us; nor attained (as prudence) while we look after somewhat else,) I find yet a greater equality amongst men, than that of strength.³⁰

In Hobbes' analysis, all the mental capacities separating humans from animals and preparing the ground for social relations other than reason in the strict sense are present in human beings, and to roughly the same degree. Roughly equal, and presumably having more or less the same desires, these men can expect bloody competition with each other when they share similar desires for the same objects, which will in fact be much of the time. The actuality of violence motivated by competition, of course, is something humans do share with animals, but the threat of this violence becomes intensified for human beings at this level of desire and competition.

A second motive for strife is peculiar to humans, and stems from expectation, rather than simply experience, of conflict, what Hobbes calls 'diffidence,' about which he notes:

from this diffidence of one another, there is no way for any man to secure himself, so reasonable, as anticipation; that is, by force, or by wiles, to master the persons of all men he can, so long, till he see no other power great enough to endanger him.³¹

Hobbes clearly uses 'reasonable' here in the wider, more inclusive, sense. Presumably, none of the agents in the state of nature have devoted themselves to the task of cultivating reason in the strict sense. They are, however, capable of quite developed and astute inferences which guide not only their actions, but more importantly their interpretations of their common situation, both immediate and long-term, and their planning for future eventualities.

These agents are capable of quite sophisticated self-referential reflection, and therein lies the danger both introduced and intensified by diffidence or expectation. The problem of the state of nature is that of being confronted with an environment composed of beings more or less like oneself, other rational subjects.³² To be sure, as Hobbes points out, human beings typically overvalue their own worth, and correspondingly undervalue the worth of others. But, this widespread self-deception is

only part of the story. Most people overrate themselves, but this itself can be noted by any competent observer as a general fact of human nature. Hobbes explains that the primary reason people deny a general equality of mental faculties is that 'they see their own wit at hand, and other mens at a distance,'³³ and follows this with a commonplace reminiscent of the first sentence of Descartes' *Discourse on Method*: 'But this proveth rather that men are in that point equal, than unequal. For there is not ordinarily a greater sign of the equal distribution of anything, than that every man is contented with his share.'³⁴

Agents in the state of nature may deceive themselves as to their own acuity and wisdom, but they certainly do not, for that, assess too lowly the capacities of their fellow agents. In the very next sentence, 'From this equality of ability, ariseth equality of hope in the attaining of our ends',³⁵ it is clear that the likelihood of conflict over resources is a function not of overblown assessments of one's own powers, but rather of a realization, by the agents involved, of their near-equality. This basic level of competition over resources is only the beginning. Rational agents realize that they will compete with their near-equals. The other person is not a threat simply because he or she shares with the subject a set of potentially infinite desires, but because the agents *both* share common structures of passions and desires, and even more importantly because each of the agents is *reflexively* aware of their similarity. This reflexive awareness, not simply a function of passions or desire for more and more power, escalates the level of competition.

Through 'anticipation,' each agent attempts, as the earlier cited passage runs, 'to master the persons of all men he can, so long, till he see no other power great enough to endanger him'.³⁶ Although this takes expression in aggressive behavior, Hobbes conceives of this attempt to achieve security through domination as primarily defensive in nature, as consideration of the structure of the fundamental motives for conflict in ch. 13 the 'three principal causes of quarrel,' which lie 'in the nature of man,' shows. These are competition, diffidence, and glory.

The first, maketh men invade for gain; the second, for safety; and the third, for reputation. The first use violence, to make themselves masters of other mens persons, wives, children, and cattle; the second, to defend them; the third, for trifles, as a word, a smile, a different opinion, and any other sign of undervalue, either direct in their persons, or by reflexion in their kindred, their friends, their nation, their profession, or their name.³⁷

Strauss, among others, has emphasized the role that the third reason, glory or vanity, plays within the motivation of Hobbes' subject, going so far as to underplay the second reason, diffidence, safety, or defense. Other interpretations have echoed this theme. Piotr Hoffman, for instance, follows Strauss in ascribing such a role to vanity, albeit to a lesser degree.³⁸

C. Fred Alford, who discusses Hobbes' view of the self through the psychoanalytic theories of Jacques Lacan and Hans Kohut, similarly argues that the Hobbesian self is more fundamentally concerned with avoidance of narcissistic injury, due to lack of recognition, than motivated by the fear of death.

