

Hobbes on Corruption

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1. Introduction

Thomas Hobbes's ideas on corruption have been largely overlooked. My first aim is thus to uncover Hobbes's understanding of corruption. Hobbes uses the term over 100 times, and textual analysis shows that he often talks of what I will call 'cognitive' corruption – the distortion of mental processes, by faulty reasoning or improper attitudes.

My second aim is to show the political importance of corruption in Hobbes's theory: it can lead to a state of nature. Much Hobbes scholarship discusses how we can escape the state of nature. But for Hobbes it was also vital to know how to avoid returning to it. Corruption is pivotal here.

Five related methodological points should be stressed. First, I mainly focus on explicit use of the word 'corrupt', whereas many scholars justifiably refer to corruption even where an author does not use the term, for example when discussing bribes. Both approaches are valid but may yield different findings. In particular, my conclusions differ markedly from what was until now the only lengthy discussion of Hobbes on corruption, by Peter Euben.¹

¹ Peter Euben, 'Corruption', in *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change*, ed. Terence Ball, James Farr and Russell Hanson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, 220-46.

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Second, while this paper is thus the first detailed analysis of Hobbes's *language* of corruption, a full analysis of his *concept* of cognitive corruption would involve reason, passion, deliberation, education, indoctrination, and so on. I address such issues elsewhere.² Of course, many writers have explored the substance of cognitive corruption without using the term. I show here, though, that analysing Hobbes's language of corruption casts new light on the concept, for example highlighting links between corruption, equity, pity, real/apparent goods, the dispositions, and the state of nature.

Third, the language of corruption helps us see what Hobbes was *doing*, not just what he was writing.³ People do things with words, and they do particular things with particular words. Corruption is a value-laden word which, historically, has often been used to attack the status quo. Hobbes usually upholds this convention but sometimes uses the language of corruption to turn the tables on *critics* of the status quo, as with his comments on constitutional corruption and on corruption of counsellors. In neither case did he have to use the language of corruption: by doing so, Hobbes undercuts his opponents' conventions. Careful attention to language, combined with a contextual understanding of linguistic conventions, helps us see why writers wrote what they wrote.⁴

Fourth, my analysis is nonetheless primarily textual and only secondarily contextual. My main aim is to interpret Hobbes's language of corruption in its own terms and in the light of his other ideas, especially the crucial distinction between real and apparent self-interest. My textual reading is sometimes informed by contextual analysis: for example, rhetorical and humanist contexts help us understand Hobbes's attack on corrupt counsellors. But I do not attempt a full-scale contextual analysis.

² Adrian Blau, *The Science of Hobbes* (work in progress).

³ Quentin Skinner, *Visions of Politics. Volume 1: Regarding Method*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 98-107.

⁴ Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, pp. 114-20.

Fifth, I recognise the danger of interpreting ‘scattered or incidental remarks’ as a ‘doctrine’.⁵ But it is legitimate to talk about Hobbes’s ‘concept’ and ‘account’ of corruption because there is enough consistency in his use of the term. It *amounts to* a cognitive conception of corruption, just as his comments on liberty amount to a ‘negative’ conception – another term which is not his. I have, though, explicitly noted where Hobbes’s comments do not, or might not, amount to a cognitive conception. And I have distinguished between where he was and (probably) was not conscious of how he used the term. Nonetheless, an unconscious understanding is still an understanding. Similarly, whether or not he was aware of it, his account of human nature is sometimes male-oriented.⁶

This paper proceeds as follows. I begin with a new taxonomy of six types of corruption: physical, semantic, moral, constitutional, political, and cognitive (section II). I then apply the ideas of cognitive and political corruption to three issues which vex Hobbes: corruption of the people (section III), corruption of the sovereign’s counsellors (section IV), and corruption of legal processes (section V). I then expand on some conceptual issues (section VI), and compare and contrast my account to that of other scholars (section VII).⁷

⁵ Skinner, *Visions of Politics*, p. 60.

⁶ Diana Coole, *Women in Political Theory: From Ancient Misogyny to Contemporary Feminism*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf (2nd edition, 1993), p. 56.

