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# "Acquired wit" and Hobbesian education

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Thesis

**“ACQUIRED WIT” IN HOBBSIAN EDUCATION**

by

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**DANIEL JOSPEH SOLECKI**

### **ABSTRACT**

This thesis analyzes and evaluates the scheme for civil education discussed in Thomas Hobbes’ political works. Hobbes argues in *The Elements of Law*, *De Cive*, and *Leviathan* that the preservation of political order requires that all subjects learn the rationally grounded principles of political theory. Some contemporary scholarship on this aspect of Hobbes’ political philosophy has confined its understanding of “Hobbesian education” to this: the sovereign’s system of true civil doctrines and the means for their dissemination. I argue that for the system of Hobbesian civil doctrines to function as it is intended, a public must also receive instruction in formal argumentation, a skill Hobbes calls “acquired wit” (*L viii. 13*). I will show that the subjects’ cultivation of their individual reasoning abilities is required so the subjects are able to (1) understand the philosophical foundations of the sovereign’s power, (2) sufficiently resist the allure of obfuscating eloquence and other falsehoods, and (3) conduct themselves in accordance with Hobbes’ natural laws. Civil peace in a Hobbesian system requires that the public be able to tell the difference between sound and unsound inferences. If Hobbes did intend for the sovereign to instruct the public in “acquired wit,” contemporary scholars who have offered sympathetic appraisals of Hobbesian education are further vindicated.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>DC</i>	<i>On the Citizen</i>
<i>ED</i>	“Epistle Dedicatory,” <i>On the Citizen</i>
<i>EL</i>	<i>The Elements of Law Natural and Politic</i>
<i>L</i>	<i>Leviathan</i>
<i>P</i>	“Preface,” <i>On the Citizen</i>
<i>RC</i>	“Review and Conclusion,” <i>Leviathan</i>



## “ACQUIRED WIT” IN HOBBSIAN EDUCATION

### Introduction

In Chapter *viii* of *Leviathan*, Hobbes makes a distinction between “natural wit” and “acquired wit” (*L viii.2-13*). “Natural wit” refers to mental acuity developed through life experience; “acquired wit” refers to the use of “reason,” which is developed through formal instruction (*L viii.13-14*). This paper will explore the connections between Hobbes’ concept of “acquired wit” and his account of the aims and principles of civil education. I will show that the stability of a Hobbesian system requires that Hobbes’ civil education scheme include training the public in the use of reason.

Once the Hobbesian contractarian story is run through, and people have emerged out of the state of nature and established a sovereign, two complementary forces preserve the civil peace: (1) the subjects’ fear of the sovereign’s coercive authority and (2) the subjects’ education in the true doctrines of civil science. Hobbes argues that since fear alone cannot compel the subjects’ obedience, civil education of the public is a necessary—but not sufficient—condition for the survival of a state. This raises a number of questions. Exactly what sort of “education” does Hobbes envision?

As several recent scholars have noted, Hobbes wants subjects taught the *truth* about politics. Citing this aspect of Hobbesian theory, contemporary philosophers like Jeremy Waldron and S.A. Lloyd have interpreted Hobbesian education as a precursor of Enlightenment liberalism (Lloyd 1997; Waldron 2001). However, this characterization has seemed to some scholars to be too generous an appraisal for a view that also advocates the suppression of opposing doctrines and the outlawing of dissent. For

instance, Teresa Bejan has argued that Hobbes' education scheme is designed to promote unthinking obedience to the sovereign's commands and civil dogmas (Bejan 2010). On this interpretation, Hobbes' interest in "imprinting" subjects is quite far from any sort of education program we might call even remotely "liberal" (Bejan 2010: 615-618). In this paper, I hope to address an aspect of Hobbesian education that Lloyd, Waldron, and Bejan pass over: Hobbes' enthusiasm for "acquired wit." Hobbes' system of civil doctrines that receives attention in the work of these scholars is an incomplete picture of Hobbesian education. If my argument holds, and Hobbes was indeed committed to teaching scientific reasoning to the general public, Lloyd and Waldron's conclusions about Hobbes as a proto-liberal are further vindicated.

I make a distinction here between an education by acquaintance with certain authoritative propositions and an education that cultivates certain skills. The role of this second kind of education has been underexplored in Hobbes scholarship, but is invaluable for the aims of the Hobbesian civil education scheme. Insofar as Hobbes argues that subjects should be taught the arguments that ground the sovereign's authority, subjects must learn how to interpret these arguments and understand the sequence of their propositions. Secondly, as Hobbes deems the equivocal use of speech to be among the chief threats to internal stability, subjects must learn "acquired wit" to be intellectually fortified against "abuses of language" (*L iv.4*). Furthermore, insofar as moral reasoning for Hobbes demands making sound inferences from true principles (*L xxvii.12*), Hobbesian subjects must learn how to properly draw moral conclusions from the natural laws. While the sovereign's instruction of the public in true doctrines reinforces the

public's intellectual tenacity, part of this tenacity must also be rooted in the subjects' ability to recognize sound reasoning when they see it. This can only be achieved, according to Hobbes himself, by careful study in the practice of ratiocination (*L viii. 14*). After outlining Hobbes' account of civil doctrines and the treatment of this issue in recent scholarship, I will outline Hobbes' views on the uses and abuses of speech. Given Hobbes' claims about the perils of false reasoning, I will present three arguments for why the Hobbesian system requires that subjects learn "acquired wit."

### **The Doctrine System in Hobbes' Scheme for Civil Education**

Hobbes grounds his view of education on the notion that public opinion determines whether the civil state prevails. In *Elements of Law*, Hobbes claims that we always act in light of our opinions about the rewards or punishments that we imagine result from a particular course of action (*EL I.12.6*). If the subjects hold opinions that give them "pretense of right" to rebel, and if the subjects are also ill-disposed towards the sovereign and have "hope of success," these seemingly innocent opinions will bring about sedition (*EL II.8.4*). In the *De Cive* version of this discussion, Hobbes claims that if the sovereign espouses the wrong sort of doctrines *or* does not espouse any doctrines at all, subjects are liable to take on opinions that will incline them toward rebellion (*DC vi.11*). The sovereign then has the right to both (1) decide which doctrines are inimical to peace and (2) suppress the public teaching of those doctrines (*DC vi.11*).

How does the sovereign decide which doctrines to allow and which to forbid? In the note to *DC vi.11*, Hobbes claims that there is no field of knowledge in which disputes

will not arise. Inevitable disagreements can ultimately result in violent confrontation (*DC vi.11n*). The tendency of disputes to end in violence is the consequence of the pride human beings take in their own supposed intelligence and in their emotional motivations to vindicate themselves (*DC vi.11n*). Given this unfortunate fact of human nature, the sovereign will not be able to manage all opinions, but will be able to focus attention on regulating the most seditious doctrines—the doctrines that suggest the subjects obey an entity other than the civil sovereign (*DC vi.11n*). Hobbes is particularly concerned about doctrines that demand obedience either to God or to a religious institution at the expense of the sovereign (*DC vi.11n*). Since any ambiguity about obedience is inimical to civil peace, doctrines that give political credibility to ecclesiastical powers should be rigorously suppressed (*DC vi.11n*).

In the *Leviathan* version of this argument, Hobbes claims that the sovereign could decide which doctrines to teach by appealing to a different qualification: whether or not the doctrines are true. Hobbes claims that when the sovereign plans the content of the civil education program, “in matter of doctrine nothing ought to be regarded except for truth, yet this is not repugnant to regulating of the same by peace” (*L xviii.9*). If true doctrines are publicly taught to all subjects, civil peace reigns. What is so special about truth that makes true doctrines conducive to peace? A few of the early chapters of *Leviathan* offer a plausible interpretation. It is important to note what Hobbes means by “truth.” In Chapter *iv*, Hobbes gives a definition of truth—it is the “right ordering of names” whereby the concept that one name signifies is contained in the signification of another term (*L iv.12*). Coming to this right ordering demands beginning our inquiries

with settled definitions and reasoning to new conclusions. The signs that we have attained what Hobbes calls “science”—that is, certain knowledge of what follows from settled and correct definitions for concepts—are that we can “demonstrate the truth [of the propositions] perspicuously to another” (*L v.22*). Although Hobbes does not explicitly use the contemporary language of a community of ideal reasoners “converging” upon a publicly perspicuous truth, Hobbes suggests something at least similar: that truth enjoys a special kind of clarity, universality, and public availability (*L iv.9-12*). By contrast, falsehood necessarily inspires confusion and disagreement, which leads to war (*L v.20*). Therefore, when Hobbes claims that the sovereign can regulate peace by means of true doctrines, this is tantamount to saying that the doctrines ought to be demonstrable, publicly, and recognized as true by any reasoning subject. The perspicuous demonstrability of true doctrines generates the public’s accord.