From this perspective, honor becomes at least as important as life, with violent death . . . being the ultimate narcissistic injury. Is this my argument? The answer is yes and no, to put it as unambiguously as possible. At the archaic level of self-development about which Hobbes is writing, there is no distinction between power and honor, and there really is none between power, honor and the self.³⁹

Without going so far as Alford in blending these motives of conflict, it is important to note that Hobbes does not conceive or present this third structure of motivation to violence as *completely* separate from the second. It is not simply that 'vain-glorious men, such as estimate their sufficiency by the flattery of other men, or the fortune of some precedent action, without assured ground of hope from the true knowledge of themselves, are inclined to rash engaging',⁴⁰ that is, that vanity, as a passion, provokes the self-deluded agent to violence, to risky adventures that will result in conflict. There are two other dangers. First, those who note such a general tendency toward self-deception in others must take greater precautions against those others. Second, since honor, according to Hobbes, is a type of power, human beings must compete over that as well, if they are not to risk others perceiving them as weak and therefore easy prey, and this reintroduces the first and second motives for conflict right in the heart of the third motive. It is precisely to forestall this that Hobbes places among the other laws of nature the 8th and 9th. 'That no man by deed, word, countenance, or gesture, declare hatred, or contempt of another', and 'That every man acknowledge other for his equal by nature'.⁴¹

Within Hobbes' depiction of the motives for conflict, motives that steer humans toward a rational organization of society through the figure of the sovereign, there is a problematic in which the grave threat that human beings pose to other human beings is not constituted simply by the structures of human passions, interests, and desires, nor by the addition of a self-deceptive and egotistical desire for recognition and proof of one's perhaps illusory power. In this moment, *it is the very rationality of other humans*, reason in the broad sense, understood as roughly equal to oneself in both capacity and structure, that poses such a threat.⁴² Piotr Hoffman, in *Violence and Modern Philosophy*, describes the modern subject as constituted by a threat of the Other,⁴³ an Other who in Hobbes, as opposed to the theme as developed in recent continental philosophy, is dangerously *similar* to the subject. Shelton has also noted

this problem, in different language: ‘in the state of nature it is not just a matter of quarreling over scarce resources: the fear of what others might do leads to preventative action, to violence against innocent but potentially dangerous competitors.’⁴⁴

Strauss’ interpretation rightly stresses the importance of this theme of the reasoning subject constituted in relation to other, alike, and therefore dangerous subjects. He argues that Hegel’s dialectic of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* reflects the Hobbesian subject.

Hegel tacitly recognizes the superiority of Hobbes’ philosophical basis to that of Descartes when he characterizes the experience from which self-consciousness originally arises as the life-and-death struggle which is born of interest in recognition from others . . . Hegel by prefacing his analysis of the pre-modern forms of self-consciousness . . . by the analysis, based on Hobbes’ philosophy, of mastery and servitude, recognized that Hobbes’ philosophy was the first to deal with the most elementary form of self-consciousness.⁴⁵

The contention that Hegel drew upon Hobbes’ philosophy may be viewed as historically implausible, but that is not what Strauss contends, for what he is claiming instead is that the Hegelian dialectic of self-consciousness and recognition echoes the Hobbesian view of the human subject. Strauss, as noted earlier, gives the third motive for conflict, vanity, an undue priority over the other two motives, and he accordingly interprets the Hegelian dialectic of self-consciousness in terms of the diadic dialectic of recognition, in which a self-consciousness, a human subject, is confronted by another similar being from whom it has to demand and ultimately coerce recognition of its substantiality as self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, for Hegel is necessarily involved with an Other.