⁷ Abbreviations used in the text: **AW** [*Anti-White*]: *Thomas White’s De Mundo Examined*, ed. Harold Whitmore Jones. London: Bradford University Press (1976). **AWL** [original Latin version of *Anti-White*]: *Critique Du De Mundo de Thomas White*, ed. Jean Jacquot and Harold Whitmore Jones, Paris: Librairie Philosophique J. Vrin (1973). **BH**: *Behemoth or the Long Parliament*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (1990). **DC** [*De Cive*]: *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1998). **DCO** [*De Corpore*]: *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, volume 1, ed. William Molesworth. London: John Bohn (1839). **DH** [*De Homine*]: *Man and Citizen (De Homine and De Cive)*, ed. Bernard Gert. Indianapolis: Hackett (1991). **DP** [*A Dialogue Between a Philosopher and a Student, of the Common*

II. Corruption: an overview

In general, corruption refers to something moving from better to worse. But we disagree on what is better and what is worse, so the exact meaning of the term varies. The language of corruption can thus be a window onto different thinkers' moral and political philosophies.

Simplifying considerably, I will distinguish six types of corruption:

- (a) physical corruption
- (b) semantic corruption
- (c) moral corruption
- (d) constitutional corruption
- (e) political corruption

Laws of England], in Thomas Hobbes, *Writings on Common Law and Hereditary Right*, ed. Alan Cromartie and Quentin Skinner. Oxford: Clarendon Press (2005). **EL**: *The Elements of Law, Natural and Politic*, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1994). (For users of the Tönnies edition of the *Elements*, Part II ch. 1 onwards is ch. 20 onwards in the Gaskin edition.) **EW**: *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, in 11 volumes, ed. William Molesworth. London: John Bohn (1839-45). **HEC**: *Historia Ecclesiastica*, ed. Patricia Springborg, Patricia Stablein and Paul Wilson. Paris: Honoré Champion (2008). **L**: *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1991). **L R/C** is the 'Review and Conclusion' of *Leviathan*. **LLC** [Curley's edition of the Latin *Leviathan*]: *Leviathan, With Selected Variants from the Latin Edition of 1668*, ed. Edwin Curley. Indianapolis: Hackett (1994). **OL** [*Opera Latina*]: *Thomae Hobbes malmesburiensis opera philosophica quae latine scripsit omnia*, ed. William Molesworth. London: John Bohn, 1839-45. I do not use the *Three Discourses* (ed. Noel Reynolds and Arlene Saxonhouse, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995) as their authorship is unresolved. The language of corruption is not used in Hobbes's translation of *Altera secretissima instructio*, or in the original Latin (Noel Malcolm, *Reason of State, Propaganda, and the Thirty Years' War: An Unknown Translation by Thomas Hobbes*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007). I follow Hobbes's gender-language, but I have removed his italics.

(f) cognitive corruption.

Of course, these distinctions are somewhat arbitrary, more than one category may apply at any one time, and a writer may invoke different types of corruption at different times – Hobbes uses all six.

Physical corruption includes decomposing bodies and rotting food. This is one of the oldest senses of the term, in its Latin form.⁸ Hobbes often mentions physical corruption, as in stagnant water corrupting (DC 13.15, 151; OL 2, 308).⁹ Physical corruption probably underlies his Aristotelian definition of corruption in *Anti-White*, a philosophical tract drafted in late 1642/early 1643: we call an object corrupted when its essence perishes (AWL 5.3, 130; AW 58-9). But with one exception, this definition does not apply to Hobbes's remarks on non-physical corruption: for example, corrupt judges may make bad rulings but they are still judges (L 25, 178; OL 3, 192). The exception is that in the original

⁸ Euben, 'Corruption', p. 220.