To take an illustrative example of a particular doctrine Hobbes considers “repugnant” to peace, we can consider the Aristotelian notion that virtues are defined by “the mediocrity [mean] of the passions” (*L xv.40*). Hobbes claims that this doctrine is false and leads to sedition (*L xv.40*). What makes this so? Hobbes argues that given that our appetites and aversions are always mutable and ambiguous, if we take the measure of our appetites and aversions to define the virtues, we can never arrive at a fixed definition of what is “good” and what is “evil” (*L xv.40*). If this false Aristotelian doctrine is publicly taught, disputes about morality will end up amounting to an irreconcilable conflict of personalities, and thus lead to conflict. It is not merely the case that certain opinions are harmful because they give people “pretense of right” to rebel or obfuscate

their political obligations, it is that these harmful doctrines are demonstrably false. They are, as doctrines, developed from erroneous or ambiguous principles and cannot generate solid accord among the public. They do not count as *civil science*.

The idea that subjects should learn the *true* rational grounds of their political obligation is a new direction in political thought (Lloyd 1997: 46-47). The major figures in Hobbes' own tradition had not granted common people the right to learn the foundations of politics, let alone taken up the universal teaching of political philosophy as a functioning cogwheel in their philosophical systems. According to the figures of the Renaissance's Neo-Ciceronian tradition of civil education, political unity is achieved by the eloquence of great orators who, by combining true principles with appeals to common *pathos* and theatrical displays of rhetorical tropes, direct the public into a stable order (Skinner 2002: 69-72). In Machiavelli's *Discourses*, the ruler is actually encouraged to manipulate subjects and lie to them about the principles of government (Lloyd 1997: 46-47). Hobbes' view of civil education is a remarkable contrast to these positions. Hobbes takes political pacification to be the result of public enlightenment—the public's capacity to learn the *arguments* that ground the true principles of government.

Hobbes is well aware of his place in the history of political thought on this issue. In the preface of *De Cive*, Hobbes acknowledges that in antiquity, political theory was only given over to the public by the “pretty forms of poetry or in the shadowy outlines of Allegory” so that the supposedly “high and holy mystery of government” would not be admitted into the vagueness and confusion of public discourse (*DC P.2*). Knowledge of justice was thus “wrapped up in fables” (*DC P.6*). However, ever since Socrates and the

subsequent tradition, people who claim wisdom about morals and politics have produced a myriad of conflicting opinions (*DC P.3*). This is particularly dangerous because commonwealths can collapse from false philosophical principles (*DC P.7*). Although Hobbes does not use this metaphor in the *De Cive* preface (relying here on a different myth from classical antiquity), it is as if the Socratic tradition opened a Pandora's Box that allowed the world to be overrun with competing political doctrines. Hobbes muses that if only people could learn that the sovereign's civil laws and their interpretations are to be acknowledged as the true and only definitions of good and evil, the "war of the sword and war of the pens" (*DC ED.7*) would finally fade into the past, and subjects could find "the royal road to peace" (*DC P.8*).

In *Leviathan xxix* and in the corresponding passages in the earlier works, Hobbes gets into the particulars of the false doctrines that lead to civil unrest (*EL II.8.4*; *DC xii.1-7*; *L xxix.6-14*). In making this list, Hobbes reiterates and summarizes many of his fundamental principles. The first doctrine Hobbes identifies as inimical to peace is the belief that "every private man is judge of good and evil actions" (*L xxix.6*). While the individual judgement of good and evil is in fact true in the state of nature, this is only because without a sovereign to decide the meaning of good and evil, "good" and "evil" are merely terms used to describe people's ever-mutable appetites and aversions (*L vi.7*). Hobbes claims that since "good" and "evil" do not track any fixed properties in nature, allowing subjects in a civil state to decide for themselves what is ultimately "good" will inevitably lead to confusion and eventually violence (*L xviii.10*). If people are taught that

they may dogmatically take up their own individual reason about the good as “right reason,” there will be no end to their conflict (*L v.3*).

The cause of this dangerous ambiguity is ultimately a confusion about language. Since people fail to recognize that “good” is an “inconstant name” (*L iv.24*)—always unavoidably attached to the fickle passions of the person using the word—individual definitions of “the good” can provide no sound grounds for reasoning. Because of the danger of allowing such a morally freighted term to be manipulated by individual speakers, one of the primary duties of the sovereign is to be the final arbiter in decisions of what is to be called good and evil (*L xviii.10*). In the Hobbesian civil state, what is called “good” and “evil” is a matter decided exclusively by the sovereign’s commands, laid forth in the commonwealth’s system of indisputable civil laws and their authoritative interpretations (*L xviii.11*). Under such a system, “the good” is unambiguous: what is lawful is good, what is unlawful is evil.

The second doctrine Hobbes describes as inimical to peace is the idea that it is a sin to act against conscience (*L xxix.7*). “Conscience” here denotes what Hobbes calls the “metaphorical” use of the term—the inner experience of God-given “secret facts and secret thoughts” that are sometimes claimed to be the foundations of an infallible moral sense (*L vii.4*). Hobbes deflates this notion; he argues that no assertion of “conscience” can be rightly taken as authoritative over the sovereign’s commands (*L xxix.7*). Hobbes claims that what is generally called “judgment” and what Calvinists and others call “conscience” are actually the same phenomenon (*L xxix.7*). “Conscience” is merely an honorific used by religiously inspired people “vehemently in love with their own new



opinions” (*L vii.4*). Taking an interior sense of “conscience” as the ultimate arbiter of good and evil is tantamount to treating one’s own judgment as superior to the sovereign’s. Furthermore, by agreeing with all one’s fellow subjects in a Hobbesian commonwealth to institute a sovereign, each subject has already authorized the sovereign’s actions (*L xvii.13*). In doing so, the subjects have already subordinated their private judgement of good and evil to the sovereign’s public judgment and have already consented to take up the civil laws as “public conscience” (*L xxix.7*).

Hobbes also takes aim at another religious doctrine: that “faith and sanctity” are determined by “supernatural inspiration” and not by a sincere and meticulous interpretation of scripture (*L xxix.8*). The idea that anyone can claim divine inspiration is absurd, Hobbes argues, because if such were the case it would be possible for every believing Christian to consider themselves a prophet (*L xxix.8*). The various ways that such self-proclaimed prophets interpret scripture would inevitably be inconsistent, and thus invite conflict. Like the calling of conscience, the inner sense of divine inspiration also ends up assuming that individual reasoning is the judge of good and evil, which is irreconcilable with civil peace (*L xxix.8*).

Hobbes next lists several other false civil doctrines that should be suppressed. Among these is the idea that the sovereign is subject to the civil laws (*L xxix.9*). This was the false doctrine that had sent Charles I to his execution just a few years before Hobbes published *Leviathan*. Hobbes claims that if the laws are set above the sovereign to provide a check on its behavior, then the sovereign is not a sovereign properly speaking at all. In a commonwealth governed by “rule of law” it is not the sovereign who issues

commands, but the commands—that is, the laws—themselves (*L xxix.9*). While this is certainly an agreeable arrangement for both Hobbes’ liberal descendants and his Aristotelian ancestors, rule of law runs afoul of several Hobbesian principles. The assignment of sovereignty is made, in part, to replace the unfixed and inconclusive moral reasoning characteristic of the state of nature with the orderly and unambiguous commands of one person or assembly (*L xxix.9*). The rule of law and not of a human sovereign adds an unresolvable ambiguity to this arrangement. According to Hobbes, since all laws are in need of interpretation (*L xxvi.21*), if the sovereign is subject to the civil laws, then the judge that interprets those laws is the sovereign of the sovereign (*L xxix.9*). Such a judge would be the true sovereign. Hobbes concludes that this arrangement produces an infinite regress of sovereigns and their judges, and so it must be false (*L xxix.9*).