What Strauss’ interpretation leaves aside here is that the dialectic of recognition that leads into a conflict, the “struggle to the death” takes its determinate form not only because of the desire of each subject for recognition from the other (the first motive, that of competition for non-human objects, does not enter into Hegel’s discussion at this stage), but precisely because of the similarity between the human subjects, the Hegelian self-consciousnesses. This similarity necessitates the conflict in two related ways. First, each self-consciousness can only be secure in its own being by dominating the other, and domination first requires subjugation, which can only happen as a result of conflict. Recognition can only come from another human subject more or less equal to oneself.⁴⁶ Second, each self-consciousness is aware that the other self-consciousness is its equal, that it is already thinking along the same lines, that it is drawing the same inferences, and that it realizes the other to threaten domination. Conflict, for both Hobbes and Hegel, is inherent in the rationality of human self-consciousness.

This similarity between self and other is thus central to the escalation of the potential of violence. When Hobbes adduces as proof, drawn, not from the passions, but from experience, of the natural condition of mankind, when he asks, '[d]oes he not there as much accuse mankind by his actions, as I do by my words?'⁴⁷ the very action, namely keeping on guard and going about armed, indicates more specifically this second motive than either the first or the third. If it is not merely through the irrationality of the passions, but also through rationality itself that men become such a threat to each other, and reside in the murderous state of nature, it is also not simply through the passions but also through that rationality that they are able to escape that state.

The passions that incline men to peace, are fear of death; desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and hope by their industry to obtain them. And reason suggesteth convenient articles of peace, upon which men may be drawn to agreement. These articles are they, which otherwise are called the laws of nature.⁴⁸

These laws are discovered through human rationality, but they are only articulated and understood fully by reason in the strict sense.

It is through these laws of nature that civil society becomes possible. The laws, however, require an authority to enforce them, since they 'oblige *in foro interno*, that is to say, they bind to a desire they should take place: but *in foro externo*; that is, to the putting them in act, not always'.⁴⁹ Hobbes later claims that:

These dictates of reason, men use to call by the name of laws; but improperly: for they are but conclusions, or theorems concerning what conduceth to the conservation and defense of themselves; whereas law, properly is the word of him, that by right have command over others.⁵⁰

The Sovereign, empowered to enforce, to promulgate, and to interpret the laws of nature discovered by and contracted to by the rational subjects (and, according to Hobbes, articulated in their most perfectly developed form in *Leviathan*), is the condition for the possibility for such laws, such products of rationality, being more than mere theorems. According to Hobbes, it is only through the alienation of the right of the subjects that the subjects can arrive at a state where the rationality of subjects can be made effective by being institutionalized and enforced.

The law of nature, and the civil law, contain each other, and are of equal extent. For the laws of nature, which consist in equity, justice, gratitude, and other moral virtues on these depending, in the condition of mere nature . . . are not properly laws, but qualities that dispose men to peace, and to obedience. When a common-wealth is once settled, then they are actually laws, and not before; as being then the commands of the common-wealth; and therefore also civil laws: For it is the sovereign power that obliges men to obey them.⁵¹

IV

Thus, in order for subjects to escape the state of nature, it is not sufficient for them to discover and to comprehend the laws of nature. They have to also absolutely alienate their right, creating (or in the case of a commonwealth by acquisition, recognizing) the sovereign who can enforce the laws and organize the complicated structures of power in society. In terms of the subjects' rationality, this means that in order for this rationality to be employed and instantiated, the subjects who develop, possess, and use that rationality must, *by a demand internal to reason*, alienate their right, and in doing so, give over the determination of that rationality to the sovereign. Furthermore, the subject, must even, as we shall see, give over the very ground of the possibility of that rationality, the life of the subject, in conformity paradoxically to a demand of that very rationality to protect and assure that very ground of the possibility of possessing and exercising it.