⁹ Also: corruption or corruptibility of bodies (AWL 5.3, 128, 130; 5.6, 134; 7.1, 146; 7.7, 150; 7.8, 150; 9.16, 169; 10.11, 181; 27.2, 314; 28.6, 335, twice; 33.7, 379, twice; 40.5, 436), a magnet corrupted by its surroundings (AWL 11.3, 183), the corruptibility of Catholic wafers (L 8, 59, but not at the equivalent point in the Latin *Leviathan* – OL 3, 65-6), corruption of human bodies (L 38, 309, OL 3, 309; L 38, 315 three times, but only twice in the Latin version – OL 3, 329; L 39, 322, but not OL 3, 337; L 44, 433 four times, but only twice in the Latin – OL 3, 467-8; OL 3, 230, but not at the equivalent point in the English original – L 28, 221; OL 3, 521 and LLC Appendix 506; EW 10, 228, 293), excrement in fields as a 'corruption' causing plague, with plants growing in 'corrupted dirt' (EW 7, 137), air 'corrupting' crystals into pieces (EW 7, 172), and water being 'corrupted' by blood and mire (EW 9, 317). *De Corpore's* account of imagination mentions phantasms 'broken and altered through sleepiness' and dreams 'made up of broken phantasms' (DCO 25.9, 399-400) – originally 'somnolentia corruptorum interruptione' and 'corruptis fiat phantasmatis' (OL 1, 325-6). Hobbes discusses objects which evil people desire and which cease to be after use – 'quae usu corrumpuntur' (AWL 38.15, 423) – in other words, temporary objects like 'food or something else pleasant that perishes in the enjoyment' (AW 474). Hobbes is probably thinking only of physical objects here.

Latin of *De Homine*, published in 1658, the ‘greatest evil’ (‘maximum malum’) for humans, the opposite of self-preservation, is described as ‘corruptio’ (OL 2, 94, 98).¹⁰

Semantic corruption involves words changing their spelling and/or meaning. Hobbes only uses this notion once, complaining that the word *considium*, a body of men sitting together, has been ‘corrupted’ into *consilium*, a body of men giving counsel (L 30, 242; this sentence is not in the 1668 Latin version – OL 3, 252). Hobbes’s clearly dislikes parliamentary assemblies giving counsel, as discussed below. This could explain why he talks not about the word being ‘changed’ but ‘corrupted’. However, I am not implying that Hobbes links this semantic corruption to political, moral or cognitive corruption.

Moral corruption includes sinful conduct and other vices. Hobbes rarely talks of moral corruption. One exception is his reference to university students who ‘corrupt one another’ in ‘drunkenness, wantonness, gaming and other vices’ (BH 147).¹¹ I will suggest later that when Hobbes describes the people as corrupt in *Behemoth* and *De Homine*, he usually implies cognitive corruption; but most writers at the time implied moral corruption, as in Milton’s reference to ‘nations grown corrupt, And by their vices brought to servitude’.¹² The two exceptions are Hobbes’s claim that the Pope ‘corrupts the morals of

¹⁰ This un-Hobbesian term is only used in the chapter summary and in the margins; the body of the text, as elsewhere, talks instead about ‘mors’ (death) (OL 2, 98). Might someone else have added the summary? This seems unlikely. Noel Malcolm suggests that Hobbes ‘probably’ wrote it, because the chapter summaries were in the manuscript, written by a scribe at Hobbes’s behest, well before printers were involved (Noel Malcolm, personal communication, 1 June 2009). For an example of such a page in the manuscript, see Timothy Raylor, ‘The date and script of Hobbes’s Latin Optical Manuscript’, in Peter Beal and A.S.G. Edwards, ed., *English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700. Volume 12: Scribes and Transmission in English Manuscripts 1400-1700*. London: The British Library (2005), 201-9, p. 207.

¹¹ Also: the ancients’ fear of philosophers ‘corrupting the manners of the young men’ (L 46, 460, but not OL 3, 491). The ‘corrupted’ blood of felons (DP 129), a standard legal term, has a moral undertone.

¹² John Milton, *Samson Agonistes*, in *The Poetical Works of John Milton. Volume 2*, ed. David Masson. London: Macmillan (1890), lines 268-9.

citizens’ (‘Corrumpens mores Civiles’) (HEC 552-3, line 2029), which could also be translated as ‘corrupts civil customs’, and his discussion of how to deal with sinners who ‘corrupt the people’ (‘[p]opulum corrumpunt’) with false religious doctrines (OL 3, 213; LLC 27, 195; but not L 27, 204).