Hobbes lists several other doctrines to be suppressed. For instance, he argues that subjects should not be taught that property rights are inalienable (*L xxix.10*). The idea of property rights that exclude sovereign incursion is inconsistent because the subjects are ultimately only able to hold property insofar as there is a sovereign to preserve the civil peace (*L xxix.10*). The subjects’ granting themselves inalienable property rights prevents the sovereign from maintaining one of its chief duties: protecting the subjects (*L xxix.10*).

Subjects must also be taught that sovereign power must not be divided, because then the divided parts of government will seek sovereignty over one another (*L xxix.12*). Subjects must also be taught not to envy the political structures of neighboring countries

because changing a government just for the sake of following the example of another nation will lead to a recurring pattern of civil disruption (*L xxix.13*).

Among the most striking of Hobbes' warnings about false doctrines is his claim that the Renaissance's revival of Greek and Latin learning must be strictly regulated to prevent subjects from getting the wrong sort of inspiration from classical antiquity (*L xxix.14*). Hobbes notes that it is dangerously easy without "the antidote of solid reason" to enthusiastically take the ancient authors as offering not only exemplar cases of personal virtues, but also exemplars of civic virtues (*L xxix.14*). An untutored view of the ancients will inspire the belief that modern people ought to reproduce something like Periclean Athens or the Roman Republic. Hobbes claims that this misguided enthusiasm for antiquity has given modern people the false impression that killing a king is actually the noble act of "tyrannicide" and that the overthrow of a monarchy amounts to an emancipation from slavery (*L xxix.14*). Classical learning also gives subjects the notion that a commonwealth is made up of several "souls" in competition with one another, and that the "ghostly," or religious soul of the state—and not the civil sovereign—could claim right to rule (*L xxix.15*). Since these specious inferences drawn from the works of classical antiquity are so dangerous, these works must be read only with the counsel of someone who can show their falsehoods (*L xxix.14*).

Set in its historical context, *Leviathan* Chapter *xxix* sets up a far-reaching program to erase many of the prevailing intellectual trends of early modern Europe. Among the doctrines that Hobbes considers detrimental are those of taken from the Aristotelian tradition: that individual reasoners are capable of determining the true nature of good and

evil (*L xxix.6*), that the sovereign is subject to the rule of law (*L xxix.9*), and that killing unpopular rulers is a noble act (*L xxix.14*; cf. *L xlvi 32-36*). Hobbes also targets the Calvinist notions that divine conscience is the arbiter of good and evil and that holiness comes from an interior reception of the divine spirit (*L xxix.7-8*). He also confronts the Catholic idea that the established church has “ghostly” power over subjects (*L xxix.15*) and confronts the English constitutional tradition that sets monarch, parliament, and the common law in “mixed” government (*L xxix.16*). Hobbes claims to have proved these doctrines false and incapable of securing civil peace. In creating a Hobbesian system, the predominant intellectual, religious, and legal traditions of early modern Europe are to be set aside. What ought to replace them?

Hobbes’ education program is a plan for a cultural shift—a plan to use true philosophy to solve the social ills wrought by false philosophy. The notion that Hobbes is interested in making the culture of the Scientific Revolution the public culture has been explored at length in the work of David Johnston, particularly in his *The Rhetoric of Leviathan* (Johnston 1986; cf. 128-133). Indeed, this theme of civil education as a *corrective* for the past appears in all of Hobbes’ political works. In *The Elements of Law*, Hobbes claims that because civil unrest is brought about by erroneous opinions spread by the traditions of Aristotelianism and “sophistry,” the sovereign’s duty must include “perspicuously set[ting] down” true ideas about natural law, civil law, and roles of the sovereign (*EL II.9.8*). In *De Cive* Chapter *xiii*, Hobbes claims that it is the duty of the sovereign to “root out” the false doctrines of past philosophers that have been so deleterious by “gently” teaching the public the right doctrines (*DC xiii.9*).

I have so far outlined what Hobbes thinks should not be taught. I will turn now to his arguments justifying his civil education program and his account of the program's content. In Chapter *xxx* of *Leviathan*, Hobbes introduces the civil education program as the solution for three different problems of political order: (1) that fear of punishment is not sufficient to compel the populace's obedience (*L xxx.4*), (2) that an insufficiently instructed populace may be seduced into rebellion by a "public enemy" (*L xxiii.6*; *L xxx.3*), and (3) that an insufficiently instructed populace may misunderstand its "natural obligation" to obey the laws (*L xxx.4*).<sup>1</sup>

Hobbes opens the discussion of civil education in *Leviathan* chapter *xxx* with the claim that without a public education program to give subjects a clear understanding of the grounds of government and political obligation, subjects are "easy to be seduced" by rival theories and "drawn to resist" the sovereign (*L xxx.3*). The invocation of "seduction" indicates a specific range of worries about how the subjects respond to the assertions of their fellow subjects. Hobbes' hope here is that subjects who know the grounds of the sovereign's right are resistant to false rhetoric; they are tenacious in their obedience because they understand the principles of their obedience. Without such clear, unequivocal understanding of the sovereign's power and the valid arguments that ground it, subjects will be liable to believe anyone that tries to convince them of a doctrine that

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<sup>1</sup> Hobbes makes distinctions between these problems elsewhere in the text. In "Of the Public Ministers of Sovereign Power," Hobbes argues that the sovereign must set up ministers for public education so that the public are "[1] more apt to live in godliness and in peace amongst themselves, and [2] resist the public enemy" (*L xxiii.6*). In "Of the Difference of Manners," Hobbes lists "ignorance" of political obligation separately from other kinds of public ignorance (*L xi.17-23*).

sounds appealing.<sup>2</sup> If the arguments grounding the sovereign's power are publicly disseminated, subjects in a Hobbesian system would have these reasons as a perspicuous and rigorous standard to use as a measure against false doctrines. We can imagine that in a situation where a subject is putting forward a false or misleading doctrine, the subjects who hear it will not give it credence because the rival doctrine is inconsistent with the sovereign's established truth.

In the next paragraph, Hobbes gives another series of reasons for political education (*L xxx.4*). He claims that the grounds of government must be taught because without an understanding of the foundations of a sovereign's right, subjects would not understand why they should obey the law at all (*L xxx.4*). Hobbes begins the argument here with the claim that the coercive power of the sovereign is alone not powerful enough to compel obedience to the civil laws (*L xxx.4*). The sovereign must use education as an auxiliary strategy. The subjects should be compelled to follow the laws by developing their own true understanding of why lawfulness is in their individual interest (*L xxx.4*). What Hobbes requires here is quite specific. Hobbes claims that in order to understand their political obligation, subjects must understand the natural law "that forbiddeth the violation of faith" (*L xxx.4*)—Hobbes' natural law of "justice." Having already either consented to the sovereign's authority or formed an agreement with one another to obey the sovereign, if subjects are not acquainted with the natural law of justice that enjoins the keeping of contracts, they will not understand the reasons they ought to obey the

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<sup>2</sup> S.A. Lloyd takes up these issues in her consideration of the character of the "dupe" (Lloyd 2009: 326-328).

sovereign's laws. The implication is that subjects ignorant of their "natural obligation" to keep their contracts are like the dangerous "fool" of *Leviathan* Chapter *xv* who claims there is no such thing as justice (*L xv.4*). Such misinformed subjects will not understand why they ought to keep their contracts with one another and obey the sovereign's laws. Of course, a commonwealth comprised of such people cannot last. Therefore, the arguments that form the grounds of the sovereign's right to make commands—including the foundations of natural law in the injunction to "seek peace" (*L xiv.4*)—must be made publicly perspicuous (*L xxx.4*). It is only by understanding the grounds of sovereign right in natural law that people will be able to understand that it is in their interest to obey the sovereign.

If "natural obligation" is not properly taught, subjects will be lost in a confusion of their fear of the sovereign's commands and their own mutable individual passions and appetites (*L xxx.4*). Not knowing the grounds of the sovereign's right makes the subjects perilously confused about the sovereign's exclusive right to the public exercise of punitive action. Subjects ignorant of the sovereign's right are liable to take state punishment as outright hostility and be inclined to retaliate (*L xxx.4*).

It is worth summarizing Hobbes' fundamental claims here. Civil peace depends on whether or not the subjects understand the grounds of the sovereign's power. Hobbes offers three reasons for why people must be thus taught: (1) that coercive force is not sufficient to compel obedience, (2) that teaching the true principles of government defends the populace against the public spread of erroneous doctrines, and (3) that

teaching true principles compels the subjects, in their own private deliberations, to know that obedience to the sovereign is morally required.

