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Hobbes and Political Realism

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Thomas Hobbes has recently been cast as one of the forefathers of political realism. This article evaluates his place in the realist tradition by focusing on three key themes: the priority of legitimacy over justice, the relation between ethics and politics, and the place of imagination in politics. The thread uniting these themes is the importance Hobbes placed on achieving a moral consensus around peaceful coexistence, a point which distances him from realists who view the two as competing goals of politics. The article maintains that only a qualified version of the autonomy of the political position can be attributed to Hobbes, while arguing more generally that attending to the relation between ethics and politics is central to assessing his liberal credentials from a realist perspective. Against the prevalent reading of Hobbes as a hypothetical contract theorist, the article proceeds to show that the place of consent in his theory is better understood as part of his wider goal of transforming the imagination of his audience; a goal which is animated by concerns that realists share.

Keywords: Consent; legitimacy; liberalism; political realism; Thomas Hobbes.

The fate of canonical thinkers is to be invoked in debates to which they could never have hoped to contribute. Thomas Hobbes is no exception and has lately been cast as a forefather of political realism. *Leviathan*, so it is claimed, ‘may be considered one of the founding texts of the realist political tradition’ (Rossi, 2010: 506), and Hobbes’s influence is evident in the way that its two leading proponents set out their positions. Raymond Geuss (2008: 23) seeks ‘to

develop the realist spirit of Hobbes in the contemporary world’, while Bernard Williams (2005: 3) identifies ‘the “first” political question in Hobbesian terms as the securing of order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation.’ Yet Hobbes’s association with realism is disputed. David Runciman (2012: 68) has recently objected that there is ‘something faintly ridiculous about reducing Hobbes to the confines of political realism, and identifying him primarily as a philosopher of legitimacy.’ *Leviathan*, he continues, ‘was not a work of political realism ... [and is] just as plausibly understood as a work of utopian political philosophy.’

The main goal of this essay is to show that Hobbes’s relation to political realism is more complex than is thought by both those who support and those who resist reading him as a realist.¹ Hobbes does have a contribution to make to political realism, but for reasons not fully appreciated by those who have drawn on him. My argument centres on the claim that Hobbes attempted to form a moral consensus around the idea that peace is good. On the one hand, this challenges realists who, drawing on Hobbes, see moral consensus and peaceful coexistence as alternative goals of politics. Indeed, those who attribute an autonomy of the political position to Hobbes downplay the importance he attached to peace as a pre-political moral value, which calls into question the political-moral demarcation that realism relies upon. On the other hand, I argue that Hobbes’s appeal to moral consensus should not be understood in terms of hypothetical consent, which would undermine his realist credentials. I maintain, instead, that his theory of consent is better understood as part of his wider goal of transforming the imagination of his audience; a goal which is animated by concerns that realists share.

Many of the realists who draw on Hobbes are liberals – setting themselves out against the liberal moralism associated with John Rawls – and a secondary goal of the essay is to argue that adopting a realist perspective allows us to better assess the character of Hobbes’s thought in relation to liberalism.² Some liberal realists embrace Hobbes wholeheartedly. In advancing

his ‘neo-Hobbesian’ theory of *modus vivendi*, for example, John Gray (2000: 28) claims that ‘if one of the core projects of liberalism is a form of peaceful coexistence that is not held together by common beliefs, Hobbes is a liberal thinker *au fond*.’ (See also Neal, 1997: 186). Others are more wary and think that even if the problem of politics should be understood in Hobbesian terms, the answer should not (Williams, 2005: 4). I argue that the emphasis Hobbes places on the *summum malum* shares something important with the liberalism of fear – notwithstanding Judith Shklar’s (1988: 6) claims to the contrary – such that liberal realists should not be overly troubled by taking a Hobbesian approach to questions of legitimacy. There are good reasons why liberals should resist many of Hobbes’s political conclusions, but those reasons are better expressed from a realist perspective, which attends to the historical experiences required for liberalism to make sense to us now and around here, than by appealing to any pre-political moral values that he might have neglected.

The essay proceeds by examining the relation between Hobbes and political realism in terms of three themes: the priority of legitimacy over justice, the relation between ethics and politics, and the place of imagination in politics.³ The first two are central to political realism and concern questions where many theorists have drawn on Hobbes. The third is a little more peripheral and associated principally with Geuss (2010; see also Rossi, 2010), but it is here where Hobbes has a lot more to offer than has previously been recognised. The conclusion draws together the different strands of argument and suggests why attending to the history of their tradition may prove particularly rewarding for contemporary realists.

Legitimacy and justice

The main reason why political realists draw on Hobbes is straightforward. Hobbes was preoccupied with the question of how to secure peace (which I use as shorthand for ‘order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation’), and this question needs to be solved before any other questions can even be posed (Williams, 2005: 3). The idea that ‘civil order is the *sine qua non* for every other political good’ is one of the central tenets of realism (Galston, 2010: 409). While this much seems uncontroversial, there are two closely associated realist positions where the relation to Hobbes is more complicated. The first concerns realists’ focus on questions of legitimacy rather than justice, and the second (discussed in the next section) their emphasis on the autonomy of the political.

To see why realists prioritise questions of legitimacy over justice, we need first to understand how they distinguish the two.⁴ There are different ways of cashing out the distinction, but for present purposes I take questions of legitimacy to be concerned with the grounds for some person or body having the authority to rule, whereas questions of justice are concerned with how that authority should be exercised (Kukathas, 2003: 5). Or, to put in another way, legitimacy is concerned with how far and to whom power should reach, whereas justice is concerned with the principles that should govern its exercise (Rossi, 2012: 157). The distinction between these questions may be obscured if it is thought that some person or body has the authority to rule by virtue of acting in accordance with (or at least approximating) certain principles of justice. Indeed, this position is often taken to characterise the dominant Rawlsian strand of liberalism, which evaluates legitimacy and justice against the same criteria and thereby tends either to conflate the two or to neglect the former while focusing on the latter (Horton, 2012: 134–35; Simmons, 1999: 756–60; Sleat, 2015: 231–39). From a realist perspective, however, it is crucial to keep the two questions distinct precisely because that of

legitimacy may be answered without appealing to principles of justice. Most (if not all) existing states fall considerably short of the standards set by many prominent theories of justice, yet there may still be independent grounds for thinking they possess legitimate authority (Horton, 2012: 136–37; Sleat, 2015: 244–45).