Constitutional corruption means deviations from good forms of government, like monarchy corrupting to tyranny. As Euben notes, Hobbes detests this Aristotelian language.¹³ Hobbes’s sole mention of constitutional corruption is cunningly insidious. Hobbes loathed the idea of mixed government, which combined the sovereignty of the one, the few and the many – a combination Hobbes saw as logically impossible and practically self-defeating (for example L 29, 228). Hobbes thus follows Jean Bodin in stating that mixed governments are ‘not rightly to be called commonwealths, but the corruption of commonwealths’ (EL 27.7, 167).¹⁴ This subversion of the Aristotelian idiom of constitutional corruption was surely a calculated snub by Bodin and Hobbes.¹⁵

Political corruption involves politically subversive conditions or actions, like factional strife or public officials accepting bribes. Political corruption usually implies a subordination of public to non-public interests, especially self-interest. Today, corruption mostly involves some notion of the misuse of public office for private gain.¹⁶ Hobbes uses

¹³ Euben, ‘Corruption’, p. 230.

¹⁴ Jean Bodin, *The Six Bookes of a Commonweale*, ed. Kenneth Douglas McRae. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (1962), 2.1, p. 194. Citing an authority like this was most unusual for Hobbes: see Deborah Baumgold, ‘The composition of Hobbes’s *Elements of Law*’, *History of Political Thought* 25 (2004), 16-43, p. 30.

¹⁵ See also Euben, ‘Corruption’, pp. 227-36.

¹⁶ I am greatly indebted to Mark Philp’s discussion and conceptualisation of corruption. See Mark Philp, ‘Defining political corruption’, *Political Studies* 45 (1997), 436-62; Mark Philp, ‘Access, accountability and authority: corruption and the democratic process’, *Crime, Law and Social Change* 36 (2001), 357-77, pp. 358-9.

a similar idea.¹⁷ Political corruption was once analogous to physical corruption: disintegration or decomposition of the body politic.¹⁸ Hobbes does not make this parallel: despite using the analogy of worms, intestinal disorders and other physical diseases when discussing problems of commonwealths, Hobbes never refers to the body politic ‘corrupting’ (L 29, 221-30). ‘Sedition’ is his preferred term: sedition is equivalent to a natural body’s ‘Sickness’, and can lead to civil war, equivalent to its ‘Death’ (L intro, 9; see also EL 27.1, 162-3).¹⁹

Cognitive corruption, which many contemporary theorists of corruption overlook, includes subverted judgement and faulty interpretation. For example, Hobbes mentions academics with ‘uncorrupted judgment’ (EW 7, 227).²⁰ Although now rare, such language was once standard.²¹ Note that this reference to corrupt judgement differs from Hobbes’s

¹⁷ For example, Pericles being ‘incorrupt’ as regards bribes (EW 8, 220), counsellors whose enemies try to undermine their integrity with accusations of ‘corruption’ (EW 8, 220 twice), and a prisoner escaping by ‘corruption’ (EW 9, 319). For more examples, see section V below.

¹⁸ Euben, ‘Corruption’, pp. 222-3.

¹⁹ For Hobbes’s ideas on sedition, see Geoffrey Vaughan, *Behemoth Teaches Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes on Political Education*, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books (2002), pp. 16-21, and Tom Sorell, ‘Hobbes’s moral philosophy’, in Patricia Springborg, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes’s Leviathan*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2007), 128-53, pp. 138-9.

²⁰ Also: people who misunderstand an idea may be ‘corrupted with prejudices from their teachers’ (‘praejudiciis magistrorum corruptum’) (OL 1, 62 – my translation). Molesworth translates this as ‘corrupted with former opinions received from their masters’ (DCO 6.5, 70). But *magister* is teacher, as any schoolboy know; ‘prejudice’ occurs in similar passages (EL 10.8, 62-3; 28.8, 176), and probably means both bias and pre-judgement (consider L 30, 233: ‘unprejudicated’ men learn reason simply by hearing it).

²¹ See for example John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch. Oxford: Clarendon Press (1979), 4.19.2, p. 698.

definition of judgement, as the ability to see differences between things (EL 10.4, 61-2; L 8, 50-1). But he also uses the term in the more usual way, as just noted.²² So will I.