Hobbes *does* grant that there are certain rights which no one can transfer or alienate, including the right to defend himself against 'them, that assault him by force, or take away his life', or by those who would wound or imprison him.⁵² The reason for this is that,

the motive, and end for which this renouncing, and transferring of right is introduced, is nothing else but the security of a man's person, in his life, and in the means of so preserving life, as not to be weary of it.

This motive and end is so fundamental for Hobbes that he adds a rule of interpretation of the behavior of a subject.

And therefore if a man by words, or by other signs, seem to despoil himself of the end, for which those signs were intended, he is not to be understood as if he meant it; or that it was his will; but that he was ignorant of how such words and actions were to be interpreted.⁵³

In the fuller structure of his political theory, however, despite Hobbes' assurances about such rights they are practically alienated by exigencies inherent to rationality, and this is articulated by reason in the strict sense.

The social relations the rational subject enters into, in which a sovereign is created as an independent entity to whom the subject renounces or alienates his or her rights, introduce, for Hobbes, the full possibility of justice and injustice. Injustice, which consists in part in the breaking of contract, is not merely conformity to the dictates of the sovereign. Rather, the position of the sovereign and of the laws of nature is reinforced by a structure seemingly internal to the rationality of the subject. Hobbes treats injustice as analogous to absurdity:

Injury, or *injustice*, in the controversies of the world is somewhat like to that, which in the disputations of scholars is called *absurdity*, to contradict what one maintained in the beginning: so in the world, it is called injustice

and injury, voluntarily to undo that, which from the beginning he had voluntarily done.⁵⁴

It should be noted that the analogy here is a very strong one. In a discussion of the meanings of 'The names of just, and unjust', Hobbes says,

when they are attributed to men, they signify conformity or inconformity of manners, to reason. But when they are attributed to actions, they signify the conformity, or inconformity to reason, not of manners, or manner of life, but of particular actions.⁵⁵

Conformity or non-conformity to reason, within civil society, is no longer, as Hobbes makes quite clear, a determination to be made by the subject, but a determination made by the sovereign and the instrumentalities of power concretely emplaced and relied upon by the sovereign. This takes place precisely because the subject has alienated his or her right, reasonably, and voluntarily. Unable to give up certain rights, by alienating his right generally, the subject ends up giving up those very inalienable rights in fact. Hobbes notes, 'He that transfereth any Right, transfereth the Means of enjoying it, as far as lyeth in his power',⁵⁶ and this transfer of means includes transferring the effective power over life and death. The sovereign, empowered to enforce the laws of nature as civil laws by the very subjects he dominates, cannot, Hobbes maintains, do injury or injustice to the subject, so long as he is in fact enforcing those civil laws and preserving order. 'Whatsoever is done, to a man, conformable to his own will signified to the doer, is no injury to him.'⁵⁷ In the discussion 'of the liberty of subjects' in ch. 21, this structure is made particularly clear. The subject in effect wills his or her own death as a means to the end of preserving his or her life.⁵⁸

This alienation exceeds the requirement of obedience to a concretely determinate rationality external to but willed by the subject, because the subject is made vulnerable to the whims and irrational desires of the sovereign. Whereas the subject could not, under pain of contradiction, act in non-conformity to reason, the sovereign suffers under no such restriction, and *precisely for the same reasons*. Two passages make this particularly clear:

[B]ecause every subject is by this institution author of all the actions, and judgements of the sovereign instituted; it follows, that whatsoever he doth, it can be no injury to any of his subjects; nor ought he to be by any of them accused of injustice. For he that doth any thing by authority from another, doth therein no injury to him by whose authority he acteth.⁵⁹

The sovereign of a common-wealth, be it an assembly, or one man, is not subject to the civil laws. For having power to make, and repeal laws, he may when he pleaseth, free himself from that subjection, by repealing those laws that trouble him, and making of new; and consequently he was free before. For he is free, that can be free when he will: Nor is it possible for

any person to be bound to himself; because he that can bind, can release; and therefore he that is bound to himself only, is not bound.⁶⁰