If we understand the questions of legitimacy and justice along these lines then how did Hobbes answer that of legitimacy? On the face of it, he seems to offer a procedural account of legitimacy that epitomises what has since come to be classified as social contract theory. Political authority rests on every individual laying down their right of governing themselves to, and authorising the actions of, the sovereign (*L*, xvii.13/260). This act of submission generates political obligations as ‘there being no Obligation on any man, which ariseth not from some Act of his own; for all men equally, are by Nature Free.’ (*L*, xxi.10/336) An individual becomes subject to the sovereign at the point ‘wherein having liberty to submit to him, he consenteth, either by expresse words, or by other sufficient sign, to be his Subject.’ (*L*, R&C, 1133–34)

Hobbes’s emphasis on contract and consent, however, might seem like an unpromising way of theorising legitimacy from a realist perspective, not least because it appears open to the objections famously levelled at social contract theories from David Hume (1987: 465–87) onwards. Indeed, when political realists draw on Hobbes, they jettison the social contract or consent aspect of his theory. Gray (2000: 132–35), most strikingly, argues that the social contract apparatus is ‘redundant’ and ‘misconceived’, but nonetheless adopts what he take to be the Hobbesian idea that peaceful coexistence rather than moral consensus is the basis of political legitimacy. The rejection of the contractual basis of legitimacy is also implicit when Williams (2005: 3) claims that Hobbes took peace to be both the necessary and sufficient condition of legitimacy. There is plenty of textual support for focusing on this aspect of Hobbes’s theory, most notably his famous claim to have written *Leviathan* ‘without other designe, than to set before mens eyes the mutuall Relation between Protection and Obedience’

(*L*, R&C, 1141); the relation which Carl Schmitt (2007: 52) – another canonical figure in the realist canon – took to be ‘the *cogito ergo sum* of the state.’

This prompts the question of whether Hobbes’s account of the mutual relation between protection and obedience can be divorced from his theory of consent. I shall later maintain that there is something about his theory of consent that should interest realists, but the core of his account of legitimacy may be preserved while stripping away the contractual apparatus. Kinch Hoekstra (2004: 67–68) has convincingly argued that Hobbes appealed to a version of ‘attributed consent’, where subjects’ consent is inferred from a certain state of affairs; namely, their having received protection from the sovereign. Yet this entails that ‘consent is sometimes stretched vanishingly thin.’ To put the point another way, consent is inferred because the state satisfies some independent criteria for being worthy of consent – peace or protection – but it is then these criteria, rather than consent, that are doing the legitimising work.

Political realists, then, focus on the substantive rather than procedural aspects of Hobbes’s account of legitimacy. This comes out particularly clearly in John Horton’s account of political obligation, one of the necessary conditions of which is that the state provides its citizens with some ‘generic good’. The ‘Hobbesian argument’ he endorses focuses on ‘the need for an effective coercive authority to provide order, security and some measure of social stability.’ (Horton, 2007: 8) Crucially, this minimal value can be secured by states that fall far short of liberal standards of social justice, but this does not necessarily render them illegitimate. Elsewhere Horton (2010: 438) relates the same considerations to a realist theory of *modus vivendi*, which is characterised by ‘an ongoing concern with the conditions of peace and security’ and seeks ‘to avoid the kinds of evils that render practically impossible any worthwhile life’. This is much closer in outlook to Judith Shklar’s (1988: 3–20) liberalism of fear than the liberal moralism associated with John Rawls, the former of which has proved

especially attractive to some of those concerned with articulating liberal concerns from a realist perspective (Williams, 2005: 52–61).

Drawing a connection between Hobbes and the liberalism of fear might initially seem tenuous given that Shklar (1988: 6) insisted that ‘Hobbes is not the father of liberalism.’ The liberalism of fear is non-utopian and begins by identifying the *summum malum*: ‘that evil is cruelty and the fear it inspires, and the very fear of fear itself.’ (Shklar, 1988: 11) The cruelty Shklar most feared is that made possible by the system of coercion at the heart of all government. Limited government would thus be necessary for the exercise of personal freedom to ever be a possibility. This is far from Hobbes. The overriding fear that Hobbes hoped to free us from is the cruelty and insecurity brought about by the breakdown of social order. Nonetheless, the reason why the liberalism of fear has proved attractive to some realists is because it focuses on minimal conditions of legitimacy, which fall considerably short of a more substantive or moralised account of justice. Hobbes’s theory, like Shklar’s, starts with the *summum malum* (of this life)⁵ – in his case, ‘warre with every other man’ – and builds upwards (*L*, xxx.3/520). The key difference is that the Hobbesian approach views anarchy, not the overmighty state, as the greatest threat to human felicity (Gray, 2000: 132). Yet, while this may distance Hobbes from Shklar, he remains closer to other prominent liberal realists like Horton and, most explicitly, Gray.