Hobbes is particularly concerned with corruption of mathematical reasoning, as in his reference to faulty principles which can corrupt mathematical reasoning ('vitiosis principiis ... corrumpet') (OL 4, 519).²³ But in his mathematical writings he talks more often about an extension of corrupt judgement: corruption of the mathematical *ideas/doctrines* which follow from corrupt judgement. For example, he accused his adversary, the mathematician John Wallis, of corrupting a mathematical rule ('regulam ... corrumpens') (OL 4, 106).²⁴

²² Also: quoting the eighth commandment as 'Not to corrupt Judgment by false witness' (L 42, 357, OL 3, 378), and two other cases mentioned below (EW 7, 216; L 15, 108).

²³ Also: true principles which do not corrupt ('corrumpunt') the ensuing proofs (OL 5, 156), and men who 'use their own judgments, not yet corrupted by the subtlety of mistaken professors' (EW 7, 216). Having initially justified a finding non-demonstratively, i.e. without proving it, Hobbes states that he will now prove it, so as not to 'corrupt the rigour of these disciplines' ('severitatem disciplinarum corrumpere') (OL 4, 456). Corrupting the rigour of mathematical proof is equivalent to corrupting mathematical reason itself.

²⁴ Also: Wallis having 'corrupted' an argument by altering its wording (EW 7, 287), falsified ('corrupit') Hobbes's position (OL 5, 54), and distorted ('corrupisse') the nature of motion through ignorance (OL 5, 82). Hobbes derides Wallis's zealous attempt to stop mathematics from being 'gradually corrupted' ('corrumpetur paulatim mathematica') (OL 4, 465). Most importantly, Hobbes mentions principles which undermine ('corrumpunt') geometry, especially algebraical principles such as lines not being bodies (OL 5, 200-1). We can infer that for Hobbes, algebra corrupts geometry: algebraic principles stop some mathematicians from reasoning properly. For Hobbes's opposition to algebra, see Douglas Jesseph, *Squaring the Circle: the War Between Hobbes and Wallis*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999, pp. 73-100, 131-88. Finally, in a 1669 mathematical pamphlet, Hobbes writes that Prince Cosimo de'Medici, to whom the pamphlet was dedicated, would be uncorrupted by disputes of this kind ('certaminum hujusmodi incorrupto') (OL 4, 487). In other words, the prince was not part of Hobbes's vitriolic tussles with Wallis and could thus assess Hobbes's claims impartially. In fact, Hobbes did not spot his own corrupted judgement: unwilling to admit defeat by Wallis, his mathematical reasoning became increasingly bizarre and faulty: see Jesseph, *Squaring the Circle*, pp. 247-92.

The same applies to many comments on religious doctrines, as in an argument ‘corrupted with a false interpretation’ of Leviticus (EW 4, 379).²⁵

So, corrupt judgement impedes reason and produces faulty conclusions. Although cognitive corruption can involve any error of judgement, many of Hobbes’s references to cognitive corruption clearly involve a particular error: judgements or opinions being distorted by self-interest. For example, after the preface of William Davenant’s poem *Gondibert* was addressed to him, Hobbes replied that he could not properly judge its worth because he was a ‘corrupted witness ... corrupted with the honour done to me by your preface’ (EW 4, 443), a comment which evokes bribery in legal settings.

A key argument of this paper, indeed, is that in political contexts, Hobbes’s use of the language of corruption usually implies anti-civic attitudes or false reasoning through self-interest – or to be more precise, through mistaking where one’s self-interest *really* lies. If acted on, corrupt mental processes can weaken the state; sections III to V offer many such references to cognitive corruption. (Note that by ‘anti-civic’ I mean ‘against the sovereign’ or ‘tending to a state of nature’.) In short, cognitive corruption involves distorted