The rational subject, to avoid the dangers that the rationality (as well as irrationality) of other subjects poses, and to maintain the ground of the possibility of that rationality, namely life, is seemingly therefore led, by demands of reason itself, into a structure of social relations that alienate the determination of that rationality while relying upon that very relationship between rationality and the life of the subject. Not only are the possibilities of determination of that rationality that all humans are presumed to have alienated from the subjects, but the privileged subject(s), the sovereign, who is able to concretely determine the structures that rationality will take in social and political relations remains as unconstrained by that reason as the other subjects are constrained.

Returning to Hobbes' place in modern philosophy, while not claiming that he was the only figure to suggest or develop this problematic, I maintain that Hobbes articulates the complicated significance of human rationality at the beginning of the 'Age of Reason' in a deep way that is also deeply disturbing. In Hobbes' view, the rationality that sets humans apart from other types of beings is both part of what makes them threats to each other, and a type of intersubjective reflexivity that further deepens and intensifies the potentialities of conflict. Compensating for this, reason (in both senses of the term distinguished here) also provides the remedy for civil strife, but demands an alienation of the subject of the very arbitrary power of life and death that reason was to provide bulwarks against, now willingly subjugated to a sovereign authority. Thomas Hobbes' developed understanding of reason may be criticized from later modern or post-modern perspectives as inadequate or incomplete, but it provides us with one highly articulated form and problematic of rationality that comes to the fore in the modern era, a lens through which to glimpse the often overlooked or minimized dangers inherent within human rationality.

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Notes

- 1 Louis Roux, 'Hobbes au XXe siècle: Quelques références contemporaines à Hobbes', *Revue européenne des sciences sociales* 20(61) (1982): 361–77. (361); trans. the author.
- 2 Leo Strauss, *What is Political Philosophy, and Other Studies* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1959), p. 172.

- 3 The extended argument made here references, develops from, and applies to *Leviathan*. Nothing, so far as I can see, militates against the argument from being applied to *De Cive*, or any of the other works of Hobbes' corpus, but this article makes and commits itself to no such positive claims. My reasons for focusing exclusively on *Leviathan* are the following. First, *Leviathan* arguably is Hobbes' work exercising the greatest influence within the world of ideas and in modern intellectual culture. Second (reflecting this first reason), most of the secondary literature engaged here focuses primarily on *Leviathan*. Third, I consider it the most mature and systematic exposition of Hobbes' thought. Fourth, the extended argument made here can be developed solely through reference to *Leviathan*.
- 4 S. A. Lloyd's interpretation lends coherence to the first part by noting their polemical or elenctic function. 'Hobbes' remarks on science, morality, and language must be taken in context. What appears at first to be a motley hodgepodge of disconnected topics in Part 1 of *Leviathan* turns out to be a catalog of most of the root sources of disorder in Hobbes' commonwealth and a first pass at correcting disruptive errors at their source.' 'Contemporary Uses of Hobbes' Political Philosophy', in *Rational Commitment and Social Justice: Essays for Gregory Kavka*, ed. Jules L. Coleman and Christopher W. Morris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 138.
- 5 David Boonin-Vail, who provides an overview on the scholarly controversy in this matter, recently offered a defense of the unity and systematicity of Hobbes' projects. He claims that since the work of Leo Strauss, 'the existing literature on Hobbes . . . offers essentially two alternatives: Hobbes is a scientist who uses the language of morality as window dressing, or he is a moralist who uses the language of science as window dressing.' Boonin-Vail purports to offer an account of Hobbes whose 'guiding thought . . . is that to understand Hobbes as a moralist one must also understand him as a scientist'. See his *Thomas Hobbes and the Science of Moral Virtue*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 13–14.
 Other commentators call attention to another key motive and theme additional to morality and (mechanistic) science, that of theology. David Johnston contends that both Hobbes' mechanism and theology are used to support his political theory in *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988). S. A. Lloyd, on the other hand, argues: 'Hobbes' remarks on natural science are present in order to correct several identifiable disruptive religious errors, and not, as the standard interpretation would have it, to ground some general psychological theory, and through that, a political theory . . . [I]t is not that Hobbes is generally uninterested in science; he wrote many scientific works and engaged in many scientific debates. But not in the service of his political theory. There the science had a sharply limited, nonfoundational, role.' Lloyd, 'Contemporary Uses of Hobbes' Political Philosophy', p. 137.
- 6 Preston King, *The Ideology of Order: A Comparative Analysis of Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974), p. 191. King's account rightly stresses that the state of nature is definitively not a state

