Introduction: Hobbes and Kant

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In his so-called moral theory, Hobbes was considered the consummate egoist who took the fundamental purpose of government to be to secure the lives of its citizens. Kant, on the other hand, was the classic defender of moral duty and the need for acting from an entirely good will. The primary function he attributed to government was not so much to secure the survival and happiness of its citizens as it was to guarantee their freedom. In their political theories, Hobbes was the absolutist who considered submission of subjects to the will and absolute authority of the sovereign a prerequisite to peace, whereas Kant, in direct opposition to Hobbes’s absolutism, insisted that sovereigns be answerable to their subjects. Kant considered the only form of government consistent with the demand for freedom to be republican in form. Finally, Hobbes saw the relationship of states to be an unavoidable repeat of the anarchic and warlike relationship of individuals in the natural condition. Kant, on the other hand, argued that reason requires republican governments to exist together in a confederacy of states for the purpose of mutual defense and international peace. From this somewhat traditional point of focus, the moral and political theories of Thomas Hobbes and Immanuel Kant could not have been further apart.

More recently, interest in Kant’s political writings has made more prominent the fact that Kant appears to have been sympathetic to, or an advocate of, many ideas in Hobbes’s political theory that he was previously thought to criticize and/or reject. These are changes in our understanding of Kant’s political theory that are not easily reconciled with traditional interpretations of his philosophy. In somewhat similar fashion, Hobbes’s political theory, under the analytical eye of some of his present day readers, has
been found to contain ideas that jeopardize the more traditional interpretations and bring his philosophy much closer to that of Kant.

There should be no surprise that comparisons and contrasts of their respective moral and political theories should begin to appear, first, to consider the ways in which Hobbes’s political theory may have influenced Kant, what ideas of Hobbes Kant actually adopted and how he saw them integrated with his philosophy as a whole. Second, interests have carried on to consider what deeper insights we might obtain regarding the fundamental principles and ideas of Hobbes’s moral and political theory if those principles and ideas were viewed by no less than Kant as reconcilable with a deontology.

This issue of *Hobbes Studies* contains five articles written by prominent Hobbes and Kant scholars on some of the most pressing questions regarding, and comparisons of, Hobbes and Kant. The articles focus on the most significant of the themes that seem either to contrast Hobbes and Kant for their differences or to compare them for their similarities and the possible influence of their theories.

In his article, “Voluntarism and Conventionalism in Hobbes and Kant,” Larry Krasnoff takes issue with those who read Kant’s moral and political philosophy as grounded upon an objective, a priori foundation. Kantian morality, according to Krasnoff, is a kind of convention under which we all have agreed to treat universalizable maxims as fully justified principles of practical reason. In this regard, Kant is closer to Hobbes in his moral and political theory than is usually thought.

Hobbes is a voluntarist (the law is whatever the sovereign declares it to be) and a conventionalist, in the sense that laws are conventions that exist only because human beings have brought them into being through acts of willing. According to Krasnoff, critics have, for many years, challenged Hobbes’s theory, arguing that this can be true only if there is an already existing shared convention to accept acts of willing as obligatory conventions.

Kant is also a voluntarist, but his voluntarism follows from conventionalism not, as it is for Hobbes, the other way around. Kantian morality, Krasnoff argues, is a convention, whereby all citizens agree to respect the universalizable maxims of citizens as laws of reason and not merely acts of individual wills. It is a distinction that allows Kant to show, ultimately, that the sovereign is bound by moral laws (conventions) no less than are citizens, i.e., the law is not, in a significant sense, whatever the sovereign wills.

In “Elusive Unity: The General Will in Hobbes and Kant,” Katrin Flikschuh takes a somewhat similar approach to Kant’s relationship to Hobbes to that provided by Larry Krasnoff. Flikschuh agrees with Krasnoff regarding the