Gray’s *modus vivendi* liberalism reformulates Hobbes’s *summum malum* approach to politics in pluralist terms. While risk of violent death is clearly ‘a great impediment to any kind of human flourishing’, it is not ‘the supreme evil of human life.’ (Gray, 2000: 44) Gray (2000: 133) denies that there is either a *summum bonum* or *summum malum*; the ‘end of politics is not the mere absence of war, but a *modus vivendi* among goods and evils.’ The test of legitimacy for any regime ‘is how well it enables conflicts among values to be negotiated’ (Gray, 2000: 133). In denying that violent death is the greatest natural evil and, concomitantly, that peace is

the overarching goal of politics, Gray clearly breaks from Hobbes. This might seem fairly inconsequential in light of his conclusion that the case for *modus vivendi* ‘is that all or nearly all ways of life have interests that make peaceful coexistence worth pursuing.’ (Gray, 2000: 132–35) Peace remains central to Gray, just as for Hobbes. But the fact that it is no longer the overarching goal of politics marks a more significant turn away from Hobbes.

Hobbes’s theory challenges the validity of any other claims that might trump peace. While realists grant that peace is usually, for most people, a precondition of leading a tolerable life, this does not necessitate that it should be viewed as the overriding goal of the state (Horton, 2010: 438). Peace is not an all or nothing matter. While a certain threshold of peaceful existence is necessary to make any meaningful life possible, from this it follows neither that the goal of peace should be maximised nor that the pursuit of peace exhausts the concerns of politics. This is an important corrective to Hobbes’s theory, undermining his stark dichotomy between peace and war. Yet it also highlights one of the major difficulties with updating his thought so as to address realist concerns.

While Hobbes recognised that politics responds to the problems of conflict and disagreement, his solution required overcoming these problems, rather than simply working out how to coexist in spite of them (see also Newey, 2008: 178–79). Realist theories deny the possibility of bringing disagreement and conflict to an end; that would be ‘to evade, displace, or even escape from politics.’ (Galston, 2010: 386) This is why, for Gray, legitimacy is evaluated in terms of how conflicts of value are negotiated. For Hobbes, however, such conflicts imperil the authority of the state and must be overcome if peace is ever to be secure. Granting that peace is not an all or nothing matter only increases the scope for political contestation and conflict, since on any given occasion another value might be taken to trump peace (Horton, 2010: 438; Sleat, 2013: 101–102). For Hobbes, the pursuit of peace (and what it entails) solves the fundamental problem of politics, rather than simply being the precondition

for further political disputes to be negotiated. Although Gray contrasts peaceful coexistence with moral consensus, Hobbes is better read as trying to form a moral consensus around peaceful coexistence. Moral philosophy, he claimed, ‘is nothing else but the Science of what is *Good*, and *Evill*, in the conversation, and Society of man-kind.’ The state of nature abounds with disagreement about what is good and evil, but ‘all men agree on this, that Peace is Good, and therefore also the way, or means of Peace ... are good.’ (*L*, xv.40/242) Peaceful coexistence could not be attained without some moral consensus, even if the morals in question are minimal. In this respect, Hobbes’s relation with liberal realism is stronger when the latter is cast as a theory of the *summum malum* than one of *modus vivendi*. Yet this raises questions about his relation with another key realist tenet: the autonomy of the political.

Ethics and politics

When realists claim that the political is autonomous, their aim is to distance themselves from an ethics-first, or moralist, approach, which starts with norms or ideals that are valued independently of politics (fairness, autonomy, equality etc.) and then uses these to evaluate political institutions and practices (see Rossi, 2012: 151). On the ethics-first approach, politics is applied ethics. If what the autonomy of the political claim rejects is fairly clear, specifying what it entails is more difficult. The most Hobbesian way of construing it is that politics is required precisely because of the prevalence of moral disagreement, which means that we cannot straightforwardly appeal to morality to answer questions about the principles underlying political association (Rossi, 2010: 506–507; Rossi and Sleat, 2014: 691).

Some caution is required not to overstate the importance of moral disagreement in Hobbes’s theory. While he recognised that disagreements could lead to conflict when there is no arbitrator to settle disputes (*L*, v.3/66), he did not list this as one of the causes of war (*L*,

xiii.6–7/192). The principal obstacles to peaceful coexistence in the state of nature are rather competition, diffidence and glory, and much of his justification for political authority would hold even in the absence of moral disagreements. Nonetheless, such disagreements do exist and Hobbes certainly viewed them as a grave threat to political authority. The doctrine that within the commonwealth ‘*every private man is Judge of Good and Evill actions*’ is especially seditious because it grants to individuals a right that characterises the state of nature and must be given up for peace to obtain (*L*, xxix.6/502). The sixteenth law of nature stipulates that ‘*they that are at controversie, submit their Right to the judgement of an Arbitrator*’ (*L*, xv.30/238), and in generating the commonwealth all individuals submit their judgement to that of the sovereign (*L*, xvii.13/260), who then becomes the sole ‘Judge of what is necessary for Peace; and Judge of Doctrines ... and Supreme Judge of Controversies’ (*L*, xx.3/306).

Hobbes, then, clearly thought that lasting political authority would have to overcome the problem of moral disagreement. But it is unclear how much follows from this formulation of the autonomy of the political claim, at least in terms of rejecting an ethics-first approach to political theory. A strong version of what it entails has erroneously been attributed to Hobbes, according to which there are no pre-political moral constraints on his theory of legitimacy.

Hobbes is sometimes viewed as offering a theory of legitimacy that ‘need not make any concessions to morality at all’ (Sleat, 2013: 80, 100), or, similarly, one where the ‘sovereign does not make any claim to be ruling in everyone’s interest but he does claim to be ruling.’ (Philp, 2010: 471) These claims are misleading, however, precisely because Hobbes thought that peace was the one value that all individuals should come to recognise as morally good. He derived all the laws of nature from the fundamental law: ‘*to seek Peace, and follow it.*’ (*L*, xiv.4/200) Justice, sociability, equality, impartiality and all the other laws are required to advance the overriding goal of peace. This simply is morality for Hobbes; ‘the true Doctrine of the Lawes of Nature, is the true Morall Philosophie’ (*L*, xv.40/242). What is more, the

sovereign may well claim to be ruling in everyone's interest, since all individuals have an interest in self-preservation and living in peace, rather than war, is the only reliable way to secure this. To be sure, Hobbes did not use the language of interest in the way more famously associated with someone like Hume, but his position can be recast accordingly. For Hobbes, as much as for Hume (2004: 3.2.9.2), the interest that ties us to political authority consists in 'the security and protection, which we enjoy in political society, and which we can never attain, when perfectly free and independent.'