- first of isolation of individual human subjects from each other, in which they then afterwards find themselves in conflict with each other. Rather, it is a state in which conflict is primary. 'The state of nature is, for Hobbes, not one where individuals are insulated against each other, but where they have reached the nadir of mutual impingement, i.e. a state of war' (ibid., p. 188).
- 7 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1951), p. 139. Cf. also J. Vialatoux, *La Cité de Hobbes: théorie de l'état totalitaire* (Paris: Lecoffre, 1935).
 - 8 Sheldon S. Wolin, 'Hobbes and the Culture of Despotism', in Mary G. Dietz (ed.) *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1990), p. 19.
 - 9 Leo Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1952), p. 11.
 - 10 ibid., p. 18.
 - 11 ibid., p. 29. For an illustrative example of some of the problems arising in attempting to interpret Hobbes' views on reason and politics in strict lock-step with his mechanistic viewpoint, cf. Joel Leschen, "Reason and Perception in Hobbes: an Inconsistency", *Nous* 19(3) (1985): 429–37.
 - 12 Johnston persuasively argues for several stages of systematic development of the different portions of Hobbes' thought, including an earlier one in which 'the actual relationship between his metaphysics and his political philosophy was no more than one of analogy', and a later one in which 'a different and more intimate relationship between these initially diverse aspects of his philosophy was established. The basis of this relationship was not logical deduction, but polemical effect.' *The Rhetoric of Leviathan*, p. xix.
 - 13 One recent study of interest that addresses this is Robert P. Kraynak's 'Hobbes and the Dogmatism of Enlightenment', in *Modern Enlightenment and the Rule of Reason* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1998). Kraynak argues that the fundamental alteration of reason during the Enlightenment lies in the rejection of 'opinion – by which I mean all forms of pre-scientific knowledge, such as common sense, ordinary language, trust in tradition, received wisdom, and religious faith' (ibid., p. 80), thereby having to seek out 'a new beginning point for reason . . . Hobbes' proposal, in other words, is to assert the autonomy of reason: to make the enlightened mind stand alone, separated from the external world' (ibid., p. 84). In Kraynak's view, Hobbes 'may be the founder and prototype of this kind of dogmatic turn in modern philosophy', found in Locke, Kant, the scientific positivists, Nietzsche and deconstructionists (ibid., p. 91). I am in agreement with Kraynak, but here develop an account of another set of aspects of this change of the understanding of reason.
 - 14 C. Fred Alford, *The Self in Social Theory: A Psychoanalytic Account of its Construction in Plato, Hobbes, Locke, Rawls, and Rousseau* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 90. Wolin makes a similar point, arguing: 'Men are not in fact what the requirements of the theory demand that they must be if its theoretical power is to be realized. Before Hobbesian citizens can be the object of absolute sovereignty, they must first be transformed into the abstract subject of a despotic theory.' 'Hobbes and the Culture of Despotism', p. 31.