Hobbes acknowledges that this kind of civil education is a very ambitious scheme. How could he expect the public to understand the niceties of the arguments that ground the sovereign's power? We can recognize the radical quality of Hobbes' proposal for political education in his extensive objection-anticipating in the immediately subsequent passages. Hobbes first responds forcefully to the objection that his scheme is unworkable because of the complexity of his ideas (*L xxx.6*). He claims that his doctrine only appears difficult because people are uninterested in following an argument *prima facie* contrary to common presuppositions (*L xxx.6*). Hobbes claims that politically powerful people do not want to accept his theory because they see it as a threat to their ambitions. Intellectuals do not want to accept the theory because it refutes their own conclusions and delegitimizes their work (*L xxx.6*). Hobbes reasons that he can dismiss objections made by such people—his usual interlocutors—because their judgment is clouded by their self-interest (*L xxx.6*). On the other hand, Hobbes speculates, common people rightly taught will surely be able to understand his positions. Unless common people are obstinate in believing received dogma, their minds “are like clean paper, fit to receive whatsoever by public authority shall be imprinted in them” (*L xxx.6*). As if to quell the concerns those who might be uneasy with this image, Hobbes compares the potential of his education program to the spread of Christianity. Just as much of Europe was brought to believe miracles “against reason,” including transubstantiation, people should be even more inclined to believe a view that is drawn entirely from rational



principles (*L xxx.6*). If people can be made to believe in false miracles, Hobbes argues, then surely subjects are capable of believing the demonstrable truth of Hobbesian theory (*L xxx.6*).

Other than the foundations of government and political obligation, what else should be taught? Hobbes lists a number of minor doctrines and policies to complement the subjects' education in civil science. As a rhetorical device to frame these minor doctrines, Hobbes associates each with one or more of the Ten Commandments. Subjects should be taught not to overvalue the political systems of neighboring countries and should not overvalue "popular men" that may usurp or outshine the public role of the sovereign (*L xxx.7-8*). The sovereign authority also must teach that it is forbidden for subjects to criticize the sovereign (*L xxx.9*). Hobbes also recommends a civil Sabbath to be set aside for the public to hear their duties and civil laws read (*L xxx.10*). Having such a political holiday is essential because it makes sure the subjects will "be put in mind of the authority that maketh them laws" (*L xxx.10*). The common subjects' political education also extends to the private domain. Taking a cue from the commandment to honor parents, Hobbes claims that children should be taught to understand sovereignty in terms of the political structure of the family (*L xxx.11*). Hobbes summarizes the later commandments with the claim that the sovereign is responsible for teaching the particulars of the law and the importance of equity in the justice system (*L xxx.12-14*).

In his set of minor doctrines, Hobbes outlines two possible venues for civil education: the civil Sabbath and the family. These are only a part of the commonwealth's doctrine system. The most important institution for disseminating doctrines are the

universities. Hobbes touches on this theme in each of his major political works. In *Elements*, Hobbes claims that teachers and preachers who have studied Aristotle and other ancient figures in universities are responsible for the spread of falsehoods such as the idea that individuals can be the judge of good and evil and that sedition is the people's right (*EL II.9.8*). The ancient and scholastic authors taught at Oxbridge "have delivered nothing concerning morality and policy demonstrably"; their doctrines have merely won over the minds of modern readers "by eloquent sophistry" (*EL II.9.8*). If only these ancient thinkers could be replaced in the curriculum with Hobbesian theory, students in universities—"whose minds are yet as white paper"—would readily imbibe the truth about the foundations of law and sovereignty and be able to readily teach that truth to the people (*EL II.9.8*).

The analogous passage in *De Cive* further elaborates these concerns about the role of universities in public discourse. How exactly have seditious opinions about the judgment of good and evil reached the general public? Hobbes accuses the way information trickles out of the universities (*DC xiii.9*). Most people, he claims, get their ideas about moral and political matters through "the pulpits of popular preachers" and from everyday conversations with people whose philosophical positions were forged out of what they remember of ancient authors they read during their university days (*DC xiii.9*). The regular repetition of these false propositions in everyday life has given people the impression that these propositions are true, when they are, in fact, "no more intelligible than if you took words by lot from an urn and strung them together" (*DC xiii.9*). By contrast, if true political doctrines are taught in universities, Hobbes' rationally

grounded civil science would spread to the populace and contribute to the preservation of civil peace.

In the *Leviathan* version of this passage, Hobbes associates part of the public's misinformation with inattentiveness to civil science. Some people, either out of need or self-interest, are too focused on their private work or the pursuit of pleasure to learn the principles of science (*L xxx.14*). Because most people do not carefully study the principles of "natural justice" or any other science, they take their opinions from the available sources—their preachers and their neighbors who "plausibly seem wiser" in political or legal matters (*L xxx.14*). Because those subjects who make a "show of learning" and command an audience maintain their claims to authority by their university education, if this education is cleansed of its Aristotelian tint and takes up the true doctrines of politics, the phenomenon of common people taking their views from the apparently learned would be put to work in preserving civil peace (*L xxx.14*). Therefore, the path to lasting civil peace begins with providing the right sort of university education.

In the passage on universities in *Leviathan xxx* Hobbes asks a rhetorical question, imagining an objector asking him "is it you [who] will undertake to teach the universities?" (*L xxx.14*). Hobbes seizes the setup for a performance of his dry wit. Hobbes replies "it is not fit, nor needful, for me to say either aye or no; for any man that sees what I am doing may easily perceive what I think" (*L xxx.14*). Hobbes confirms the reader's suspicions in *Leviathan's* "Review and Conclusion." Hobbes claims that since universities "are fountains of civil and moral doctrine," it would be good for the curriculum to adopt *Leviathan* as a central text (*L RC.16*). Provided that the universities

are free of “the venom of heathen politicians and from the incantations of deceiving spirits [namely, Aristotelianism],” the people who attend university should take up Hobbesian doctrines from these fountains and “sprinkle” what they learn on the general public (*L RC.16*). Having been acquainted with the curriculum of Hobbesian universities, subjects will find themselves less willing to “serve the ambitions of a few discontented persons” in rebellion and more willing to contribute to public defense (*L RC.16*). This adds yet another dimension to the general aims of Hobbesian education. The public’s commitment to serving critical national interests is won not by compulsion or blind patriotic faith—which can be easily misunderstood or rejected—but by the demonstrable truths of civil science. A properly educated Hobbesian populace would understand what is at stake when the civil peace is threatened.

Hobbes outlines his conclusions about civil education with orchestrated braggadocio, in all likelihood actually intent on inviting the scorn of his targets. This reproachful attitude, of course, led to uproar (Bejan 2010: 608). The same intellectual luminaries of the period who chastised Hobbes for his unrepentant materialism and determinism also excoriated him for this university reform plan. John Wallis scoffed that Hobbes only wanted to jettison “Aristotelity” from the universities so that “Hobbeity” could take its place as the dominant philosophy (Bejan 2010: 608). Of course, Wallis is not wrong in this assessment. Oxbridge professors quite predictably found Hobbes’ hubris unpalatable.

### Contemporary Appraisals of Hobbesian Education

In the contemporary scholarly literature, evaluations of Hobbes on education have centered on a notion I have elucidated here: Hobbes' idea that subjects must be "truly taught" the principles of political theory (Lloyd 1997; Waldron 2001). As Hobbes himself recognized, there is indeed something very novel in the view that subjects ought to learn the truth about politics. The role of truth in Hobbesian education has been most closely considered in the work of Jeremy Waldron and S.A. Lloyd.

In her 1997 paper, "Coercion, Ideology, and Education in *Leviathan*," Lloyd argues that while we might object to the particular content of the Hobbesian education scheme, we might not so readily object to its structure (Lloyd 1997).<sup>3</sup> While it is implausible that a contemporary person would want to submit themselves for education in a Hobbesian university or be a faithfully obedient subject of an absolute Hobbesian sovereign, the idea that the state should provide the subjects with true information critical to the state's survival is not in itself very problematic—in fact, this principle is deeply connected with Rawls' conclusions in *Political Liberalism* (Lloyd 1997: 54). Hobbesian education has much in common with a central ideal of contemporary liberal education: that children are not to be taught falsehoods (Lloyd 1997: 38-39, 58-59). Just as Hobbes thought teaching Aristotelian ethics was politically irresponsible, no right-minded contemporary education reformer would want children learning discredited pseudoscience or other such falsehoods. As such, the education program described in

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<sup>3</sup> Lloyd expands this same argument in "Fools, Hypocrites, Zealots, and Dupes: Civic Character and Social Stability," Chapter 7 of *Morality in the Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (Lloyd 1997: 295-356).