Those who deny the importance of morality for Hobbes's political philosophy typically appeal to some independent criteria for what counts as a moral theory that he did not endorse. The most prominent example is the claim that a genuinely moral theory cannot be reducible to considerations of rational self-interest (Nagel, 1959; Rawls, 2007: 66, 68–71).⁶ Hobbes's moral theory is less demanding, however, as it accords moral status to the virtues that promote sociability and peace amongst humans, irrespective of whether those virtues can be derived from self-interest. To this extent his approach might seem to share much with political realists.⁷ Nonetheless, caution is required before attributing an autonomy of the political position to him, most notably because his theory builds on a pre-political moral premise: all individuals have the natural right to do whatever they think necessary to preserve themselves (*L*, xiv.1/198). These liberty-rights do not impose correlative duties on anyone else, but they do limit subjects' obligations to the sovereign, which are 'understood to last as long, and no longer, than the power lasteth, by which he is able to protect them. ... The end of Obedience is Protection' (*L*, xxi.21/344). This might not be a substantive moral account of political legitimacy, but it is still a minimal one; a theory of the *summum malum*, as we have seen.

Leaving the issue of natural rights aside, one objection to this broader line of argument is to deny that peace counts as a pre-political moral principle in the sense required to be classified as an ethics-first approach. When outlining his own theory of legitimacy, Williams

(2005: 5) remarked that if it appeals to a moral principle, it at least ‘does not represent a morality which is prior to politics. It is a claim that is inherent in their being such a thing as politics: in particular, because it is inherent in there being first a political question.’ What distinguishes politics from a reign of terror is simply that something (beyond an account of successful domination) must be said to those power is exercised over; this is the Basic Legitimation Demand.⁸ Any coherent answer presupposes the provision of peace, which is not true of other moral values (fairness, equality, autonomy etc.). In this sense, peace might not be considered a pre-political moral value in the relevant sense because it is inherent in there being such a thing as politics.

This objection is sound up to a point, but it relies on prematurely circumscribing an account of the political. Demarcating the limits of what counts as political is itself a political question, subject to disagreement (Newey, 2001: 50–54; Sleat, 2013: 46). Even if Williams is right to distinguish politics from a reign of terror, the salient question for present purposes is whether politics can take place, and demands for legitimation arise, without peace being secure. Williams (2005: 3) claims that solving the first political question is ‘a necessary condition of legitimacy’, but this is debatable. In times of war (civil or otherwise), demands for legitimation persist and it is conceivable that an answer could be given (perhaps in terms of national honour) despite the fact that the political authority in question is unable to secure peace.⁹ In Hobbes’s case, at least, to argue that peace is the value by which political authority should be assessed was to take a stand on a matter of great political contention, and he did so by providing independent arguments as to why everyone should value peace. It is not evident, then, that Hobbes saw peace as representing a morality prior to politics in the sense that Williams’s account requires.

My argument thus far shows why we should not attribute a certain interpretation of the autonomy of the political claim to Hobbes, according to which there are no pre-political moral

constraints on his theory of legitimacy. There are moral constraints, but they are minimal rather than substantive. Crucially, however, these moral constraints limit subjects' obligation to the sovereign without limiting the sovereign's right to rule. Indeed, there are no limits to the controversies or disagreements that the sovereign can adjudicate, or doctrines he can promulgate.¹⁰ This is another way that the autonomy of the political claim could be cashed out, which is perhaps best captured by the worry that, for Hobbes, politics 'seems to swallow up all morality.' (Gaus, 2013: 163)

The relation between ethics and politics in Hobbes's thought is key to assessing his association with liberalism, especially from a realist perspective. To recall, Shklar (1988: 6) repudiated this association on the grounds that Hobbes rejected toleration and would have the sovereign impose religious beliefs upon subjects. For Gray (2000: 25), by contrast, the liberal association is based on the idea that a 'Hobbesian state extends to private belief the radical tolerance of indifference.' The 'tolerant Hobbes?' debate has attracted much scholarly attention since the 1980s (Bejan 2016: 1–6), much of which turns on his apparent endorsement of 'Independency' towards the end of *Leviathan* (*L*, xlvii.20/1116). This is not the place to attempt to resolve the debate one way or another, but two points bear emphasising.

The first is that Hobbes rejected any claims for limiting political authority on the grounds of conscience. Much as it is seditious to maintain that individuals remain judges of good and evil in civil society, so too the notion 'that *whatsoever a man does against his Conscience, is Sinne*' equally threatens political authority. At his most polemical, Hobbes reduced conscience to mere judgement, or private opinion, which must submit to 'the publique Conscience' of the commonwealth expressed through the law (*L*, xxix.7/502). To the extent that liberalism advocates toleration based on a commitment to liberty of conscience, Hobbes's liberal credentials are weak. But this is not the approach liberal realists should take to justifying toleration, since it involves adopting an ethics-first perspective that prioritises the (substantive)

pre-political value of liberty of conscience (see also Newey 2014, 74–80). Williams (2005: 128–38) makes a similar point in relation to theories of toleration based on individual autonomy, which are difficult to reconcile with liberalism’s aspiration to avoid being ‘just another sectarian doctrine’. Instead, he proposes that toleration is best approached as a political rather than a moral issue, which involves examining the contexts and practices where demands for toleration arise, rather than assuming that there is any single value or attitude justifying claims for toleration.

