

Hobbes's Moral Constructivism

Paper Proposal for TEMPO 2020

In the closing lines of *Leviathan's* Second Part, Hobbes congratulates himself for having accomplished what “neither Plato, nor any philosopher hitherto” had been able to do – “set into order, and sufficiently or probably proved, all the theorems of moral doctrine” pertaining to civil life. A “theorem” for Hobbes is a rule, and the rules to which he refers in this statement are the nineteen “precepts of reason” expounded in the book’s First Part, which he commonly calls Laws of Nature. But what can he have taken himself to have *proved*, with regard to those rules? How can he have supposed that their exposition in *Leviathan* might be deemed sufficient to merit the title the “true, and only moral philosophy”? In all the commentary on Hobbes’s philosophy, little attention has been given to those questions. There may be no other major philosopher of whom even his ostensibly sympathetic commentators so routinely assume a heedless and blundering inattention to the burden of argument required to sustain the doctrine he is said to propound. This, I contend, is the product of a long-lived misconception concerning Hobbes’s (mature) understanding of moral philosophy, and its intended contribution to his larger project in *Leviathan*. The mistake is due to a confluence of several question-begging interpretative presumptions, of which the most tenacious are (a) a faulty inference from his (idiosyncratic) use of the term ‘Law of Nature’ to designate his moral rules, and (b) a fallacy concerning the bearing of his exposition of these rules on his political doctrine. In disputing these interpretative presumptions, I seek to show that there is no non-question-begging basis for attributing to him the intention to identify a rationally-compelling motive for compliance with these rules, as commentators have almost invariably thought. I argue on the contrary that Hobbes has no further concern than to establish their *moral* validity - that is, their validity *as* moral rules, the proper basis for distinguishing socially acceptable conduct from that which is to be seen inimical to social relations - in a word, hostile. This proof takes the form of his demonstration, over the course of the rules’ exposition, that these rules are indeed constitutive of peaceable social relations. In this respect, his method is best understood as a venture in moral construction, giving rise to a theory of peace. His stated justification for adopting this procedure amounts to a transcendental argument, establishing the goodness of peace on the grounds that except insofar we are prepared to agree on its goodness, no social intercourse would be possible. Such a reading of his arguments, I propose, makes it newly possible to understand what he meant in vaunting his unique achievement as moral philosopher, and moreover serves to clarify the nature of his enterprise in *Leviathan* as a whole.