*Leviathan* is not “objectionably ideological”; Hobbes is not interested in fabricating a false dogma to pacify the subjects, he is interested in teaching the public what he took to be a momentous discovery—the rational principles of civil science (Lloyd 1997: 45-47, 54-60).

Jeremy Waldron has concurred with Lloyd that Hobbesian education has a surprisingly liberal quality (Waldron 1998). Waldron is particularly interested in aspects of Hobbes’ thought that seem to reflect the Rawlsian principle of publicity (Waldron 2001: 448). For Rawls, one of the fundamental tenets of an ideal political order is the idea that politics must not be based on lies or myths about government or public institutions (Waldron 2001: 448). The grounds of state authority ought to be demonstrably true, and the public must be able to recognize these truths. Waldron argues that the Hobbesian education scheme, insofar as it offers something very close to this picture, meets Rawls’ criteria for the principle of publicity.

Waldron also argues further that the Hobbesian education scheme has “respect” for individual reasoners (Waldron 2001: 469). Waldron points out that while the Hobbesian scheme does not have “respect” for reasoners in the sense of a guaranteed freedom of speech, Hobbes does seem to be alert to the possibility that the subjects will figure out the truth for themselves if the sovereign tries to make government mysterious (Waldron 2001: 468-469). The very fact that the sovereign must be open about the grounds of government is evidence that Hobbes took care to accommodate the savvy of individual reasoners into his political picture. Since the exposure of a political ruse can be

so destabilizing, it is better for the sovereign to tell the subjects the truth than to dissemble (Waldron 1998: 142-143).

Lloyd and Waldron have met rebuke from Teresa Bejan, who emphasizes that Hobbes merely intends the civil education program to provide a supplemental justification for obeying the law in cases where the subject's fear of the sovereign is insufficient (Bejan 2010: 615). The principal force compelling obedience and maintaining the political order is the subjects' fear of the sovereign's power (Bejan 2010: 615). Against Lloyd and Waldron, Bejan draws from Hobbes repeated use of the "clean paper" metaphor (*EL II.9.8; L xxx.7*) and characterizes the sovereign's education scheme as "imprinting" (Bejan 2010: 620). The Hobbesian program for civil education is something akin to an indisputable secular faith to which all subjects will be taught the catechism (Bejan 2010: 618-620).

All three of these authors give extensive treatment to the issue of the role of civil doctrines in Hobbes' political system. However, they leave underexplored Hobbes' hopes for the cultivation of the subject's intellectual capacities. In what follows, I will give Hobbes' account of speech, reason, and science and show that a Hobbesian subject ought to learn how to tell the difference between rationally grounded discourse and specious reasoning. I argue that being able to dogmatically recite the sovereign's doctrines cannot suffice; knowing what makes rationally grounded discourse rationally grounded is a necessary precondition for Hobbes' educational scheme to have its intended effect.

Waldron's claim that Hobbes shows "respect" for individual reasoners (Waldron 2001: 469) does not completely align with Hobbes' most salient worries. It is not that

people are so naturally endowed with reason that they will be able to determine whether or not the sovereign's claim to authority is a ruse. The larger problem lies with the subjects' lack of reasoning abilities. Hobbes is more concerned that an insufficiently educated public might not be rational enough to understand what is required to preserve a commonwealth. If public ignorance and the subjects' failure to understand the grounds of sovereignty are indeed significant threats to public peace, it follows that at least some subjects must learn the proper use of ratiocination. Without this "acquired" skill as a component of Hobbesian education, the subjects have no litmus test for truth in politics, either of the sovereign's own doctrines or of any other set of beliefs.

### **Truth, "Acquired Wit," and Civil Peace**

While a complete portrait of Hobbes on language is beyond the scope of this study, there are a number of aspects of Hobbes' theory of language that are important for his hopes for a civil education of the public. The power of imposing names on things is supremely useful for all of the needs of a human community, but it is deleterious if used improperly (*L iv.13*). How does language lay these foundations for civil peace? What sort of discourse is capable of this feat? Hobbes' exemplar for rational discourse is geometry, which he describes as one of the only precise sciences so far discovered (*L iv.12*). Arriving at truth requires "settling" the "significations" for terms on stable and plausible definitions and being meticulous about the logic of our inferences (*L iv.11-13*). This kind of Euclidean rigor, by virtue of its inexorable logic, has tangible effects when applied to political theory (cf. *L xxx.5-6*). Hobbes hopes that just as all individual reasoners



correctly following Euclid's system land at identical conclusions, all reasoners following his system will achieve an analogous concord: identical conceptions of the true grounds of sovereignty.

Hobbes calls this kind of geometric reasoning "ratiocination" (*L v.2*). When we ratiocinate with true affirmations, all we are doing is "reckoning"—that is "adding and subtracting"—the consequences of general names (*L v.2*). A syllogism, for Hobbes, is a "sum" of consequences of terms; the certainty of its conclusion depends on the stability and plausibility of the definitions employed (*L v.1*). If we can take all of the fixed terms that make up a particular field of knowledge and prove theorems from these definitions, the resulting proofs are what Hobbes calls a "science" (*L v.17*). This scientific discourse is not merely knowledge of particular facts or likelihoods, it "is the knowledge of consequences," the sum of all of the syllogistically deduced theorems in a particular area of language (*L v.17*). Science proceeds to certain conclusions that all capable reasoners could rationally arrive upon and is perspicuously demonstrable from one person to another (*L v.22*).

It takes an *education* in language and reason to become versed in science—one must be learned in precise definitions and be able to set the definitions forth in a logical proof (*L v.17*). In chapter *viii*, Hobbes makes clear that ratiocination is not a skill people are born with; it is only learned with extensive practice. This distinction between "natural wit" and "acquired wit" is a recurring theme in *Leviathan*. Hobbes defines "natural wit" as good judgment, directedness of thinking, and mental quickness (*L xiii.2-12*). "Natural wit" is innate and is cultivated throughout life by experience, resulting in a type of

practical wisdom about particular situations Hobbes calls “prudence” (*L viii.11*). In Chapter *xiii*, just before he describes the state of nature, Hobbes discusses natural wit as one of those qualities in which human beings are fundamentally about equal (*L xiii.1-2*). Acquired wit, he reiterates, is developed exclusively through education (*L viii.14*). Training in the ability to draw truth from language is extremely fruitful for worldly concerns. Human progress and the benefits of the civil state are won through sound inferences (*L v.20*). “The light of human minds,” claims Hobbes, “is perspicuous words...by exact definitions first snuffed and purged from ambiguity; reason is the pace; increase of science, the way; and the benefit of mankind, the end” (*L v.20*).

### **The Consequences of Irrational Speech: Absurdity, Sophistry, Civil Discord**

I have been outlining Hobbes’ concept of “acquired wit” and his sense of why this particular skill is so important. The contrast case with acquired wit is speech that signifies equivocally, refers to objects that do not exist, or uses private meanings of words. This kind of speech cannot bring about rational convergence on shared principles and is frequently the cause of civil unrest (*L v.20*).

Abuses of speech often begin as mistaken or insufficiently stable concepts. If definitions are not kept meticulously distinct, an inquirer “will find himself entangled in words; as a bird in lime twigs” (*L iv.12*). The errors in a definition compound over the course of one’s reasoning and lead to absurdities (*L iv.5*). Hobbes took this kind of deeply entrenched absurdity to be the defining characteristic of the contemporary state of the sciences, particularly moral and political philosophy (*L iv.13*). Scholars who adhere to

false definitions and attempt to wring truth out of nebulous Aristotelian distinctions are like “birds that entering by the chimney, and finding themselves enclosed in a chamber, flutter at the false light of a glass window, for want of wit to consider which way they came in” (*L iv.13*). This incoherence has led to public disagreement, and thus to conflict.

