USE OF THESES

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Three Readings of the Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes.

Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts,
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The Faculties,
Australian National University.

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DECLARATION.

I declare that authorship of this thesis is my own and that full acknowledgement of other sources have been provided where appropriate. __________________ G. A. Worthington. 20/5/91.

Three Readings of the Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes. Submitted in fulfillment of requirements of the degree of Master of Arts in Political Science at the Australian National University.
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NOTE ON HOBBÉS'S WORKS.

When citing references from Hobbes's original sources I have used the following editions;


These references have been given by chapter and section.

All other references to Hobbes's works are taken from

London, 1839-45.

References from this edition shall be denoted *English Works*, the volume number and page number.
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INTRODUCTION.

Hobbes's *Leviathan* has been lauded as "the greatest, perhaps the sole, masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language."\(^1\) Such accolades are supported, at least in the twentieth century, by the prodigious volume of literature which has been produced in the field of Hobbes studies. However, the claim for the enthronement of Hobbes as a classic thinker is not as solidly founded as might first appear when accounting for the approval which his work has met in the twentieth century. Despite declarations of Hobbes's rigorous logic and lucid expression which have become his heralds for all commentators; Hobbes scholarship is itself deeply divided over the issue of what is actually communicated in his civil philosophy. At times it would seem that the only point of agreement is the myth of his singleminded clarity!

The primary concern of this dissertation is not to provide yet another analysis of Hobbes's political thought but, rather, to examine the twentieth century scholarship that it has generated. A number of studies have already been conducted which survey the corpus of commentaries on Hobbes that have blossomed in the late nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century. These range from histories which chronicle the development of trends in attitudes towards Hobbes showing why these might have come about.\(^2\) to those which seek to classify and methodologically disect these various schools of interpretation.\(^3\) The current undertaking leans towards this latter variety of scholarship on Hobbes studies.

There are characteristics of this study which have a substantial degree in common with Greenleaf's incisive analysis of twentieth century scholarship on Hobbes. The

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current undertaking will be conducted with essentially the same objectives as those announced by Greenleaf and, in the majority of instances, will follow a similar format in achieving these ends. The first part of this thesis will classify the scholarship which is to be examined under three heads: these shall be referred to as libertine, rational choice and natural order interpretations of Hobbes. These categories, with few exceptions\(^4\), stand in an isomorphic relation to what Greenleaf has termed respectively the traditional, individualist and natural law cases for Hobbes interpretation. Greenleaf presents the distinctive features of each of these cases and then explains their diversity by showing them to have concentrated upon different areas and aspects of Hobbes's civil philosophy. I have attempted to systematise these multiform readings of Hobbes further by focusing upon the very different accounts which each school provides of his concept of obligation. The nomination of a particular device through which Hobbes's philosophy can be read should not be taken as an affirmation of the exclusive centrality of obligation to his political philosophy. Of course, accounting for obligation is an important mechanism in understanding Hobbes but it is only one of many concepts available. By proceeding to analyse the various interpretations of Hobbes via reference to a particular term of which all give account emphasis will be focused upon the relationships that exist between the various schools. And so while this study follows Greenleaf in tracing the development of three general modes of Hobbes interpretation it seeks to identify a more analytically detailed relationship between these schools.

Greenleaf also announces that he is concerned to draw out the methodological implications which are inherent in each school's reading of Hobbes. This conforms to the objectives of the second part of this thesis. Greenleaf is content to show how each school differs from the others, that is, upon which aspects of Hobbes's doctrine each interpretation chooses to concentrate. I wish to proceed from this point to examine what type of consideration might lead them to choose the areas they do in the first place. This thesis is in the character of a case study of a body of theory surrounding a particular set of

\(^4\) Some instances of this will be provided on p.5
historical texts. Its end is to elucidate and compare some of the methods which have been set forth prescribing how best to read these texts.

