

THE REDUCTION OF DISTRIBUTIVE JUSTICE TO TRIBUTE

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***Abstract:** Von Clausewitz thought that war is just the continuation of politics by other means. I hold that it's exactly the reverse. But if all political categories are reducible, without remainder, to military ones, to what are considerations of distributive justice reducible? Tribute? Precisely! But is it helpful to view issues of distributive justice this way? I argue that it is. The folk-vocabulary acquiesced to by traditional political philosophy may swell our hearts. But it leaves political counsel decidedly undecidable, and it renders us vulnerable to exploitations against which military vocabulary offers us much better protection. This reduction is, I concede, more than a tad disgusting. But so is most life-saving surgery!*

***Key words:** distributive justice, tribute, political philosophy.*

INTRODUCTION

There's a view afoot in political philosophy - a minority view, to be sure, but the *right* one - according to which **all political categories are ultimately reducible to military ones**. This is a brutal view, in both senses. It's brutal with *itself*, in that it'll countenance no hand-waving. And it's brutal with its *interlocutors*, in that it'll brook no compromise with the folk-psychological vocabulary it seeks to replace.¹ If this view wins the day, then at the *end* of the day you'll no longer be allowed - on pain of being an object of philosophical pity - to regard Paul Bernardo as a criminal.² He'll become instead an enemy. Nor will he even be an enemy of the state. He'll be an enemy of an army. Nor will you be allowed to speak of regressive taxation as an injustice. If you don't like something the government's doing on that front, you'll have to say that it's an ill-advised adjustment in tribute.

The reduction of distributive justice to tribute is the objective of the present undertaking.

The argument for the *reducibility* of one discourse to another is one thing. That argument will be offered, in bald at least, in the next two sections. But the argument for the advisability of *performing* that reduction is another matter entirely. (For example, it's doubtful that any gain in prediction and control from reducing meteorology to physics would justify the consumption of computational resources such a reduction would require.) And the argument for then *adopting* that reduction is something else again. (For example, even supposing that "Darling, I love you!" is reducible to "Woman, I'm eliciting your reproductive cooperation!", it hardly follows that the would-be lover should revert to the language of gamete replication. Why not? Because one move in the elicitation of her reproductive cooperation just *is* this deployment of love-talk.)

The case for the performance *and* adoption of my proposed reduction can be made, I

submit, in one fell swoop, and by even this single confirmation instance. Had the Jews of Europe seen their condition from 1933 to 1945 as one of war rather than ‘resettlement’, that alone would certainly not have saved the six million they lost. But had the increased cost to the enemy of even a *few* more Jews going down fighting been enough to save even a few *hundred* of those millions, the reduction would have been worth it. It would certainly have saved many more lives than were saved, or ever will be saved, in North America, for example, by the relevant reductions made in the debate over capital punishment!

But, I concede, the case for the *universal* adoption of my proposed reduction is not so easy to make. For it may turn out that the false consciousness, both in ourselves and others, engendered by the deployment of the folk-psychological vocabulary of political discourse, is in fact *indispensable* to civil society. If so, what I have to say here, right though it may be, may have to be consigned to the flames. But the case for so consigning it can’t be decided ab initio. So, as T. S. Eliot put it, “Oh, do not ask, ‘What is it?’ Let us go and make our visit.”

1 - Of War and Peace

The case for the reducibility of political philosophy to military science proceeds from two corrections: one to *our* thinking about the thinking of Hobbes, the other to the thinking of Hobbes himself. I shall deal with these corrections in that order.

In Chapter XIII of *Leviathan*, Hobbes argues from

- 1) “the weakest has strength [or wit] enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others,” to
- 2) “[no] man [sic] can claim to himself any benefit, to which another may not pretend, as well as he.”

Or, to reiterate it as Hobbes himself does at the outset of Chapter XIV, in a state of nature “every man has a Right to every thing; even to one anothers body.” From (2) - and whenever

- 3) “any two men desire the same thing, which nevertheless they cannot both enjoy” - the so-called moderate scarcity condition - “proceeds
- 4) competition.” Or, in more contemporary *game theoretic* terms, they’re faced with a zero-sum game.