How can the subjects of a Hobbesian system avoid this kind of speech? Among the primary sources of this problem is the phenomenon of “inconstant signification” (*L iv.24*). The seemingly straightforward process of characterizing behavior or naming objects can be fraught with inconsistencies. Hobbes argues that our private conceptions of the world are highly mutable—these conceptions depend to a large degree on our ever-shifting emotions and bodily states (*L iv.24*). As a result, we have a tendency to apply different qualitative terms to the same objects, inevitably giving our speech “a tincture of our different passions” (*L iv.24*). This “tincture” is the source of many errors. Hobbes claims that there are a substantial number of words that we often treat as having a fixed meaning in nature, but are actually “inconstant.” Hobbes counts among these troublesome words “the names of the virtues and vices” (*L iv.24*). Words like “wisdom,” “stupidity,” “gravity,” and “prodigality” have equivocal significations, and cannot ever be admitted into “true grounds of any ratiocination” (*L iv.24*). Unless their definitions are fixed by the sovereign power, one ought not reason with “inconstant names” (*L iv.7*). Different reasoners will have different private definitions of these terms and will, accordingly, land at different conclusions, making conflict inevitable.

Hobbes excoriates the Aristotelian tradition in particular for falling into this linguistic trap. In *Leviathan xlvi* Hobbes claims that Greek moral thought never

progressed beyond fixing “the rules of good and bad by their own liking and disliking” (*L xlvi.11*). This legacy has left the modern world full of irresolvable conflicts between the rival proclivities of private individuals—conflicts that have merely masqueraded as philosophical debate and never actually proceeded to the “theorems” of the “science of moral philosophy” (*L xv.40*).

Another cause of incorrect reasoning is what Hobbes calls “insignificant” signification—cases where the concepts drawn upon have no basis in empirical observation (*L iv.20*). There are a variety of situations that fall into this category. One case is where two names which are irreconcilable are drawn together to form an illusory compound concept (*L v.15*). Examples of this include “incorporeal body,” “round quadrangle,” and “in-poured virtue” (*L iv.21*). Another common error involves positing the existence of universals (*L v.12*). For Hobbes, the consummate materialist, there is something very wrong in so hastily assuming the existences of so many abstract non-entities—so many “nesses, tudes, and ties” (*L viii.27*). In “Of Darkness from Vain Philosophy and Fabulous Traditions,” Hobbes claims that part of the mistake lies in the Greek tradition’s hypostatization of the copula “is” (*L xlvi.17*). Hobbes goes so far as to argue that the idea of separated “essence” and other false notions speciously derived from the verb “to be” have been the cause of much despair and unnecessary conflict in human history. Mistaking the copula “is” as being indicative of “spirit” or immaterial “essence” has frightened people away from rightly understanding their political obligations (*L xlvi.17*). In particular, the scholastics’ fascination with “ghostly” power has served to maintain the superstitious ignorance of the common people (*L ii.8-9*). The public should

be educated to recognize that the supposedly “ghostly” force of ecclesiastical dictates manipulates them just “as men fright birds from the corn with an empty doublet, a hat, and a crooked stick” (*L xlvi.18*).

Hobbes also warns about the obfuscating power of rhetorical tropes (*L iv.24*). As the work of Quentin Skinner and others has shown, Hobbes changed his attitudes toward the art of rhetoric throughout his career (Skinner 1996: 334; Johnston 1986: 66-68, 89). While a full treatment of the thorny issue of Hobbes on rhetoric is beyond the scope of this paper, it is worthwhile to touch on what Hobbes found so worrisome about rhetoric. This issue further illuminates his larger worries about the relation between reason and politics.

In the intellectual world of Elizabethan and Jacobean England in which Hobbes grew up, education for political life included learning how to generate emotive arguments rich in figurative language to appeal to the *pathos* of an audience (Skinner 1996: 26-40). After having produced the first English translation of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* in 1628 and tutored the Cavendish children in what was then called “civil science,” Hobbes came to sharply reject the intellectual tradition of his youth (Skinner 1996: 256-257). Hobbes is scathing about rhetoric in *Elements* and *De Cive*. He claims that public speakers who inflame the passions of the populace with obfuscating metaphors and invocations of unfixed concepts are among the most pernicious threats to civil peace (*EL II.8.14*; *DC xii.12*). The problem with “eloquence” is that rhetoricians often knowingly argue from false, commonly held opinions and speak merely to win over “the present passions” of their audience (*EL II.8.14*). Hobbes’ fiery attitude toward rhetoric is much diminished in

*Leviathan*, where Hobbes reserves most of his barbs for Aristotelians and radical Protestants. Not only does Hobbes use a great many classical rhetorical tropes in *Leviathan* itself, he even claims, in the “Review & Conclusion” that reason alone is not sufficient to generate “attention and consent” of the listeners (*L RC.1*) and that reason and eloquence must be reconciled and made to support one another (*L RC.4*).<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, Hobbes in *Leviathan* is still quite clearly concerned about the power of abused eloquence. Hobbes warns about the problems of eloquence in a public assembly, where speeches made without pause for clarifications and objections can have the effect of stirring an audience into a rebellious furor (*L xxv.15*). In *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*, Skinner identifies a leitmotif in Hobbes’ political writings that seems to be intended as a response to the powerful rhetorical trope of *paradiastole*, the formal strategy of making a virtue appear as a vice or a vice appear as a virtue (Skinner 1996: 10-11, 151). A commonly discussed feature of rhetoric in English Renaissance manuals of eloquence, *paradiastole* was widely feared because the rhetorician using it could hypothetically manipulate the audience’s opinions in whatever direction the speaker pleased. Skinner argues that we might find Hobbes’ concern about *paradiastole* in his theory of “inconstant names” (*L ix.24*), the very idea that moral philosophy ought to be a “science of virtue and vice” (*DC iii.32; L xv.40*), and the reasons given for why human societies are not like those of “ants and bees” (*L xvii.10*; Skinner 1996: cf. 279, 311, 343). For instance, when Hobbes bemoans the fact that

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<sup>4</sup> cf. Quentin Skinner’s focused discussion of Hobbes’ “changing conception of civil science,” especially with *Leviathan* (Skinner 2002: 85-86).

human beings, unlike ants and bees, have “the art of words” with which someone “can represent to others that which is good in the likeness of evil, and evil in the likeness of good” (*L xvii.10*), Hobbes is specifically addressing the power of *paradiastole* to lead an audience astray (Skinner 1996: 343).

Hobbes concludes Chapter *v* of *Leviathan* with the claim that all of these abuses of language “are like *ignes fatui* [a fool’s fire], and reasoning upon them is wandering amongst innumerable absurdities; and their end, contention and sedition, or contempt” (*L v.20*). Hobbes identifies a great variety of ways that speech can go wrong, turn up false principles, and lead to sedition. There are certain types of very common speech patterns that are inherently unstable, ambiguous, or simply nonsensical. As such, public peace in the Hobbesian commonwealth is held together by the meticulous adherence to the correct use of language. If this is the case, public discourse in an extant Hobbesian system is remarkably fragile. Even if a subject is educated in the grounds of the sovereign’s authority, these false types of speech are still very easy to fall prey to. Hobbes himself admits that language has an inescapably rough and imprecise quality. “All words are ambiguous,” he claims (*L xxx.22*). Misunderstanding is easy and there is plenty of interpretative ambiguity in speech for the sovereign’s signal to be lost or confused in its public dissemination. How is public discourse to retain its rational and unambiguous form?

### **Ratiocination and the “Grounds and Reasons” of Sovereignty**

One remedy for this linguistic precariousness is that the sovereign in a Hobbesian system serves as the final arbiter of all disputes: whatever the sovereign decides is “right reason,” is “right reason” (*L v.3*). Hobbes begins his argument for this doctrine with the acknowledgment that individual reasoning is fallible (*L v.3*). Even people with excellent “acquired wit” can still make mistakes in any ratiocination, even basic arithmetic. One person’s certainty about a proposition does not make that proposition true; neither does the certainty of a large number of people (*L v.3*). In order to resolve disputes which would otherwise be interminable and lead to violence, the sovereign’s representative—a judge—must serve as neutral “arbitrator” (*L v.3*). Both parties to a dispute will agree to take the judge’s reason as “right reason.” This does not mean that the sovereign’s judge may be allowed to fabricate whatever sort of reason she desires. Any judge serving on behalf of the sovereign authority must follow the law of nature that commands that the verdict produced is as close as possible to being “consonant to natural reason and equity” (*L xxvi.12*). In cases where a judge has misreckoned the case, the decision does not stand as precedent, but can be cast aside to be corrected in future rulings (*L xxvi.24*). This aspect of Hobbes’ system acknowledges human fallibility and the need for an arbitrator to order public discourse and resolve disputes about otherwise ambiguous doctrines.