This leads into the second and more important point to highlight: for Hobbes, toleration was a political not a moral question, in the sense Williams outlines.¹¹ Hobbes’s discussion of what beliefs and doctrines should be permitted is motivated by questions of political expediency, not by substantive moral values.¹² Gray (2000: 25) recognises this when he states that a Hobbesian *modus vivendi* regards the various claims individuals make for their way of life ‘with indifference – *except* where they endanger peaceful coexistence’ (emphasis added). Yet this leaves the question of which claims actually do endanger peaceful coexistence unspecified and much of the debate about how tolerant Hobbes was hinges on his assessment of what the answer to that question looked like in seventeenth-century England. Gray does not address this, but his theory can still pass as Hobbesian regardless, largely because the answer to the question of what beliefs endanger peaceful coexistence is contingent; it is dependent on historical and contextual considerations, which today bear little resemblance to seventeenth-century England. Indeed, it is worth emphasising that a realistic liberalism will have to countenance intolerance in the case of any beliefs that really do undermine civil order (Newey 2014, 118–22). To approach the question of toleration in this way is to think about the relation between ethics and politics from a Hobbesian perspective, rather than one that appeals to more substantive moral values.

These remarks point the way to a more general understanding of the relation between Hobbes and liberalism. Realists tend to think of liberalism in more minimal terms than liberal moralists. Williams (2005: 7) claims that a liberal answer to the Basic Legitimation Demand will not accept rationalisations of disadvantage (coercion, suffering, torture etc.) based on race or gender, or appeals to self-justifying hierarchical structures that generate disadvantage (more generally see Sagar, 2016: 370–74). Measured against these criteria, there is nothing illiberal about Hobbes’s theory of legitimacy, especially as he placed considerable emphasis on recognising others as equals – largely for political reasons (*L*, xv.21/324; see also Hoekstra, 2013). Liberals may nonetheless be worried about a theory that potentially subsumes all morality under politics, but Hobbes’s overriding point is that the amount of space left for private morality outside of politics can only be determined by attending to the exigencies of politics and must, therefore, be decided by the sovereign. The recognition that where to draw the public-private line is itself a political question, in part because of the prevalence of moral disagreement, should be well taken by realists of all persuasions.

That Hobbes’s sovereign must be absolute and preferably undemocratic sits uneasily with liberals today, for good reasons. But those reasons are better expressed from a realist perspective than one that appeals to some other pre-political value that Hobbes either overlooked or failed to interpret correctly (autonomy, democratic equality, popular sovereignty etc.). From a realist perspective, the strongest thing that can be said in defence of representative democracy and limited government may well be that, in practice, they minimise the evils that governments can inflict on their citizens and enable transitions of power without recourse to violent upheaval (Shklar, 1988: 9–11; Williams, 2005: 16–17). To use Williams’s phrase, the close relation between liberalism and representative democracy makes sense to us now and around here, but the reason why this makes sense is best explained by attending to the historical experiences of the last century. Hobbes’s defence of absolutism arguably made a lot more sense

then and around there. None of this is to suggest that Hobbes is really a liberal, but what the realist perspective helps us to see is that the main reason why he was not a liberal is that the historical experiences required for liberalism to make sense had yet to occur. If this is the case, liberal realists need not be overly concerned with theorising politics in a Hobbesian mould. To see what he might still have to offer on that front it is worth returning to his theory of consent and considering the place it occupies in his broader goal of articulating a political theory with the power to shape the imaginations of his readers.

Consent and imagination

Hobbes's political theory, I have argued, rests on a minimal form of moral consensus, for 'all men agree ... that Peace is Good' (*L*, xv.40/242). As is well known, he modelled this agreement on the device of a social contract. Earlier I claimed that realist theories of legitimacy have strong reasons to jettison the contractual apparatus and instead focus on the substantive basis of Hobbes's account of legitimacy; namely, the value of peace. But I also suggested that there might be something important about his theory of consent from a realist perspective and it is now time to make good on that suggestion. To do so it is necessary to dispel certain misinterpretations that abound when Hobbes's account of consent is read through the preoccupations of later contractarian thought.

Jeremy Waldron (1987: 140) famously wrote that the '*fundamentally liberal*' thesis is that 'a social and political order is illegitimate unless it is rooted in the consent of all those who have to live under it'. Following Rawls's revival of social contract theory, the consent or contract in question is often understood as hypothetical, a position which has in turn been widely attributed to Hobbes (for examples see Kavka, 1986: 19–23; May, 1980: 195–96; Pateman, 1979: 44; Rawls, 2007: 34; Rhodes, 2002: 397–98; Sreedhar, 2013; Vanderschraaf,

2001: 384; but cf. Newey, 2008: 133, 146–47; Stanton, 2011: 165–66). However, if his theory really does rest on a hypothetical contract then this would undermine his realist credentials. Realists criticise hypothetical theories for shifting the emphasis from whether or not citizens actually do consent or endorse the state in question, to whether or not they would do so if they reasoned about things in a certain way (and usually under idealised counterfactual conditions). For theories of hypothetical consent, the question of whether citizens actually do consent is superfluous as ‘people’s own views about the legitimacy of their state are taken to be of no particular relevance.’ (Horton, 2012: 134) Many scholars, however, seem quite willing to read these implications into Hobbes’s theory. On the hypothetical interpretation, he did not ‘think that most people living in civil societies have *actually agreed* in any meaningful sense to be ruled.’ (Sreedhar, 2013: 216)

Hobbes thought that political obligations are based on individuals laying down rights (*L*, xxi.10/336), so if most people have not actually agreed to do so then this poses insurmountable problems for his theory. Hobbes’s voluntarism, seen this way, ‘is completely hypothetical—and meaningless’ (Pateman, 1979: 53). Fortunately, at least for Hobbes’s sake, this interpretation and the attendant criticisms are unwarranted. In his discussion of how rights can be transferred, he claimed that signs of a contract or covenant are ‘either *Expresse*, or by *Inference*.’ Signs by inference, he continued, ‘are sometimes the consequence of Words; sometimes the consequence of Silence, sometimes the consequence of Actions; sometimes the consequence of Forbearing an Action’ (*L*, xiv.13–14/204). The distinction between express and inferred signs was central to Hobbes’s discussion of how rights could be transferred and the reliance on some form of inferred consent recurs throughout his works (*EL*, xiii.11, xxviii.1; *DC*, xiv.12; see also Hoekstra, 2004: 68–73). Implied consent is no less binding than express consent.¹³ All that matters is the question of what could be taken as a sign of an individual’s

will that implies consent. Hobbes's answer was resoundingly simple: '*transfer of right* consists solely in non-resistance' (*DC*, ii.4).

