

An Analysis of a Hobbesian Morality in International Relations

Written by Jan Dobrosielski

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There is continuous debate as to whether international relations essentially amount to a Hobbesian state of nature, and whether there can be international stability in the absence of the ultimate authority of a sovereign. Yet there are limits to the analogy that states, like individuals, exist in anarchy: although they do share similarities with Hobbes' description of pre-social life and Hobbesian mechanics are still very much in effect, nevertheless the structure, character, and motivations of states comprise sufficiently different bottom-up incentives as to allow for the emergence of an internally regulated order. Because the relatively greater security and wealth of states permits them to enact the laws of nature, the construction of an international morality becomes a course of action states not only can but must pursue as a function of their duty to promote the interests of their citizens.

Hobbes' *Leviathan* is a monumental work that employs a description of life prior to society as a theoretical device for justifying the primacy of the authority of the state. Without this sovereign intervention, life is anarchic and famously "nasty, brutish, and short".[1] A dominant feature of Hobbes' state of nature – that is, life outside of the social covenant – is that self-preservation, based on fear and resources, fuels competition in a world of scarcity.[2]

The precipitous and deadly nature of this competition is created by the equal lethality of all human beings: even the weakest person, Hobbes argues, has power over the strongest by virtue of mutual vulnerability to attack (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 76). Combined with the impossibility of being certain about others' intentions, this creates a condition of mistrust and suspicion that precludes any agreements between individuals: even though peace may be favourable, the first person to lay down their guard without a reciprocal abstention from violence invites destruction. Hobbes believes that the only way out of this predicament is for individuals to jointly forfeit their right to violence to a greater authority that will enforce this covenant through superior power.[3] This submission forms the essence of the creation of the State, for it is only by relinquishing the right to violence that individual disputes can be resolved in favour of pursuing communal endeavours. The arts, morality, philosophy, and all the other benefits of commodious living are within reach once this is established.

Although this argument has been contested since its publication and faced opposition as early as Rousseau, it has nevertheless enjoyed wide endorsement as a plausible accounting of the State's rightful monopoly over coercion. But the implications of this theory extend to the arena of international relations as well. Hobbes himself had little to say on the matter, limiting his thoughts in *Leviathan* and *De Cive* to the view that states face a condition corresponding to that of pre-social individuals, and this has been echoed by realist thinkers for centuries.[4] Yet this analogy is just as contested as *Leviathan's* principal claim, and there is a school of thought which argues that the relations of states and individuals are insufficiently similar to warrant comparison by merely superimposing the conditions of the latter over the former. This is important because, as pre-social life is characterized by violence and mistrust, the structural logics that govern the conditions of states determine the nature of their relations. And while Hobbesian thought acknowledges that morality exists even in the state of nature, it also argues that it is essentially unenforceable. Morality for Hobbes amounts to a list of natural laws which lead to a good life; but lacking the strength of any covenant backed by the sword, these laws remain unpractised (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 103). If Hobbes is correct, states live in an equally amoral world where might makes right.

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Although there is no Leviathan to guarantee covenants between states, their character is vastly different from that of individuals. To begin with, states are not nearly as vulnerable as people in the sense that they cannot perish from one swift, mortal stroke, and it does not follow that states need a sovereign as an absolute guarantor of their safety before placing some measure of trust in other states (Prokhovnik and Slomp, 72). Hobbes' argument about the vulnerability of even the strongest has no place in the realm of immortal, non-physical international bodies, which are not subject to the same harsh necessities that are evident in pre-social individual relations. States can afford greater margins of error by virtue of their relative security not only from harm, but from destitution as well (Prokhovnik and Slomp, 64). While this latitude may mean that peace is not as urgent for states to achieve, neither is pre-emptive action so imperative for their safety.[5]

Moreover, while global resources are by no means unlimited, the nature of competition for resources between states is not as aggressive as that between famished individuals in a state of nature. Hobbes himself notes that a fundamental task of the sovereign is to provide for what he terms commodious living and industry (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 78): not only do adjudicated covenants allow for greater security of the person, but they also grant distinct advantages in the form of commercial enterprise. Yet states lack this imperative to attack each other in order to avoid poverty: as internally ordered bodies, citizens already enjoy a standard of living that is absent between warring individuals (Prokhovnik and Slomp, 65). Thus the nature of the scramble for resources between states is spared the violent, anarchic conditions of pre-social man.

The tendency of commerce to impel states to peace rather than war was noted by Kant in *Towards Perpetual Peace*, where he argues that "it is the spirit of trade, which cannot coexist with war, which will (...) take hold of every people." [6] This co-operation hinges on the absence of the threat of imminent destruction, and is indeed facilitated by the more tolerant relations states can afford to maintain with each other. Although Rousseau argues correctly that a state "knows not the physical limitations of men; its appetites are insatiable; its boundaries are not limited by physical body, thus it seeks ever to expand," [7] the emergence and growth of international commerce has proven these characteristics to be not incompatible with peace. A functioning system of trade means that the costs of war often outweigh its benefits, and states restrain their violence towards each other in preference for more diplomatic and fiscally prudent forms of competition. [8]

Given these points, however – the relative security of states, their internal order and wealth, and the evidence of their co-operation – the overarching anarchic paradigm imposed by Hobbes still persists. But it is now possible to examine the nature of an international morality that can be constructed within Hobbes' argument for anarchy in the absence of sovereign authority. Indeed, the same mechanisms Hobbes allows for in domestic matters yield entirely different conclusions when applied to the structurally dissimilar international level.