From this competition, and this equality of vulnerability, says Hobbes, proceeds

- 5) “diffidence.” And, finally, “from [this] diffidence [proceeds]
- 6) war.” Since
- 7) in such a state “the life of man [is] solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short”,

8) “men are encline[d] to Peace [by] the Passions [of] Feare of Death; Desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and a Hope by their Industry to obtain them.” To which end

9) “a [rational] man [is] willing, when others are so too, as farre-forth, as for Peace, and defence of himselfe he shall think it necessary, to lay down this [aforementioned] right to all things; and be contented with so much liberty against other men, as he would allow other men against himselfe.”

But since

10) the only mechanism by which this can be accomplished is the institution of, or acquiescence to, an *absolute Sovereign*, it follows that

11) a rational man is willing, when others are too, to lay down his right to *everything*, and be content with *no liberty at all!*

It *likewise* follows - and this will be especially important for *our* purposes - that

12) war leaves off where civil society begins, namely at the investiture, either by Institution or Acquisition, of, but *only of, this absolute sovereign.*

The *standard* critique of Hobbes, at least from *within* the Hobbesian/liberal tradition, is that he errs, and errs grievously, with respect to (10). That is, it's simply *false* that absolutism is the only alternative to anarchy. In fact most political thinkers have since decided that absolutism is more likely to *precipitate* war than prevent it!³

Needless to say I join Hobbes' critics on this score. But that's not the first of the two corrections I have in mind. Rather I want to revisit the equality of vulnerability claim made in (1). *Is* it true that in a state of nature “the weakest has strength [or wit] enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others”? That is, even supposing equality of strength and wit, is the world, other than in the rarest of cases, so radially materially symmetrical that, as we approach the about-to-become battlefield from our respective corners, any stick or stone I can pick up with which to dispatch you at some distance will be matched with a like stick or stone you can pick up with which to dispatch me at the same distance? Obviously not. So Hobbes could only be speaking of conditions in which our proximity to each other is such that this equality of vulnerability *does* obtain. And what might those conditions be? That is, under what conditions are we too close to withdraw from each other with sufficient dispatch to access these military asymmetries in the environment? And what brought us into such proximity in the first place?

The answer, I submit, must be - the appeal of a *commons*, by which I mean: **any not necessarily spatio-temporally contiguous domain of interactivity in which we take each other to be more valuable to each other alive and free than dead or in chains; and take each other to so take each other.**⁴ It may be sex, or perhaps just warmth, that draws a man and woman into

the same bed. But once there, is it not true than any implement by which one can dispatch the other - the clock radio, for instance - is likewise one with which the second can dispatch the first? Is it not true that any tool for cooperative widget-making ready to hand to you as a weapon is likewise ready to hand to me? So, I submit, it's only within a *commons* that Hobbes is claiming that (1) obtains.

But now consider the effect of this corrected understanding of (1) on our understanding of (3). In a commons we're in a pure *coordination* game. That is, the only difficulty in moving the log too big for either of us severally is whether we heave *on* the count of three or *after* it. But (3) refers to games of pure *conflict*. So it follows, as the night the day, that what Hobbes is talking about are situations in which

- a) the payoff for defecting in the game of pure conflict is higher than that of cooperating in the pure coordination game - why else would we proceed from (4) to (5)? - or else
- b) the coordination game has expired, it's been replaced by the game of pure conflict, but, as already noted, we can't withdraw from the proximity created by the first game with sufficient dispatch to access these aforementioned military asymmetries.

For only under either (a) or (b) do we get both competition and equality of vulnerability. So only under either (a) or (b) do we get diffidence. And so only under either (a) or (b) do we get war.