The acceptance of protection (signified by not resisting the power that ensures protection) is a sufficient sign of an individual's will and thus by receiving protection subjects consent to and authorise the sovereign's rule. In the 'very act of receiving that protection, and not renouncing it openly ... they have assented.' (*LNC*, 180) To appreciate how this understanding of the contract diverges from hypothetical readings, it is worth stressing that Hobbes did not argue that if presented with a suitably characterised position of choice then individuals *would* consent to the sovereign's rule. He instead argued that the fact that individuals enjoy the protection secured by the existence of the sovereign is a sign that they *do* consent. When he wrote that in generating the commonwealth it is 'as if every man should say to every man, *I Authorise and give up my Right of Governing my selfe, to this Man, or to this Assembly of man...*' he clearly did not think that this had ever happened at some point in human history. Yet we should resist assuming that if contract theory is not historical it must be hypothetical (cf. Dunn, 1996: 40–42; Gauthier, 1977: 135; Rawls, 2007: 15). The 'as if' in the passage is best understood in terms of implied consent. In the act of receiving protection from the sovereign it is as if every subject utters the subsequent words, since those words express what the act in question implies. As authorisation and transfer of right are necessary conditions of the sovereign being able to ensure protection, subjects implicitly authorise the sovereign and transfer their right of self-government to him by receiving that protection.

Theories of implied consent are subject to much criticism. One objection is that implied consent fails to capture what is important about consent because if an act implies consent it does not follow that the actor in question intended to consent (Simmons, 1979: 88). This would strip consent of all voluntariness. Indeed, it has recently been argued that although Hobbes appeared to endorse the mere non-refusal of protection as evidence of consent, we should not

attribute this position to him because of the notorious (Humean) problems that accompany this ‘sort of unwitting “consent”’ (Lloyd, 2009: 269–70). This objection misses the mark, however, as Hobbes’s aim was to show individuals the sense in which they actually do consent. The preservation of the commonwealth would only ever be secure so long as the mutual relation between protection and obedience is ‘set before mens eyes’ (*L*, R&C, 1141), so that they come to understand themselves as consenting to the sovereign’s rule. Implied consent has to be understood as consent by the individuals in question, for otherwise it would not really be consent at all.

This point is worth stressing because Hobbes’s broader goal was for his readers to internalise the logic of his argument and thereby change the way they understood their relationship with the commonwealth. He sought to shift his readers’ perspectives so that they would come to see things in a more Hobbesian way (more generally see Johnston, 1986: 70; Oakeshott, 2000: 15, 159–63; Stanton, 2011). For Hobbes, in fact, to understand oneself as consenting is to actually consent, because to consent to something is for one’s will to be determined a certain way and one’s will is a consequence of one’s understanding. To adapt a point he made in a different context, the imagination of consent is the same as consent in the mind of the individual who imagines (*AW*, xxviii.2; see also Douglass, 2014: 145–46). Hobbes’s contract is better understood as imaginary rather than hypothetical, but imaginary, in this context, should not be understood as the antonym of real or actual (see also Newey, 2008: 121–23, 133, 146–47). It refers, instead, to how individuals understand their relationship with the commonwealth, and such understanding is an act of imagination (more generally see *LNC*, 358–59, 401; Douglass, 2014: 128–33). The acceptance of protection is a sufficient sign that individuals consent and have obligations to the sovereign, but the efficacy of the sign depends on it being unequivocally understood as such by everyone concerned. Hume (1987: 475) wrote that ‘implied consent can only have place, where a man imagines, that the matter depends on

his choice', and Hobbes's aim was to shape the imaginations of his readers so that they come to understand that by receiving protection they make that very choice. Hobbes, at least, deemed *Leviathan* a success in this respect, boasting that it had 'framed the minds of a thousand gentlemen to conscientious obedience to present government' (*SL*, 335).

Even if this interpretation of Hobbes's theory of consent is endorsed, it might still be thought superfluous. As I argued earlier, political realists might be better off jettisoning the contractual aspects of Hobbes's theory and instead focusing solely on the mutual relation between protection and obedience. To some extent this would be warranted, but there are grounds for pushing back, at least up to a point. The first is that while realists deny that the legitimacy of a state is based on universal agreement or consent, it is still important that most people acknowledge its authority. Any state must be able to offer an account of its legitimacy to those it exercises power over, even if it is implausible to think that everyone will find the account offered acceptable. The question of who needs to be satisfied 'depends on the political circumstances.' (Williams, 2005: 135–36) There will always be some people who do not acknowledge a given political authority and from their perspective its claim to legitimacy will be contested (which is not to say that their perspective should be treated as authoritative). Amongst most people, however, some consensus must prevail that the state in question is broadly acceptable; there must be 'a kind of shared willingness to acknowledge the legitimacy of some particular set of political arrangements.' (Horton, 2010: 438–39, 443)