An exhaustive analysis which considered every contribution to the corpus of twentieth century Hobbes scholarship would require a work of unmanageable proportions. With this in mind I have selected for examination a series of commentators who represent the full range of what Greenleaf has referred to as the 'internal variation' within each school of Hobbes interpretation.

Before proceeding to analyse the various schools of Hobbes scholarship a cautionary note should be added. This follows from the schematic nature of the exercise but is compounded by the inclusion of the more radical variants of each interpretation. There is an inherent risk of over-schematising and so constructing 'straw men' who are easily refuted through over-simplification of their accounts. All that can be done to offset this undesirable state of affairs is to make constant allowance for qualification and where this is appropriate I have given references. Plotting an over detailed map would lead to unnecessary confusion on points of order. Further to this it should be remembered that I have constructed an artificial schema. The scholarship has been arranged upon a continuum with the libertine paradigm at one end and the natural order at the other. The gradations in between, are to a degree, contingent on what one is looking for in the scholarship.

An account of the theory of obligation in Hobbes's political philosophy can be represented as a three stage development of the moral condition of the individual. At the first level the individual can be considered to exist in a pre-moral state of chaos. Each may use his morally unrestricted right of nature against his fellows. Nothing bar the physical limitations which accompany each agent constrains his will. In this circumstance 'can means may'. This condition concurs with the use Hobbes makes of the state of nature as a logical myth; this is the state of bellum omnium contra omnes. This abstract state of nature has recently been juxtaposed with the more empirical and historical account

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5 Greenleaf, op cit. p.9
of the individual in his natural condition. The historical account coincides with the second level in the ethical development of Hobbes's individual. Here obligation can exist but only tenuously, relying on the most precarious of foundations; it is a moral state of chaos. In this condition the laws of nature are discovered by each agent through the use of his faculty of reason. However, they cannot be deemed obligatory because of the myriad of interpretations which accompany particular expressions of them in this still subjective condition. They are present in a nascent form with a capacity to counsel but not command and are therefore not laws proper. Moral obligation could conceivably exist in this condition but this is unlikely. There is want of an objectifying principle by which the laws can be interpreted and the provision for such an interpretation to be enforced upon those who would not accept it. The final stage in this evolution of Hobbesian deontology is one in which the validating conditions required at the former level are fulfilled. Hobbes devised an artificial institution which could interpret, pronounce and enforce the laws of nature. Under this regime physical and moral obligation are united in a concept of rational obligation which, only then, can be presented as a political obligation. The three stages of moral evolution can be identified by the predominance of a particular type of obligation constraining the agent; these are physical, rational and moral respectively.

Scholarship on Hobbes's political philosophy over the last century (and perhaps in its entirety) can be classified as consisting of three schools of interpretation which follow from this account of the ethical development of the individual. These interpretations can be placed along a continuum with those who emphasise the physical nature of obligation occupying one end of the spectrum. At the other end of this axis lay those who, on the contrary, stress the moral component in his theory of obligation. Falling between these heads are those commentators who concentrate on the subjective rational origins of obligation in Hobbes's deontology. Each case emphasises a particular type of obligation which is the primary determinant of those actions one is or can be

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I am not making the extreme claim that one specific type of obligation is particular to each school only the softer proposition that each settles its notion of obligation primarily upon one of the above mentioned species.

I have denoted those interpretations which assert the primacy of physical obligation libertine. The title is intended to indicate the priority that this reading cedes to the right of nature in understanding Hobbes's political philosophy. A right describes one's liberty and it is from this liberty that the laws of nature derive. The right is prior to the law and so natural law cannot constrain this precedent condition of natural liberty. Reason embodied in natural law is the servant and not the master of the will.

The second category of commentary will be referred to as rational choice interpretations. The algebraic formulae and jargonistic tones which are employed in some versions of this approach may give the impression of a new strain of scientism in Hobbes studies. But the ideas expressed in this at times technically flavoured language found a marvellously literary exposition in the writings of Michael Oakeshott as early as the 1930's and 1940's. They contend that political obligation is arrived at through a combination of natural physical and artificial moral components. The rational faculty is a natural ability capable of artifice.