What's just been said is right enough, at least for our purposes. But it's not *quite* right. To get it *exactly* right we'd have to drop these 'only's. That is, either of (a) or (b) is a *sufficient* condition for competition and equality of vulnerability, hence for diffidence and hence for war. But neither is a *necessary* condition. Neither is necessary because competition and equality of vulnerability could arise *without* the mediation of a state of commons. That is, suppose that you and I find ourselves in competition - say for the one and only watering hole in the desert - and that we just happen to *be* militarily symmetrical. Or suppose even that we find ourselves in competition for the watering hole and we're militarily *asymmetrical*. From the fact that we don't have "equality of hope in the attaining of our Ends", it doesn't follow that war can't ensue. On the contrary, if I'll most assuredly die of thirst if I *don't* engage you, I'll have to engage you no matter *how* remote my prospects for success. Though Hobbes doesn't acknowledge these two possibilities, neither does he deny them. So the purpose of this excursion into Hobbes' equality condition is not to show that he's wrong about the *general* connection between war and equality of vulnerability, but rather and only *why* he thinks the two are generally connected. And, as we've seen, about that he seems to be right.

That said, we can conclude our exegesis of Hobbes with the following summary of our findings. A state of war *generally* arises from a state of commons, which I've defined as

any not necessarily spatio-temporally contiguous domain of interactivity in which we take each other to be more valuable to each other alive and free than dead or in chains; and take each other to so take each other.

A state of war may then be defined as

any not necessarily spatio-temporally contiguous domain of interactivity in which we take each other to be more valuable to each other dead or chains than alive and free; and take each other to so take each other.

States of war are *generally* routed through states of common. Hobbes is silent about alternative etiologies. But his logic, once properly understood, and so far as (1) through (9) are concerned at least, survives his detractors unscathed!

2. The counterfeit white flag problem

The correction just rehearsed wasn't so much to Hobbes' thinking as to our *own*. That is, we might have thought that his equality condition was implausible. But now that we see what he must have had in mind, it becomes not only plausible but unassailable. The second correction, by contrast, *is* to Hobbes' own thinking. More specifically, Hobbes agrees that

[in] this warre of every man against every man ... nothing can be Unjust. The notions of Right and Wrong, Justice and Injustice have there no place. Where there is no common Power, there is no Law; where no Law, no Injustice. Force, and Fraud, are in warre the two Cardinall vertues ... [In] warre ... there [is] no Propriety, no Dominion, no Mine and Thine distinct.

In other words, the categories appropriate to a state of war are, quite naturally, military ones. But once the Sovereign is in place, he thinks political vocabulary *is* meaningful and appropriate.

But this supposes - does it not? - not only that there *is* a distinction between war and peace, but also that we can *know* whether we're at one or the other, and so know whether we can now safely switch from our erstwhile *military* mode of thinking to the now-appropriate *political* one. That is, since war rests not on our *being* more valuable to each other dead or chains than

alive and free, but only on our so *taking* each other, if war and peace turn out to be both *phenomenologically* and *epistemically* indistinguishable, they're for all *our* intents and purposes one and the same thing. So if it can be shown that war and peace *are* phenomenologically and epistemically indistinguishable, it'll follow that we *can't* exit the state of war. Not because we couldn't *be* at peace, but because we couldn't *know* whether we are or not. And since we couldn't know whether we're at war or peace, we'd have to err on the side of caution and behave as if we're at war. We could talk about 'civil society', perhaps. And we could talk about it precisely as Hobbes would have us do, i.e. as the condition of a Sovereign being in place. But it wouldn't on that account cease to be a condition of war. Rather a sentence like "A Sovereign's in place!" would be of the same form as a sentence like "The enemy's seized the high ground!"

What remains to be shown, then, is that war and peace can be distinguished neither phenomenologically nor epistemically. And - to ensure that the proof is in no wise merely contingent - this will have to be shown to be *necessarily* so! To wit:

Wars typically consist of long hiatuses interrupted by brief engagements called battles. In the interim we're making preparation for the next encounter. But just as often we're waiting for the weather to improve. Or, perhaps, for confederacies to re-configure. But these aren't the only ways in which war and peace could be phenomenologically indistinguishable. Yet another is for war to *dissimulate*. One could, that is, raise a counterfeit white flag.