- 15 Thomas Hobbes, *English Works*, ed. William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1889), vol. III, p. 30. Subsequently, all references to *Leviathan* will be given as *EW*.
- 16 *EW*, p. 31.
- 17 *EW*, p. 13.
- 18 *EW*, p. 35.
- 19 *ibid.*
- 20 *EW*, p. 36.
- 21 Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan*, p. 56. Johnston also charts a definitive change in Hobbes' attitude towards reason from the earlier works to *Leviathan*, in which an earlier 'optimistic note' vanishes. Johnston, however, claims that 'the conception is reason in *Leviathan* is unchanged. . . . But Hobbes no longer argues that reason is a natural attribute shared by all men' (*ibid.*, p. 95). Johnston does not regard prudence, or the yet broader set of capacities, what I call here rationality or reason in the looser sense, as being Hobbesian reason, which has an 'acquired or artificial character' (*ibid.*, p. 96). He overlooks, however, that reason in the broader sense is itself in part acquired, precisely through accumulated experience, as well as the fact that drawing and even assessing inferences are performed by all Hobbesian subjects.
- 22 *EW*, p. 247.
- 23 To avoid any misunderstandings on this count, the assumption here is that reason in the broader sense *encompasses* but is *not strictly identifiable with* prudence, as Hobbes uses that term, for the reason that prudence is *one* of the human intellectual capacities acquired by experience, not the *entirety* of human intellectual capacities other than reason in the strict sense.
- 24 *EW*, p. 33.
- 25 George Shelton, *Morality and Sovereignty in the Philosophy of Hobbes* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), p. 40.
- 26 Boonin-Vail, *Thomas Hobbes and the Science of Moral Virtue*, p. 50.
- 27 Lawrence C. Becker distinguishes between these two senses of reason, arguing that they can be distinguished by Hobbes' capitalization or use of lower-case for the term 'reason'; see his 'Community, Dominion, Membership', *The Southern Journal of Philosophy* 30(2) (1992): 94–5. He further argues that the 'Fool' is somebody who uses reason in the loose sense in such a way as to contravene the product of reason in the strict sense, namely the laws of nature. In doing so, the Fool reasons badly even in the loose sense.
- Michael Oakeshott wished to make a distinction within reason as well, writing: "Reason", "rational", and "reasoning" are words which, in Hobbes' vocabulary, signify various human powers, endowments, and aptitudes which, though they are related to one another, are not identical' (see his *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* [Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1991]). The distinction, as Oakeshott articulates it, however, is between the human capacities for ordered thought, and for 'putting words together in a significant manner and of composing arguments'.
- 28 *EW*, p. 113.
- 29 My argument in this article does not require taking an explicit position of my own here on whether Hobbes' starkest depictions of the state of nature

are meant to be factual or to serve a rhetorical purpose. Though I do not argue for it here, in my view, the greatest relevance of the concept of the state of nature has to do with the breakdown of existing civil society and authority. One might argue that, in factional strife and civil war within a previously functioning civil society, the subjects in conflict could still possess and use previously developed products of reasoning in the strict sense which claim to embody it. Hobbes repeatedly attacks extant theories alternative to his own (e.g. Aristotle and Cicero on natural law, an entire host of positions derived from Christian theology, Greek and Roman discussions of liberty), regarding them as products of reasoning in some way gone astray, i.e. as insufficiently rational.

30 EW, p. 110.

31 EW, p. 111.

32 There is a considerable literature devoted to discussing precisely how this works. Quite sufficient discussions and summaries of this literature can be found in Edwin Curley's 'Reflections on Hobbes: Recent Work on His Moral and Political Philosophy', *Journal of Philosophical Research* 15 (1990): 187–94, which includes voluminous notes and a generous bibliography, and Boonin-Vail, *Hobbes and the Science of Moral Virtue*, supplemented recently by Michael Lebuffe, 'Hobbes on the Origin of Obligation', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* 11(1) (2003): 15–39.

33 EW, p. 110–11.

34 EW, p. 111.

35 *ibid.*

36 *ibid.*

37 EW, p. 112.

38 Cf. Piotr Hoffman, *Doubt, Time, Violence* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. xiii–xviii; and Piotr Hoffman, *The Quest for Power: Hobbes, Descartes, and the Emergence of Modernity* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), pp. 16–24.