²⁵ Also: the ‘suspicion of corruption of the Scripture’ (L 34, 278, but not OL 3, 290), biblical passages which provide evidence for divine salvation, ‘there being neither difficulty, nor interest, to corrupt the interpretation of texts of that kind’ (L 38, 316, but not OL 3, 331), Judaism being ‘much corrupted’ after being conquered (L 40, 331, OL 3, 349), Jews who ‘corrupted the Text of the Law with their false Commentaries, and vain Traditions’ (L 46, 462, but not OL 3, 491), ecclesiastics with reason to falsify (‘corrupis’) Biblical accounts of the relationship between church and rulers (OL 3, 276; the original English has ‘falsifie’ – L 33, 266), subjects not having the right to judge whether religion might be corrupted [*corrumperetur*] by the sovereign (OL 3, 432, but not L 42, 400), Luther’s attack on licentious academics ‘corrupting’ the scriptures (EW 5, 64), and ‘faith subjected to corrupt philosophers’ (HEC 482-3, line 1428). Some of these cases of cognitive corruption also include semantic corruption, and some might involve corruption of judgement more than corruption of doctrines; different conceptions of corruption can be hard to distinguish, especially in brief comments. Hobbes’s reference to the ‘corrupt Doctrine’ of men with ‘fraudulent Designe’ (L R/C, 490) seems to be the only comment about corrupt ideas/doctrines which does not involve specifically mathematical or religious doctrines.

judgement, and can lead to political corruption (bribery) or sedition (factional strife, fomenting civic unrest, shirking taxes, and so on). This highlights Hobbes's primarily cognitive understanding of the roots of disorder.

The main difference between political and cognitive corruption is that political corruption refers to actions (as does sedition) while cognitive corruption refers to the prior mental processes – reasoning, dispositions, emotions, appetites, and so on. In Hobbes's terms, of course, actions follow from the will, and the will is merely the last appetite in deliberation (L 6, 44-5). Seditious acts such as shirking taxes, or political corruption such as accepting bribes, must thus follow cognitively corrupt appetites, such as greed.

Cognitive corruption is thus necessary *but not sufficient* for politically corrupt or seditious acts. This is why it helps to separate cognitive corruption – a mental state – from acts of political corruption and sedition. The distinction also highlights the fact that people who are cognitively corrupt may or may not go on to act improperly. As I explain elsewhere, this also helps us understand Hobbes's wide-ranging tactics for avoiding a return to the state of nature: sometimes he tries to stop cognitive corruption at its root, sometimes he tries to stop it turning into political corruption or sedition, and sometimes he tries to stop political corruption and sedition spilling over into a state of nature.²⁶ In sum, though, for Hobbes corrupt motivations or actions are those which are anti-civic. Section VI conceptualises this more precisely, and compares and contrasts it to modern ideas of corruption.

I now examine Hobbes's comments on corruption in more detail. I will examine three key issues: corruption of the people, which is entirely cognitive; corruption of counsellors, which combines cognitive and political corruption; and corruption of legal proceedings, which is often cognitive, but may also involve the standard notion of political corruption as bribery.

²⁶ Blau, *The Science of Hobbes*.

III. Corruption of the people

Hobbes scholars have written much about how to escape the state of nature. Hobbes himself wrote far more about how to avoid returning to it. To understand Hobbes's political theory we must thus examine his account of corruption, since it can lead to civil war, one of Hobbes's greatest fears. Civil war means a state of nature: without a sovereign whose rulings are generally accepted, conflict arises between individuals and groups, producing insecurity and death.²⁷

Popular corruption underlies Hobbes's account of civil war. *De Cive*, mainly written in 1641, describes two causes of civil war: 'the doctrines and passions inimical to peace', and men who 'take people who are already disposed to rebellion and violence, and incite, assemble and direct them' (DC 12.1, 131). Erroneous judgement thus occurs in the minds both of citizens, who develop attitudes opposed to peace, and of agitators, who encourage dissatisfied citizens to rebel.