In war, as in battle, surrender consists of three 'moments':

- 1) **Some gesture of one's *willingness* to render himself as or more useful to his erstwhile enemy alive and free than dead or in chains**, e.g. raising a white flag, followed by
- 2) **some acknowledgement of that announcement**, followed by
- 3) **the vanquished so rendering himself**, e.g. handing over his weapon.

But from the fact that the vanquished now *is*, and is believed to be, as or more useful to the victor alive and free than dead or in chains, it doesn't follow that the *victor* is now as or more useful to the *vanquished* alive and free than dead or in chains. Nor, a fortiori, that the victor yet *believes* that the vanquished takes him to be more valuable alive and free than dead or in chains. So, since "from Diffidence proceeds Warre", it follows that there must be a *fourth* moment in the process of surrender, one in which

- 4) **vanquished and victor alike attempt to *convince* each other of their desire to exit the state of war and enter a state of commons.**

But, of course, **these signals can be** either genuine or *disingenuous*. So now it seems

that a state of commons and one of inactive war are indistinguishable both phenomenologically and epistemically. And so, *quod erat demonstrandum*, the distinction between the two collapses.

If we're in a state of war at all, we're in a state of war inextricably. But since, as Hobbes insists, in a state of war political notions are meaningless - and yet since, as we all seem to think, notions we take to be political we *do* take to be meaningful - it follows that these notions we *take* to be political are *not* political after all! But since all that remains for them to be is military, it follows that **all seemingly political categories are reducible, without remainder, to military ones.**

3. The Reduction

More particularly - and here I'll simply summarize the reductionist schemata for which I've argued in detail elsewhere⁵ - for any phenomenon we've erstwhile been disposed to call politics, it's reducible to one or more of the following six explanatory schemata. Either we're

1) maintaining the benefits of inactive war to de-motivate others from exiting the real or pretended state of commons and returning to an active state of war. This is what we denote by considerations of distributive justice.⁶

Or we're

2) jockeying for confederacy in anticipation of an opportunistic or imposed exiting of the real or pretended commons and re-entry into an active state of war. This corresponds to considerations of class interest. Or we're

3) secreting away the wherewithal by which to prosecute that war should that opportunity or eventuality arise. This is what we pick out by our deliberations over the public/private distinction. But

4) one of the most effective ways to augment one's own threat advantage is to undermine the enemy's own rationality. This is what we call ideology.

And

5) another is to undermine one's own rationality. In fact no theory of rational choice is complete without a careful and thorough analysis of this logic of self-deception and self-effacement. And, finally,

6) the five mechanisms just cited apply recursively. Which explains why, for example, for so many finer philosophers than me this reduction not only fails to resonate, but is received with such utter revulsion!

4. Liberal and Material Dividends are of a piece

Of these six explanatory schemata, libraries can be - indeed they have been - written on each. But here I want to confine myself to schema (1), i.e. the reduction of distributive justice to tribute.

Normally we think of tribute as material extorted from the weaker party by the stronger to de-motivate the latter from revisiting the former with an active state of war. Here, however, that understanding must be expanded on two fronts:

First, by distributive justice, or tribute, I mean to include the distribution of both material dividends *and* liberal ones, and to treat them as reducible to the common canonical currency of preference satisfactions. This proposal flies in the face of a distinction which is virtually writ in stone in the Western mind. For example, according to John Rawls, rational self-interested agents, negotiating for the dividends of peace from behind a veil of ignorance as to their natural and social endowments, will insist on equality of political liberty *first*, and then and only then countenance such inequalities as may prove strongly pareto-optimal, and are accessible to all. Even *supposing* one could be coaxed behind his veil in the first place, and even supposing one could think *anything* behind such a veil - these being the contractarian and feminist objections respectively - that Rawls is manifestly mistaken about his famous Two Principles of Justice is conclusively shown by the fact that during the height of Apartheid in South Africa it was the blacks of egalitarian liberal Mozambique who were desperately trying to enter racist-fascist South Africa, not the other way around. And you and I are no different in our daily trade-offs. In short, then, material and liberal dividends are of a piece. We trade liberties and equalities for stereotypes with as much alacrity as we trade bobbins for tea towels!