39 Alford, *The Self in Social Theory*, p. 107. For an earlier critique of the tendencies of James Glass' similar psychoanalytic interpretation of Hobbes, cf. Sheldon Pollack, 'On Glass: "Hobbes and Narcissism: Pathology in the State of Nature"', *Political Theory* 9(2) (1981): 257–9.

40 EW, p. 88.

41 EW, pp. 140, 141.

42 Bernard Gert makes an interesting proposal in 'Hobbes' Account of Reason and the Passions', in *Thomas Hobbes: de la Métaphysique à la politique: Actes du Colloque Franco-américain de Nantes*, ed. Martin Bertman and Michel Malherbe (Paris: Vrin, 1989), making the point that 'Hobbes' account of reason or rationality is a complex one' (p. 92), arguing that most Hobbes scholarship has gone wrong in (1) contrasting reason and desire and (2) identifying desire with the passions. In his view, Hobbes' account includes *both* rational desires and emotional desires, the former including 'desires for self-preservation, avoidance of pain and injury, and the attaining of security and felicity' (p. 90). While his account is compelling, the rational desires do not seem to have in his account the sort of reflexivity, which intensifies conflict and its possibility, that I highlight in this article.

- 43 Piotr Hoffman, *Violence in Modern Philosophy* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1987), pp. 10–13. One can see in this position a reversal of the position taken by Levinas and to a lesser extent by Derrida, where the Other constitutes the subject, not as a threat, but as a (perhaps impossible) demand that justice be done to the Other, the Other that the subject threatens. Here, it is the Other who poses a threat to the subject, not because of an ultimate indeterminability of the other, but precisely because the Other *is* determined as *like* the subject, and therefore both dangerous and capable of an escalation of that danger through reflection on the common intersubjective situation, precisely one of the ever-present possibility of violence.
- 44 Shelton, *Morality and Sovereignty in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, p. 140.
- 45 Strauss, *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes*, pp. 57–8.
- 46 To avoid any misunderstandings on this count, ‘more or less equal’ here does not refer to the social status, determinate relationships, or possessions of the human subjects, but rather to their status as human subjects, i.e. as more or less rational in the broad sense, including in this the realization of the other human subject as similarly rational.
- 47 *EW*, p. 114.
- 48 *EW*, p. 116.
- 49 *EW*, p. 145.
- 50 *EW*, p. 253.
- 51 *ibid.* For a recent discussion on the problem of the normativity of the laws of nature in relation to the sovereign and the civil law, cf. the author’s ‘The Laws of Nature as Moral Norms in Hobbes’ *Leviathan*’, *Acta Philosophica* 15(1) (2006): 77–94; and the discussions between the author, Martin Rhonheimer and Michael Zuckert in ‘Forum: Hobbes on Laws of Nature and Moral Norms’, *Acta Philosophica* 17(1) (2007): 125–42.
- 52 *EW*, p. 120.
- 53 *ibid.*
- 54 *EW*, p. 119.
- 55 *EW*, p. 135.
- 56 *EW*, p. 125.
- 57 *EW*, p. 137.
- 58 *EW*, 1, pp. 99–200.
- 59 *EW*, p. 163. It should be pointed out that such complaints on the part of the subject are not only, by Hobbes’ logic, absurd, but, given that the sovereign, or the sovereign’s representatives, determines what counts as just and unjust, already, precisely by being complaints against the sovereign, unjust actions against the sovereign and the rest of civil society. All the same, in ch. 21, Hobbes treats the possibility of a subject’s bringing suit against the sovereign, ‘as if it were against a subject; and before such judges, as are appointed by the sovereign. For seeing the sovereign demandeth by force of a former law, and not by virtue of his power, he declareth thereby, that he requireth no more, than shall appear to be due by that Law. The suit therefore is not contrary to the will of the sovereign . . .’ *EW*, p. 207.
- 60 *EW*, p. 252.