It would appear as if the commonwealth’s peace could be preserved with this coordination between the sovereign’s coercive power to enforce its commands and the public education program, which attempts to standardizes public discourse to a single political position. I maintain that with these institutions alone, a Hobbesian



commonwealth is still vulnerable.<sup>5</sup> I argue that the public must also adopt the spirit of scientific reasoning. In what follows, I will make three arguments that show that a Hobbesian system needs its subjects to achieve “acquired wit.” First, acquired wit enables subjects to actually understand the logical progression of the reasons that ground the sovereign’s right. Second, acquired wit makes the subjects more resistant to the claims of *any* false, contentious speech, not just speech that directly contests the sovereign’s power. Third, acquired wit is necessary for subjects to properly draw moral inferences from the natural laws. After outlining how Hobbes’ doctrine system taken alone cannot meet these challenges without a Hobbesian public educated in the use of reason, I will draw out passages that confirm this reading and show that Hobbes himself was committed to having the subjects, including common people, cultivate an “acquired wit.”

In Chapter *xxx* of *Leviathan*, Hobbes claims that subjects must be taught the “grounds and reasons” of the sovereign’s right (*L xxx.4*). Why must subjects be taught “grounds and reasons” and not merely a civil catechism? What is insufficient about something like “this is your sovereign, obey or face death”? The *De Cive* version of the “grounds and reasons” passage offers a useful elucidation. Subjects must be taught the “grounds and reasons” of sovereignty because “opinions are sown in men’s minds not by command but by teaching, not by threat of penalties but by clarity of argument” (*DC xiii.9*). Public opinions are rightly “sown” when the subjects are able to follow the valid arguments to their conclusions. The subjects attach themselves to the sovereign’s

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<sup>5</sup> For another take on the insufficiencies of Hobbesian education, see Quadrat (2012).

“reasons” by virtue of their being *reasons*. Hobbes claims that those false doctrines to which the subjects are merely habituated are less likely to generate the public’s commitment than doctrines that are true and publicly demonstrated as such (*DC xiii.9*).

What is the picture that emerges here? Hobbesian subjects must be publicly taught the perspicuous and valid arguments that ground the sovereign’s authority. Does this mean that the subjects only need “imprinting”—in Bejan’s sense—to be able to parrot out the central propositions of Hobbesian political theory (Bejan 2010: 620)? This is implausible. Hobbes wants his subjects to know their political obligations by the “clarity of argument.” If the intention is to create a set of civil shibboleths, there would be no reason to teach the subjects “reasons” or emphasize discursive virtues like “clarity of argument.”

In addition, since Hobbes makes clear that ratiocinative skill is “acquired,” and cannot be considered innate (*L viii.13*), the subjects must also need to attain a certain level of understanding of how arguments are supposed to work. This skill is required for truly understanding Hobbes’ doctrines. After all, when attempting to understand a geometric proof or a philosophical argument, one needs to know not only the particular content of each of the premises, but also the manner in which some conclusions follow and others do not. Without any education in ratiocination, a person encountering even a moderately complicated argument risks misinterpreting it as a list of disjointed propositions. In fact, Hobbes indicates that this disjointedness is actually characteristic of how civil doctrines enter the public sphere. In Hobbes’ account of the role that universities play in public opinion, he describes true doctrines being “sprinkled” (*L*

RC.16) onto the populace by Sunday preachers and by daily conversation (*L xxx.14*). For the doctrine system and universities to have their intended effect, common people would have to be able to correctly align these fragments of political theory they pick up in everyday life into coherent arguments.

Furthermore, as Waldron has remarked, Hobbes' political theory is quite "counterintuitive" and is open to being very misunderstood (Waldron 2001: 457-458). Without proper training in ratiocinative skills, the nuanced arguments that ground the sovereign's power might be otherwise indistinguishable from sophistry. For an uneducated Hobbesian subject, a false doctrine founded merely on uninformed opinions might appear more plausible than sound logic. These are destabilizing situations a sovereign clearly ought to avoid.

### **Ratiocination and the "Public Enemy"**

Acquired wit is also necessary for the defense of the commonwealth from what Hobbes calls "the public enemy" (*L xxiii.6*). The character of the "public enemy" appears in a variety of guises in *Leviathan*. He can be one of "needy men, and hardy, not contented with their present condition" (*L xi.4*), or a rhetorician who "represents to others that which is good in the likeness of evil" (*L xvii.10*), or one of the "ecclesiastics" who seeks to "take from young men the use of reason by certain charms compounded of metaphysics, and miracles, and traditions" (*L xlvi.27*). Whatever the particular form, Hobbes' reasoning about the "public enemy" problem works like this: if subjects are taught the grounds and duties of their rights, then they will have internalized a standard

by which they can judge the acceptability of doctrines that diverge from the sovereign's. When the subjects hear a heterodox doctrine publicly proclaimed, they will be able to refer the public enemy's discourse back to what they already know about the civil doctrines. This ability to compare against a clear transcript of acceptable doctrines gives the subjects a degree of intellectual tenacity. Rather than waiting for a dispute between doctrines to be judged in the sovereign's public court, the subjects themselves will be able to choose how to doctrinally align themselves in their private deliberations. In a stable Hobbesian system, such a "public enemy" directly confronting the sovereign would have to overturn the Hobbesian subjects' beliefs about government, overcoming the logical force of Hobbes' own arguments. Such a person would have to undermine years of "services" at the civil Sabbath and the entire public doctrine system taught at the universities.

We can imagine a few ways a public enemy could evade these safeguards. One weak-spot in the commonwealth's defenses is that language itself is too unwieldy to be comprehensively regulated. In Hobbes' critique of false discourses like rhetoric and scholasticism, we saw how many easy pitfalls there are in everyday language use. A seemingly insignificant misfiring of a metaphor, or an inappropriate hypostatization, or emotive use of an "inconstant name" can be easily misinterpreted. As Hobbes remarks in the discussion of civil laws in Chapter *xxvi*, almost every word is subject to some kind of ambiguity (*L xxvi.26*). Even if the sovereign makes all laws pithy and unambiguous and fixes all unsettled significations, mistakes in public discourse are still quite possible. It is plausible that the natural ambiguity of even fixed terms could compound itself over time,

escaping the notice of the sovereign's public ministers and eventually creating a scenario where a definition inspires public controversy. In such a scenario, the natural ambiguities of language could be manipulated to the advantage of a public enemy.

Another way a "public enemy" could side-step the Hobbesian doctrine system is by introducing a new, previously unjudged set of beliefs. Hobbes himself must have been familiar with this phenomenon. He himself lived in an age in which the English populace was met with all manner of unfamiliar doctrines: radical religious creeds (*L xlvi.37*), new fears of witches (*L ii.8*), occultism in universities (*L xlvi.29*), and beliefs in magic (*L xxxvii.9*). How should a Hobbesian system respond to such falsehoods?

Let us imagine a rapid arrival of a doctrine—a nascent theological movement, a pseudoscientific text, or some other such falsehood—that has not previously been subject to the sovereign's judgment. Before the doctrine is brought for review, nothing in the commonwealth's system of civil laws would explicitly outlaw it. In fact, the new belief would be licit under Hobbes' own doctrine that grants liberty to the subjects in cases where the law is silent (*L xxi.17*). If it is eventually judged that the new doctrine does indeed stand in opposition to the sovereign, the sovereign's ministers might be met with a difficult situation: a large segment of the population would be left holding a belief contrary to the sovereign's judgement. One faction of the populace would be at odds with another, leading to confrontation.

Simply knowing the "grounds and reasons" of the sovereign's right and all of the other stipulated civil doctrines is not enough to counteract the effects of these ideological shifts. These cases show that false doctrines not explicitly banned in the Hobbesian

education scheme have the potential to spread widely and cause discord unless otherwise restrained. The content of the Hobbesian curriculum could never be broad enough to put blanket prohibitions on every false doctrine or corruption of language. Something else is needed.