What's significant about this for *our* purposes, however, is this: Hobbes knows that his account of Sovereignty by Institution may be saddled with an unresolvable bootstrapping problem; and that in any event no Sovereign - least of all the one beheaded in 1649 and the one who'd subsequently be restored in 1660 - is ever actually 'instituted'. But, says he of Sovereignty by Institution and Acquisition, a.k.a. conquest, "the Rights, and Consequences of Sovereignty, are the same in both." Why? Because

men who choose their Sovereign, do it for fear of one another, and not of him whom they Institute: But in this case, they subject themselves, to him they are afraid of. In both cases they do it for fear. (*Leviathan*, Chapter XX.)

But have we not just seen that *acquiescence* to such a conqueror, by any either word or deed, *can't* put an end to the state of war between victor and vanquished? In fact doesn't Hobbes himself acknowledge that "Force, *and* Fraud, are in warre the two Cardinall vertues"?

Moreover, there's no such thing as an unconditional surrender. For example, in raising the white flag one does *not* thereby acquiesce to being killed. Or starved. Or ... Either explicitly or implicitly, one *negotiates* articles of armistice. And the terms of armistice can include the retention of certain political liberties as well as material dividends. In such negotiations one can, and does, trade one for the other. And so it's simply *false* that Sovereignty by Acquisition need be, or even *can* be, absolute.

Hobbes isn't unmindful of this tension in his position. In fact so mindful is he that unresolved it could unravel his entire system, that he takes great pains to convince his readers that, whether the terms of surrender are *negotiable* or not, surrender *does* obligate victor and vanquished alike to *honour* the terms of their armistice. "Covenants entred into by fear, in the condition of meer Nature," insists Hobbes,

are obligatory. For example, if I covenant to pay a ransome, or service for my life, to an enemy; I am bound by it. For it is a Contract, wherein one receiveth the benefit of life; the other is to receive mony, or service for it; and ... [t]herefore Prisoners of warre, if trusted with the payment of their Ransome, are obliged to pay it." (*Leviathan*, Chapter XIV.)

This is, of course, an extraordinary passage. It's both patently absurd in its own right and blatantly inconsistent with Hobbes' acknowledgment that fraud is among the cardinal virtues of war. Much has been written about it, the growing consensus being that Hobbes could only have been appealing to some suppressed moral primitive like, "If someone would and could kill me, but declines to do so, I quite literally owe him everything short of my life!" But, on his own terms, no such moral primitive is available to Hobbes. So his entire system *does* unravel. What's in dispute is what, if anything, we're to do with the pile of twine now on the floor.

5. Tax Policy is a military equilibrium solution

The second revision to the usual understanding of tribute is this: It's a naive warrior indeed - and very likely an unsuccessful one - who imagines that war is decided by which side would boast the last man standing were the war to be prosecuted *to* the last man standing. In fact if this, or anything like it, were what's meant by winning and losing in war, these terms would have no meaning in military thinking. Winning and losing make sense in the case of a bivalent outcome, such as champions going head to head. But, as already noted, no one understands this to mean that the winner quite literally takes all!

Rather what he takes, i.e. the terms of peace, is decided by what it would cost each side to continue *towards* that last-man-standing limit, and how willing each side is to pay that cost.

The higher one's willingness to pay, the higher the other's costs. What emerges is equilibrium. And so it's that equilibrium that dictates the terms of disengagement.

It follows, therefore, that by tribute is meant *whatever* that equilibrium dictates. And for this it's literally nonsense to talk about who gives and who takes. *No sense* can be made of the notion of giving and taking because in a state of war "there [is] no Propriety, no Dominion, no Mine and Thine distinct", and because giving and taking are parasitic on these notions!

6. Looting Games

This is important. In fact it's the *core* of the import of this reduction on matters of liberal and material entitlement. For it's likewise, then, with Ayn Rand's reduction of taxation to what she calls, in unreflective high moral dudgeon, 'looting'.