This shared willingness is precisely what Hobbes sought to theorise. Indeed, he defined consent, somewhat idiosyncratically, as the concurrence of many wills 'to some one and the same action, or effect' (*EL*, xii.7, xiii.2). The action or effect in question was submission to a sovereign who could ensure peace. His theory of consent, then, was principally concerned with the importance of subjects acknowledging the legitimacy of the sovereign. What is more, although Hobbes appealed to universal consent – all agree that peace is good – he was well

aware that, in practice, many people thought that there were other goods, such as eternal salvation, that both trump and conflict with peace. The claim that all agree that peace is good is, strictly speaking, false, or at least in need of significant qualification. One way to defend Hobbes here would be to argue that all people *would* agree that peace is good if they thought rationally, which might be in line with hypothetical interpretations of consent. For Hobbes, however, there is nothing irrational about sacrificing your mortal life by resisting the sovereign if you will be rewarded for doing so, or punished for not having done so, in the afterlife: ‘*Eternall life* is a greater reward, than the *life present*; and *Eternall torment* a greater punishment than the *death of Nature*’ (L, xxxviii.1/698). Knowledge of the afterlife is not given to us by reason, but in the second half of *Leviathan* Hobbes offered a wide-ranging and ambitious reinterpretation of Scripture to show that there is no conflict between one’s self-preservation in this life and one’s eternal salvation in a life to come. The claim that everyone agrees that peace is good is contingent on these (and other) arguments proving persuasive, and in this respect such agreement is better understood as something Hobbes hoped his political theory would help generate, rather than merely the starting point on which it is based.

The second reason why attending to questions of consent is of interest from a realist perspective is that the idea of a social contract, or that the legitimacy of democratic states is based on the consent of the governed, seems to occupy a prominent place in the popular imagination, at least in liberal democracies now and around here (see also Shapiro, 2005: 21–22). If this is true then realists cannot escape from questions of consent in theorising political legitimacy because they are committed to taking seriously people’s own views about the legitimacy of the states in which they live. As I have argued, the concern with how people understand their relationship with the state was at the forefront of Hobbes’s thinking. Although it is not for what he is most famous, he placed great emphasis on the role of opinion in governing human affairs. The idea that it is ‘on opinion only that government is founded’ is

most readily associated with Hume (1987: 32), but Hobbes too recognised that ‘the Power of the mighty has no foundation but in the opinion and the beleefe of the people’ (*B*, 128). The authority of the sovereign ultimately rests on the opinions of the subjects, for the reputation of power is power (*L*, x.5/132). If subjects cease to believe that the sovereign is legitimate then peace will be fleeting. In so far as people do think that a legitimate political authority requires the consent of the governed, Hobbes offers a way of theorising this to show people the sense in which they consent. He averred that ‘in the wel governing of Opinions, consisteth the well governing of mens Actions, in order to their Peace and Concord’ (*L*, xviii.9/272), and *Leviathan* was itself an attempt to shape the opinions of its readers to their peace and concord.

The purpose of the foregoing discussion is not to claim that realists should endorse Hobbes’s theory of consent. Liberals, at least, have long been troubled by the minimal limits Hobbes set on that to which individuals can consent. Locke (1988: ii.23, ii.135) appealed to God-given constrains, Rawls (2007: 87) to considerations of background fairness, and most liberals would want to place some limits on the scope of what counts as consent. Nonetheless, liberal realists – or realists theorising the legitimacy of liberal states – will still need to have something to say about consent and it remains an open question whether we can make sense of this idea for modern states.

The more general point to draw from Hobbes’s theory of consent is that the problems animating it are not as far removed from realist concerns as they might initially appear. In this respect, the approach he takes is more instructive than the conclusions he reaches. One reason for this is because his political theory is grounded in the type of ‘complex moral and political psychology’ called for by realists (Galston, 2010: 408). The implications of his psychology limit the role of reason in guiding human conduct, with the imagination and passions having far greater sway. Hobbes saw very clearly that for political argument to be effective it cannot only speak to our reason; it must have other ways of moving us. This is why the use of rhetorical

devices and the visual imagery of the frontispieces are so important for conveying his message. These strategies, amongst others, are deployed to help readers of *Leviathan* come to acknowledge the political authority to which they are subject. Geuss (2010: x) has recently pressed the case ‘for the importance of imagination in all forms of politics’. Hobbes’s political theory not only shows us why this is needed, but also seeks to recast the imagination of his audience so that peace might prevail.

Conclusion

My aim in this essay has been to show that reading Hobbes in light of the concerns of political realism is a worthwhile and illuminating project: illuminating both for what it tells us about how Hobbes’s ideas continue to structure debates in contemporary political theory, and for what realists might gain from a closer study of the tradition they inherit. Central to my analysis has been the importance Hobbes placed on forming a moral consensus around the idea that peace is good. This may be fairly uncontroversial as an interpretative claim about Hobbes’s political theory, yet foregrounding it provides a helpful vantage point to evaluate, and here summarise, various aspects of his relation with political realism.

Hobbes’s theory of legitimacy, I have argued, challenges the contrast that Gray (the most avowedly Hobbesian realist) draws between peaceful coexistence and moral consensus as alternative goals of politics, since it instead attempts to form a moral consensus around the value of peaceful coexistence. It is thus problematic to read Hobbes as rejecting an ethics-first approach to political theory, for peace may itself be understood as a pre-political moral value. The question of why peace (or ‘order, protection, safety, trust, and the conditions of cooperation’) should not be understood as a value prior to politics is one that any realist theory needs to answer if it is to distance itself firmly from political moralism, or ethics-first

approaches to politics. Realists have turned to Hobbes to answer this question, but he does not supply the answer they require. Hobbes's theory of legitimacy is a moral one, then, but it is a theory of the *summum malum* rather than one that appeals to more substantive moral values. In so far as the autonomy of the political position can be attributed to Hobbes, it is most plausibly construed as meaning that all other moral values are subsumed under peace, the value at the heart of his politics. Even if this led Hobbes to endorse some decidedly illiberal positions, he did so because of what he thought was required to avoid the greatest evils of life; an approach with which liberal realists should have some sympathy. Finally, I have argued that the moral consensus in question is not merely a starting assumption from which his analysis proceeds, but rather something he hoped his theory might generate. This interpretation challenges the widely endorsed hypothetical reading of Hobbes's contract theory and instead shows that the consent he appeals to is both implied and imaginary. That it is imaginary is especially important because Hobbes, like contemporary realists, was concerned with how people actually view the legitimacy of the states under which they live. The purpose of *Leviathan*, however, was not just to theorise the opinions people hold of the state's legitimacy, but to actively shape them. Hobbes was engaging in politics, not just theorising it retrospectively (more generally see Philp, 2010: 483).

