Moral Justification in Hobbes*

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I. Introduction

To refer to someone as a ‘Hobbist’ was once an insult. The term connoted a deeply duplicitous individual; one held hostage by his baser, selfish instincts and drives. He was thought to violate, intentionally and without remorse, those sacred values thought necessary to preserve not only hearth and home but the very essence of Christendom itself. In short, the Hobbist was a moral monster—an individual devoid of conscience. Having a conscience, at least in a minimal sense, means being reflectively aware of one’s behavior in so far as it impacts on another. A person of conscience in thus capable of placing another’s interests before his or her own and, in consequence, morality can become a worthwhile end in its own right. Importantly, mere weakness of will is not what was at issue. It was not simply a lack of trying, as it were, which separated the proverbial Hobbist from his ethically enlightened peers. Morally speaking, the Hobbist was not simply unwilling, he was, by definition, psychologically unable to do the right thing for the right reason. His worldview prohibited him from seeing his fellows as anything other than a means to his own self-directed ends. He was, first and last, an egoist.

Contemporary scholars, although in a much less pejorative manner, continue to cast their subject in a similar light. On this reading the Hobbesian agent ought, so far as it is in his power, only to do that act which is most likely to maximize his long term self-interest. Hobbes is thus the modern forbear of homo economicus-man as ubiquitous maximizer. Clearly, such a conception of personhood is grossly incompatible with any sort of objective moral theory. The purported genius of Hobbes, however, is not his overriding commitment to egoism. Instead, it is seen by standard interpreters as his keenly resourceful ability to co-opt ethical concepts of a traditionally moral kind (e.g. obligation, justice, the Laws of Nature, etc.) and incorporate them into his overall moral and political theory. On this view, Hobbes drains every ounce of objectivity from such notions but preserves their normative aura in order to harness the obvious rhetorical dividends of

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employing such concepts. These concepts, in Hobbes's hands, become hollow shells of their former selves. They retain the veneer of objectivity but their inner core has become decidedly egoistic. As such, Hobbes is a thoroughgoing moral consequentialist because, as Jean Hampton contends, his ethical theory 'evaluates actions (and for that matter, motives, character traits, and social institutions) solely in terms of their consequences' to the individual.2

Or does he? In what follows, I argue that this long held view of Hobbes is mistaken. I begin by distinguishing between what I take to be two types of moral justification: normative justifications and motivational justifications. I then turn to Hobbes and argue that on neither type of justification does he resort to egoism in morals. This claim is substantiated through an investigation into Hobbes's use of the Negative Golden Rule as his fundamental ethical principle and his non-consequentialist conception of the moral worth of actions and persons. It is further shown that egoism only becomes an issue for Hobbes within the context of his theory of politics wherein self-interest functions as a tool to motivate, whether by carrot or stick, those who lack the requisite strength of character to do their duty solely on the basis of moral reasons alone.

II. Normative and Motivational Justifications

Why ought I to do as I ought if what I ought to do conflicts with what I want to do? This notoriously difficult question has vexed moral philosophers since Socrates. Responses to this apparently innocent query tend to fall into two groups – those which simply deny the legitimacy of the question and those which attempt to show that, at least over the long haul, what we ought to do is ultimately in line with what we want to do. Nonetheless, the question itself presupposes that the answer to yet another notoriously difficult question – 'What ought I to do?' – has been satisfactorily provided. On reflection, one quickly realizes that these seemingly innocuous questions provide the immediate point of departure for any philosophical inquiry into the basis of morals. Indeed, the interrogative conjunction of 'What ought I to do and why ought I to do it?' essentially exhausts the field of normative ethics. Furthermore, a close conceptual connection obtains between these questions and yet each is in its own way distinct. On one hand, of course, both questions are practical in that each is deeply concerned with action, but, on the other, each is asking for a very different, though not necessarily unrelated, type of justification.

The first question – what ought I to do? – calls for what might be termed a normative justification. In other words, any answer to this question seeks, at its