Rand was a novelist, not a philosopher. She can thus be forgiven her failure to see her own question-begging. Robert Nozick and Jan Narveson, by contrast, though more careful about the use of prejudgment-laden terms like looting, nevertheless commit the identical circularity in hanging their take on entitlement on Locke's. Given the *ex hypothesi* meaninglessness of possessives in a state of nature/war, in what sense can something become 'mine' - even if I *do* leave as much and as good for others - by my mixing my labour with it? For that matter, does it even make sense to talk about it as '*my*' labour?

Narveson - though not Nozick - is self-consciously committed to the same sparse premises to which Hobbes confines himself. So for Narveson, to say that "**S is entitled to x under so or so circumstances**" is just an unfortunately imprecise way of saying that "**S is entitled to x under so or so circumstances' is what rational self-interested agents would subscribe to!**" Narveson and I have sparred for years as to just how universalizable - or even *generalizable* - this claim could be.⁷ But here I want to target the deeper point. And that is that if Hobbes is right about the meaninglessness of entitlement-talk in a state of war, and if I'm right that we're *inextricably* at war, then entitlement-talk, if it's to be meaningful at all, must be military equilibrium-talk. Accordingly, not unlike blacks with respect to the term 'nigger', and lesbians with 'dike', I propose to re-appropriate Rand's 'looting' and make it the centre-piece of the discourse on an activity I shall henceforth refer to as *looting games*. To wit:

Wily practitioners of animal husbandry don't slaughter their cattle when they're thin. They wait until they're fat. And practitioners who are wiliest still don't fatten their cattle but let the cattle fatten *themselves*. Likewise, then, the wiliest practitioners of *human* husbandry don't raid the village in the spring when the granaries are empty, but in the fall, *after* the crops have been taken in. We don't think of the rancher as a looter in Rand's pre-theoretic sense. Why then should we think any less of the raider?

When as-yet-in-opposition conservatives campaign against liberals, they invariably accuse

the latter of looting, in Rand's sense, the most productive members of society. Well, asks Hobbes, who else *would* one loot?! Liberals, as fatuously, counter that it's the *workers* who're the real producers. It's big *business* which, under conservative regimes, has been doing the looting! To which, even were this true, Hobbes would counter, what difference would that make?! Both parties, it would seem - and the ideologies they represent - have bought into the same natural law nonsense foisted upon us by Locke. Good statesmanship is just good economics. And good economics is utterly indifferent to who's looting whom in the Lockean/Randist sense. It's concerned solely with what equilibrium of looting in the *re-appropriated* sense will, in Hobbes' words, best satisfy "men[']s] Feare of Death; Desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living; and [their] Hope by their Industry to obtain them." Or, put another way, talk about producers and looters in the Lockean/Randist sense would disappear - would it not? - once one acknowledged that one produces as much, if not sometimes more, by *restraining* one's looting activities, as does the so-called producer of the goods to be looted. Why, then, do we applaud the one activity but not the other?!

7. The Cleverness/Wisdom distinction

Could we conduct our negotiations over the dividends of peace without the vitriolic rhetoric, a.k.a. ideology, designed to blind us to our true negotiation positions? Oftentimes yes. And that's why, on pain of squandering the widow's mite that pays my salary, I cannot *but* urge the widespread adoption of this reduction. But, I allow, sometimes no. Sometimes, that is, we *need* our blood to boil in order to affect the requisite adjustment to a status quo that doesn't reflect the true equilibrium of power. The trick, of course, is acquiring the wisdom to tell the difference between the two.

My anti-reductionist colleagues tell me that clever is my strong suit. Wisdom, they hasten to add, is not. So having demonstrated the *reducibility* of politics to military science, and having done, I hope, a little more than just hand-waved at what that reduction would look like, I leave it to those whose long suit is wisdom to judge when and when not to urge that this reduction be adopted.

Notes

¹ The view is therefore isomorphic with eliminative materialism in the philosophy of mind.

² For non-Canadian readers, Bernardo is the Canadian paradigm for the sadistic serial killer.

³ I have in mind here Locke and the American Federalists. And, of course, virtually every political thinker since.

⁴ Note that it's the *doxastics* that do all the work here.

⁶ And as we'll see momentarily, what's up for grabs here are *both* material dividends *and* political liberties.

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