Political realists criticise ethics-first political theory for having an impoverished understanding 'of the conditions of its own possibility.' That is, it has very little to say about the political circumstances in which its prescriptions could actually be implemented (Newey, 2001: 731; Horton, 2010: 437). While realists have been quick to criticise other theories on these grounds, less attention, to date, has focused on what realism has to offer by way of remedy. It is here that turning to the history of political realism may prove particularly illuminating, as many of its canonical thinkers had a clear idea of how their theories impacted upon the political circumstances of their day. Hobbes is an especially interesting case, precisely because he

thought carefully about the transformative potential of his own political theory. This goes well beyond his hope that *Leviathan* ‘might fall into the hands of a Sovereign’ who could ‘convert this Truth of Speculation, into the Utility of Practice’ (*L*, xxxi.41/574), and is more broadly reflected in the various strategies he deployed throughout his works to impress his ideas on his readers. That many realists still take Hobbes as their starting point for thinking through the problem of politics is just one amongst many signs indicating that he largely succeeded in capturing our imaginations.

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¹ The approach I take in relation to political realism is thus similar to those who have subjected Hobbes’s association with realism in international relations theory to critical scrutiny (e.g. Armitage, 2012: 59–74; Malcolm, 2002: 432–56). While the two realisms are related, they are generally studied independently, and the political realists who draw on Hobbes tend to leave aside his views on how enmity and peace in the international sphere impact upon the domestic. The same is true of this essay, as my main concern is to evaluate the relation between Hobbes and political realism. However, it might still be objected that political realists cannot fully understand Hobbes’s stance on morality and politics without attending to his discussion of the international sphere. While I cannot address this objection in detail presently, it arguably overstates the significance of the international sphere to Hobbes’s political theory. On this point see Armitage (2012: especially 59, 72): ‘Hobbes had much less to say about the relations between states than many scholars – particularly theorists of international relations – would like him to have said ... Hobbes assumed his place among the founders of international thought

as much in spite of as because of his own statements on the law of nations and the relations between states.’

² There is a vast literature on Hobbes’s association with liberalism, but some of the most important approaches focus on his having prioritised rights over duties (Strauss, 1936: 181–82), the individualistic basis of his philosophy (Oakeshott, 2000: 67), or his formulation of a negative conception of liberty (Skinner, 1998: 60, 113–16).

³ For more general accounts of the key tenets of political realism see Galston (2010); Rossi and Sleat (2014).

⁴ The distinction is drawn from the realist literature, not Hobbes’s texts. For example, justice is taken to represent a substantive moral value, rather than simply the keeping of covenants. Cf. Hobbes (*L*, xv.1/220). The following abbreviations are used for Hobbes’s works: *AW* = *Thomas White’s De mundo Examined*; *B* = *Behemoth*; *DC* = *De Cive* (trans. as *On the Citizen*); *EL* = *The Elements of Law*; *L* = *Leviathan*; *LNC* = *The Questions Concerning Liberty, Necessity, and Chance*; *SL* = *Six Lessons to the Professors of the Mathematics*. All references to *L* are given by chapter and paragraph (R&C = ‘A Review, and Conclusion’), then page numbers to the Clarendon edition. References to *AW*, *DC* and *EL* are given by chapter and section numbers.

⁵ The parenthetical qualification is important because Hobbes considered this the greatest *natural* evil, but also recognised that forfeiting eternal life is a greater evil than temporal death (see Olsthoorn, 2014).

⁶ There is much debate about whether Hobbes’s moral theory is reducible to self-interest, but my argument does not take a stand on this. The most important reply to the Nagel-Rawls line of argument is Lloyd’s (2009) thesis that Hobbes articulated a defence of ‘the reasonable’ in the Rawlsian sense.

⁷ Hobbes’s theory is arguably consistent with Williams’s (1995: 76–68) account of a minimalist moral psychology.

⁸ There are other questions about whether Williams succeeds in offering an account of legitimacy that does not represent a morality prior to politics. For a defence of Williams see Hall (2015).

⁹ Even if we grant that in times of war there is no politics taking place *between* the warring parties or states, politics still takes place *within* those parties or states.

¹⁰ It could be objected that there are limits as the sovereign remains bound by the law of nature. While this is true, the obligation is owed only ‘to God, the Author of that Law, and to none but him’ (*L*, xxx.1/520), and the sovereign is the sole authoritative interpreter of God’s law. Hobbes certainly thought that sovereigns were well advised to follow the laws of nature and, in this respect, he did not endorse the Machiavellian view of the autonomy of the political, according to which political actors should behave in ways that frequently contradict conventional standards of morality.

¹¹ Even this might be overstating the case. It is debatable whether it makes sense to attribute a *theory* of toleration to Hobbes. As Newey (2014: 76) notes, toleration is an idea Hobbes ‘seldom mentions, and then unflatteringly, in *Leviathan*’.

¹² In this sense Bejan’s (2016) recent focus on the conditionals (e.g. ‘if it be without contention’) in the passages invoked in the ‘tolerant Hobbes?’ debate is most welcome, although her conclusions (especially 22–25) for how we should theorise his ideas on toleration take a slightly different direction to those suggested here.

¹³ Notice the difference here with Locke’s (1988, ii.119–22) more famous distinction between express and tacit consent. Locke thought that the former gives rise to stronger obligations than the latter.

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