Altruism, which Hobbes defines as "the desire of good to another" (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 26) arising from a perceived concern that "the calamity of another (...) may befall oneself" (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 28), can be mortally dangerous in the individual state of nature. Driven by self-preservation, fear, and poverty, pre-emptive violence pushes aside any altruistic considerations by sheer necessity. But Hobbes admits that empathy is always there; it simply requires the intervention of the Sovereign before it can be acted upon (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 103). Between states, however, this element of danger is not as immediate, allowing more sympathetic relations to exist wherein states refrain from attack simply out of pity for their victims (Malnes, 32).

Prudence is another motivation that can help diminish conflict between states even in the absence of a sovereign. On an individual level, Hobbes dismisses prudence largely due to the comparable lethality of persons: "the inequality of Power is not discerned but by the event of Battle" (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 73). In addition, scarcity and fear are powerful motivators towards pre-emptive action, as is evidenced by the constant need to accrue power as the only sure way of staving off defeat (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 54). And even though Rousseau notes the insatiability of states (see above), their relative safety from attack lessens the need for acquisition in order to survive, while the impossibility of murdering states raises the prudential considerations prior to declaring war. Rousseau also admits that war is not rationalized by states as an absolute necessity for survival; it emerges, instead, from princes' endless pursuit of power, wealth, and prestige, both within their own borders and without. [9] On an international level, the calculations of prudence urge greater restraint, as the motives for war may not justify the costs and the certainty of victory is more

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difficult to ascertain. This is also evidenced by balance of power arrangements, which are conspicuously absent in Hobbes' portrayal of pre-social life. While not permanent solutions to hostility, they nevertheless showcase the tendency of states to act cautiously when calculating opposition (Malnes, 92).

The possibility of states acting on prudential or altruistic motives allows for the design of an international moral order even with Hobbesian mechanics still very much at play. With less fear of destruction or impoverishment and a greater security threshold, states can recognize and enact the laws of nature to the mutual benefit of all concerned (Malnes, 36). The absence of a sovereign forms no significant impediment to their co-operation; indeed, prudence, altruism, and morality produce a kind of bottom-up incentive for peaceful resolution of conflict that is not evident in Hobbes' analysis of individual relations, but is nevertheless highly applicable to international relations (Malnes, 32).

Sceptics point to global cosmopolitanism as an obstacle to any consensus that might yield universally applicable moral guidelines. But disagreement between parties does not altogether discount the possibility of a satisfactory solution. Even within societies, disagreements on morality abound without leading to dissolution and anarchy; and this is equally true of partnerships between states that share relatively equal moral beliefs (Beitz, 18). Under these circumstances, morality is simply the most reasonable course of action available on which most parties can agree, and is often reached by consensus decisions even in the absence of overarching legal institutions (Beitz, 19). And while errors of judgement not only may but probably will occur, a similar margin of error exists in intra-social verdicts without precluding agreement. Indeed, there are many areas of domestic activity that are not legislated but where morality is fully expected to be in effect (Beitz, 21). Although individuals need a sovereign before the laws of nature can be enforced, states are not similarly bound. Given the greater latitude states enjoy in their relations with each other, even in the absence of an international sovereign, states can act to forge moral concord.

There remains, however, a steadfast objection that states are unwilling to subvert their immediate goals for the long-term benefits to be reaped by moral relations with each other, echoing Hobbes' argument that the sovereign's authority is needed to impose discipline.^[10] Yet states, themselves sovereign powers, have an obligation to act for the benefit of their citizens. The erection of an international moral order serves all parties concerned in the same way that submission to the Sovereign does domestically. And while states have a responsibility to protect their citizens from harm, they nevertheless must pursue the construction of international morality whenever possible so long as this does not compromise the safety of their constituents (Beitz, 34).

Moral sceptics take such national security obligations farther than is justifiable, often confusing the promotion of ideals or private interests with the well-being of citizens. The safety of individuals is of little concern in territorial or trading disputes, yet these are precisely the kinds of contests that sceptics argue create irreconcilable differences between states and prevent international moral agreements (Beitz, 53). In such cases, only the interests of the few are at stake, and the Hobbesian concern for absolute reciprocal compliance amounts to mere sophistry that impedes co-operation while the actual threat to citizens is minimal (Beitz, 54). As Rousseau would argue, the real danger to individuals occurs when statesmen carry these disputes to the point of war (Rousseau, *Project for Perpetual Peace*, 176). Morally speaking, states mean nothing; "it is the rights and interests of persons that are of fundamental importance," which are best served by morality in accordance with the laws of nature (Beitz, 55). It is not only the choice of states, but their duty, to uphold these laws.

The life of individuals as described by Hobbes' state of nature in *Leviathan*, while providing a convincing account of sovereign authority, does not wholly reflect the condition of states in international relations. More powerful, wealthy, and secure, states are not motivated by the need for violent action and mistrust in the same way that individuals are. The absence of an international sovereign does not impede the considerations of prudence, altruism, and morality from creating bottom-up incentives for peace rather than war. Restraint from violence and co-operative action then become imperatives for states which must act to guarantee the interests of their citizens so long as their safety is not threatened. And where Hobbes needs a sovereign to protect individuals from harm so that covenants can be secured, states do not require an equal guarantee of reciprocal commitment to preserve their security. With these conditions in place, the construction of an international morality becomes not only a possibility, but an obligation.

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An Analysis of a Hobbesian Morality in International Relations

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An Analysis of a Hobbesian Morality in International Relations

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Date written: October 2012