The final body of Hobbes scholarship will be specified with the appellation natural order interpretations. Characteristic expressions of this type of approach have been provided by commentators such as A. E. Taylor and F. C. Hood. Hobbes is taken to have intended his conception of natural law as a principle of moral order which is prior to human society. The right of nature, then, becomes a description of the courses of action left open to the agent after the demands placed upon him by the laws of nature have been met. Right derives from law. This is a diametrically opposed reading of Hobbes to that provided by libertine contentions.

I shall now give an instance of the problems, alluded to earlier, which one invariably encounters when classifying scholars in an exercise of this type. Greenleaf classifies Strauss's interpretation of Hobbes as individualist while I prefer to group his
representation as libertine (traditionallyist in Greenleaf's terms). This classification is challenged even again by Watkins who refers to a 'Strauss-Warrender-Taylor-Robertson thesis'. This association would locate Strauss amongst proponents of what I have called the natural order interpretation of Hobbes. All of these views are supportable and this brings to light an important methodological point which I shall note more than once in the ensuing discussion. In Greenleaf's words:

> Of course these are (in a way) artificial categorisations each encompasses a range of internal variation. But none is a mere abstraction and their distinctive characters can be discerned in the actual history of the scholarship.

Convincing cases can be made for the inclusion of certain commentators under banners other than the ones I have chosen for them. This must, to a large extent, be determined by one's objective in conducting a survey of Hobbes scholars in the first place.

In addition to the above, it should be noted that in sketching the criteria for these various schools of interpretation I am not identifying each with every other member of a particular stance. It must be accepted that there is a broad range of diversity in substance and sophistication of expression operating within each school of theory. The more sophisticated accounts will be, by their nature, aware of other types of obligation than those they regard as primary in Hobbes's theory; they will share a larger amount of common ground.

The argument in part one will follow through the three stages of the development of obligation examining the conditions in which each variant is perceived by a particular school to apply to the individual. The first chapter will examine the circumstance of a pre-moral chaos which occurs in the logical state of nature. The second will investigate the condition of a moral chaos where the mere laws of nature apply but cannot effectively constrain the individual. The final chapter will show the condition that accompanies the institution of a sovereign. Within each of these chapters an examination will be made of

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8 Greenleaf, *op cit.* p.9
the type of obligation each school presents as the basis of constraint upon the individual. Accordingly each of the three chapters will be divided into three sections. Within each chapter libertine and natural order interpretations shall be examined before their rational choice counterparts. This procedure will serve two functions: it will allow a better definition of each of these schools by placing each alongside its most extreme contrast. It will also allow the exhibition of the elements that rational choice interpretations incorporate from each of the formerly discussed schools. It is hoped that such an arrangement will show the rational choice interpretation's ability to concur with libertine notions of physical obligation as well as the conception of moral obligation in natural order theories. It will be argued that this is achieved by the development of an intermediary condition in which the mere laws of nature operate as rational theorems.

The primary purpose of part one of the thesis is to describe the prevailing currents of Hobbes scholarship in the twentieth century. This is intended as an outline which anchors the various schools of interpretation in a common referent; the concept of political obligation. After establishing the enormous diversity amongst the treatments of this concept I shall investigate the causes which may have led to such a state of affairs in the second part of this thesis. The purpose of part two is to show the methodological mechanisms which each school of interpretation employs in support of their particular positions. Chapter four will begin by recounting libertine appeals to historiographical evidence and the status of other interpretations assessed on this criterion of validity. This chapter will trace the subject matter of arguments employed throughout the 1960's and 1970's which discuss the importance of Hobbes's seventeenth century context. This debate can be seen as an attempt to break the impasse which had been reached by the contending schools of Hobbes interpretation. Finally, in the fifth chapter, reaction to the assertion of the supremacy of historiographical method will be examined. The discussion will move even further away from direct consideration of Hobbes as general methodological concerns of how a text can/ought be read will be considered.