In a Hobbesian system where the populace has not learned “acquired wit,” the public enemy is able to side-step the intended force of the sovereign’s doctrine system. A “public enemy” could seize this opportunity and, by speaking to the “present passions” of the populace (*EL II.8.14*), sow civil discord. However, if the Hobbesian populace adopts a scientific spirit—the disposition to search for stable and plausible definitions, generate sound inferences, and jettison inconstant or insignificant speech from ratiocination—the body politic would be keener to ignore the allure of false doctrines. This is because such an educated populace would be more likely to recognize these challenges to the sovereign as *false*, and demonstrably so. The rhetorical or religious word-play of the public enemy character or the novel false doctrine would have no appeal because the subjects would be more apt to recognize unsound reasoning. Merely teaching the particular principles of Hobbesian theory can only serve as a standard for judgment when the public enemy’s false doctrine clearly conflicts with the sovereign’s established tradition. Education in “acquired wit” would give a Hobbesian system a defense mechanism for the subjects themselves to be able to confront and nullify the effects of false doctrines by referring them to a scientific standard: whether or not the public enemy’s inferences are properly drawn.

There are a number of passages where Hobbes comes very close to advocating for such a public education in “acquired wit” to serve as a bulwark against the draw of falsehoods. Hobbes’ arguments on this point turn on the notion that people ignorant of reason and science are easy to manipulate. In Chapter *ii* of *Leviathan* Hobbes claims that “if this superstitious fear of [illusory] spirits were taken away...by which crafty ambitious persons abuse the simple people, men would be much more fitted than they are for civil obedience” (*L ii.8*). In Chapter *v*, Hobbes laments the fact that common people are not taught the use of reason and instead think that geometry is “conjuring” (*L v.18*). As a result of their ignorance of science and geometry, they “are in this point like children” and can be easily manipulated by the people around them to believe nonsense (*L v.18*). In Chapter *xlvi*, Hobbes explicitly claims that his purpose in proving Aristotle wrong is to relieve people of their irrational fears of “separated essences”; these fears have only made people more vulnerable to manipulation by would-be usurpers (*L xlv.18*).

In Chapter *xi* of *Leviathan*, Hobbes claims that ignorance of science forces people to depend on the false opinions of their peers (*L xi.17*). As is the case for those who take their ideas about politics from their fellow citizens “who plausibly seem wiser” (*L xxx.14*), this is particularly infelicitous because subjects will take the definitions given to them as right, even if they are nonsensical (*L xi.18*). Hobbes concludes that relying on unexamined received principles and not on reason and science increases the likelihood that people will fall into the trap of naming things merely according to their mutable

individual passions (*L xi.19*). Moreover, this ignorance of science makes people apt to believe in nonsense and be easily manipulated (*L xi.23*).

### **“Acquired Wit” and “Moral Theorems”**

I have so far shown that “acquired wit” is necessary for subjects to understand Hobbes’ own doctrines and necessary for the subjects to reliably resist the “public enemy.” Next I will show that “acquired wit” is necessary for the subjects’ proper understanding of moral reasoning. In the passage justifying civil education in *Leviathan* Chapter xxx, Hobbes recognizes that a subject will not reliably obey the law out of fear of punishment alone; the subjects must themselves understand that their obedience to the sovereign is grounded upon “the law of nature that forbiddeth the violation of faith” (*L xxx.4*). Hobbes argues here that if subjects understand the natural law of justice, they will understand what is at stake in their political obligation—namely, the civil state itself—and therefore be less inclined to resist the sovereign’s authority. Since knowledge of the natural laws is knowledge of “the science of virtue and vice” (*L xv.40*), such an education in the sovereign’s right amounts to a special kind of moral education—a “scientific” moral education in the “theorems” of proper conduct (*L xv.41*). Just like the subjects’ public understanding of the logical force of the doctrine system, moral reasoning from the natural laws would also, for analogous reasons, require facility with the ratiocination.

Of course, it is surely likely that a subject can know Hobbes’ natural law of justice and simply ignore it. Even rightly educated Hobbesian subjects can violate natural



law when they are overcome by their passions (*L xxvii.13-18*). However, Hobbes argues that it is also possible for a subject to err in behavior by drawing “erroneous inferences from true principles” (*L xxvii.12*). Hobbes alleges that this phenomenon of moral misreckoning is quite common among headstrong people who have an inflated opinion of themselves and do not realize that “good natural wit” is insufficient for moral judgement (*L.xxvii.12*). These people who err in this particular way do not realize that moral reasoning requires careful and meticulous study of the inferences they make (*L.xxvii.12*). If people have the skill of drawing inferences from principles, they would be less likely to commit infractions and threaten the public peace.

Hobbes’ other discussions of public ignorance also have a connection to moral concerns. In the passage in Chapter *v* when Hobbes discusses common people’s ignorance of science, he specifically mentions this “ignorance” in connection with common people’s lacking “certain [true] rules of their actions” (*L v.5*). In the account of the natural laws in *De Cive*, Hobbes argues that there is a natural law against drunkenness because following the laws of nature requires that a subject always “maintain his ability to reason properly” (*DC iii.25*). Dimming one’s rational faculty by excessive drinking prevents one from drawing the proper moral conclusions from the natural laws (*DC iii.25*).

There is also a substantial discussion of failures of moral reasoning in Chapter *xi* of *Leviathan* that seems to directly connect with the issues discussed in Chapter *xxx*. Hobbes claims that when people are ignorant of the “causes and original constitution of right, equity, law, and justice,” they follow “custom” or legal “precedent” instead of

“reason” (*L xi.21*). The result of this tendency is particularly deleterious: people cite custom when reason is inconvenient, and cite reason when custom is inconvenient (*L xi.21*). This confused pattern of inconsistent moral and legal reasoning is responsible for interminable conflicts over “good” and “evil” (*L xi.21*). In considering how subjects are to understand moral reasoning, we can conclude that merely teaching the particular propositions of the natural laws would be insufficient for ensuring that the public would know how to draw the proper moral conclusions and “live in godliness and peace among themselves” (*L xxiii.6*).

### **Conclusion**

I have shown in this paper that Hobbes’ scheme for civil education requires teaching the public the skill of ratiocination. However, it is important to qualify what exactly this conclusion gives us for a general characterization of Hobbes on education. For instance, Hobbes does not extend his hopes for the public’s use of reason into an argument for free inquiry. Unrestrained discourse and debate, especially in political theory, would surely be met with stern rebuke, or worse, from the sovereign’s censors. Hobbes would have also considered such free inquiry unnecessary. If Hobbes’ theory is true—which Hobbes believes it is—a commonwealth of cultivated reasoners would be inexorably drawn to accept *Leviathan*’s conclusions. Accordingly, Hobbes seems to believe that the subjects’ attaining the use of reason will not lead them astray. In fact, teaching reason will allow them to better follow Hobbes’ own arguments and keep them in lockstep with his conclusions (cf. *L xxx.8*).

It might seem clear that “public education for a more thoroughgoing absolutism” is not quite a *cri-de-coeur* for an “Enlightenment” spirit, at least not the Enlightenment spirit Waldron tries to evoke in his appraisal of Hobbesian education (Waldron 1998: 143-144). However, Lloyd and Waldron are right that Hobbes’ commitment to teaching the public the *truth* about politics is not only a sharp break with the history of political thought—as Hobbes himself recognizes (*DC P.1-10*)—but is a policy that has much in common with contemporary values about the role of truth in modern liberal societies (Waldron 1998: 143; Lloyd 1997: 38-39, 45-46). Waldron calls Hobbes a “modern” and “a *liberal* thinker” because of Hobbes’ “respect for individuals as reasoning beings” (Waldron 1998: 143). As I have shown, Hobbes did not believe that people are naturally endowed with rational faculties, but did believe that reason could and *should* be taught. In fact, the very survival of a commonwealth depends on it. I believe that my claim that Hobbes wanted to teach the public the *means* for gaining truth further vindicates the Lloyd-Waldron characterization of the role of truth in Hobbesian education. The idea that subjects ought to learn the use of reason is at odds with Bejan’s reading of Hobbesian education as “imprinting” a civil faith on the minds of common people (Bejan 2010: 618-620). In fact, the idea that Hobbes believes peace requires a populace schooled in the art of reasoning might even have a radical implication for our picture of the role of “common people” in a Hobbesian system. Since it is general public ignorance that makes subjects confused about the rights of sovereignty, vulnerable to the lies of a “public enemy,” and hasty in their moral reasoning, a substantial portion of the entire population would have to be included in the public teaching of ratiocination. If this is the case, Hobbes might

have been tacitly committed to a view that would have been truly radical both for his day and indeed for several centuries after the English Civil War—a view that all men and women, from the wealthiest to the poorest, can contribute to the public good by acquiring an education in the art of reasoning.

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