Hobbes’s Reply to the Foole: A Deflationary Definitional Interpretation

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Perhaps one of the most discussed passages in all of Leviathan is Hobbes’s chapter fifteen discussion of “the Foole”. This passage has usually been interpreted as an attempt to demonstrate the narrow rationality of morality. Some commentators have supposed that Hobbes is arguing that it is never in one’s self interest to violate the third law of nature prohibiting breaking covenants, or for that matter, to violate any others of the laws of nature. Thus understood, the Foole passage is presumed to count as evidence in favor of a self-interest interpretation of the laws of nature, for unless the laws of nature are themselves rules for securing the self-interest of the agent, how could it be crucial to showing that those laws are in accord with reason (hence laws of nature) to show that they cannot require actions not approved by self-interest? However, as David van Mill has correctly argued, because the only thing the Foole cares about is his self-interest, and not his religious or moral duties, and perhaps not even the good of others, it can be but weak evidence indeed for the self-interest interpretation of the laws of nature that Hobbes does not reply to the Foole by insisting that injustice is contrary to duty or bad for humanity generally.

In the Latin Leviathan Hobbes made unusually extensive revisions to his earlier reply to the Fool. We can present the Foole’s position as this:

3 Edwin Curley’s edition (Hackett, 1994) documents these revisions. I am assuming, perhaps controversially, that while it is possible that portions of the Latin version predate the English, Hobbes did include there changes from the English, or was in any case prepared to let stand those Latin passages that diverge from the English. However, the interpretation I shall offer does not require privileging either of these versions. I mention it here because I shall be making use of both versions. Curley follows Molesworth’s Latin Leviathan in introducing quotation marks to set off what the Foole says from Hobbes’s comment on his position, and these are the passages I compile in the following account of the Foole’s position. However, it is an open question whether Molesworth’s innovation introduces an overly sharp distinction between attribution and commentary that might prove detrimental to interpretation of Hobbes’s reply.
There is no such thing as justice;... every man’s conservation and contentment being committed to his own care, there could be no reason why every man might not do what he thought conduced thereunto, and therefore also to make or not make, keep or not keep, covenants was not against reason, when it conduced to one’s benefit. ...The kingdom of God is gotten by violence; but what if it could be gotten by unjust violence? Were it against [right] reason so to get it, when it is impossible to receive hurt by it [but only the supreme good]? And if it be not against reason, it is not against justice; or else justice is not to be approved for good. ...you may call [regicide by an heir] injustice, or by what other name you will, yet it can never be against reason, seeing all the voluntary actions of men tend to the benefit of themselves, and those actions are most reasonable that conduce most to their ends.4

Hobbes writes of the Foole that

He questioneth whether injustice, taking away the fear of God (for the same fool hath said in his heart there is no God), may not sometimes stand with that reason which dictateth to every man his own good; and particularly then, when it conduceth to such a benefit as shall put a man in a condition to neglect, not only the dispraise and revilings, but also the power of other men.5

Simply put, the Foole maintains that justice cannot be a rule of reason because profitable injustice, and particularly, rebellious injustice that gains one a kingdom, is not against reason.

Why is the person who maintains this position a fool, according to Hobbes? In what does the Foole’s foolishness consist? One possibility, suggested by various traditional interpretations, is that the Foole’s folly lies in his failure to see that injustice never profits the unjust agent. However, Hobbes himself grants that indeed there is such a thing as “successful wickedness”,6 and that the question why evil men often prosper “has shaken the faith, not only of the vulgar, but of philosophers, and which is more, of the Saints, concerning the Divine Providence”.7 Hobbes laments the fact that “men, from having observed how to the Foole. For this reason, I follow this compilation with quotation of those of Hobbes’s remarks that seem to me to occupy this disputed territory.

4 Curley, pp. 90-91. The Latin revisions appear in brackets. { } contain my supplement to preserve the meaning of the quoted remark.
5 Curley, p. 90.
6 Hobbes says this explicitly in the first paragraph of the Foole passage, III, 132.
7 III, 346.