Hobbes does not mention corruption here, but he does in *De Homine*. Reason can uncover our real good, notes Hobbes, and the greatest real good is self-preservation. But our appetites lead us to underplay long-term consequences, so we often prefer *apparent* goods – things that are good in the short term but bad in the long term (DH 11.5, 48; 12.1, 55; see also L 6, 46; 19, 129). (The distinction between real and apparent goods is crucial to my paper.) Appetites and emotions 'frequently obstruct right reasoning' (DH 12.1, 55; see

²⁷ Some scholars treat the state of nature as a purely theoretical construct: see the references in Kinch Hoekstra, *The Savage, the Citizen, and the Foole: The Compulsion for Civil Society in the Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes* (University of Oxford, DPhil thesis, 1998), p. 11. As Hoekstra shows, this view is a simplification: Hobbes sees civil war as one example of the state of nature. For example he attacks men who 'disobey the Laws, and thereby overthrow the Common-wealth, and introduce confusion, and Civill War; for the avoiding whereof, all Civill Government was ordained' (L 42, 372). For further discussion, see Kinch Hoekstra, 'Hobbes on the natural condition of mankind', in Patricia Springborg, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's Leviathan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (2007), 109-27, pp. 117-9.

also L 19, 131). Good dispositions make us suitable for civil society, but ancient republican tracts ‘make the people’s disposition hostile to kings’ (DH 13.9, 70; 13.7, 68). So, ‘the people’s disposition hath up to now been greatly corrupted [*corruptitur*] by the reading of books and the listening to siren songs of those who want supreme power in the kingdom to belong to an ecclesiastic in civil form’ (DH 13.7, 68, OL 2, 116).

This is clearly cognitive: corruption refers to anti-civic attitudes, and it is not the rebellious action itself but a precursor to rebellious action. Cognitive corruption is central to Hobbes’s account of political order: citizens will obey the sovereign if they reason clearly without being infected by fractious dispositions; otherwise citizens are corrupt. Right reason tells one to prioritise one’s real self-interest over short-term gains.

A similar account is found in *Behemoth*, Hobbes’s history of the civil war, probably largely written by 1666. Hobbes starts by noting that Charles I’s problems arose because ‘the people were corrupted generally’. Hobbes asks ‘how came the people to be so corrupted? And what kind of people were they that could so seduce them?’ Six groups of ‘seducers’ are listed, including Catholics, and republican MPs nurtured on Aristotle. Furthermore, ‘the people in general were so ignorant of their duty, as that not one perhaps in ten thousand knew what right any man had to command him, or what necessity there was of King or Commonwealth, for which he was to part with his money against his will’ (BH 2-4; see also DCO 1.7, 8-10). So, citizens’ judgements had been corrupted because false reasoning meant few citizens appreciated their duties, a situation cultivated by the King’s enemies. Dialogue I of *Behemoth* is essentially a discourse on popular corruption. But again, popular corruption refers to the mental processes preceding rebellion, often by years.

Hobbes’s comments in *De Homine* and *Behemoth* clearly imply that popular corruption is cognitive. Popular corruption involved unruly attitudes and faulty reasoning – intentional (by agitators) and unintentional (by ordinary citizens). This led to disorder and ultimately civil war, and was still destabilizing after the Restoration. The link between corruption and democracy is noteworthy: citizens in a monarchy are corrupt if their passions push them

towards democracy or mixed government. But in each case, corruption refers to mental processes before rebellion, not the rebellion itself. This may explain Hobbes's comment that Hull's townsmen, 'having *already* been corrupted by the Parliament', snubbed the King's appointed governor (BH 103; emphasis added). Hobbes's usage thus differs from civic republicans, who often talked of corruption as the disintegration or decomposition of the body politic.²⁸ Hobbes calls this 'sedition', not 'corruption', as noted above.

IV. Corruption of counsellors

I now turn to Hobbes's cunning barb that any of the monarch's counsellors who use rhetoric over reason are 'corrupt Counsellours ... bribed by their own interest' (L 25, 178, OL 3, 192). This must be placed in the context of Hobbes's long battle with civic humanism and rhetoric.²⁹

Counsellors had a key constitutional role in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³⁰ The early seventeenth century saw major clashes over who should advise monarchs. In the turbulent 1620s and the Short Parliament of 1640-1, many MPs sought to counsel King James and King Charles against their will, and objected to counsellors such as the Duke of

²⁸ Euben, 'Corruption', pp. 222-3.

²⁹ David Johnston, *The Rhetoric of Leviathan: Thomas Hobbes and the Politics of Cultural Transformation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press (1986); Quentin Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric in the Philosophy of Hobbes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1996).

³⁰ John Guy, 'The rhetoric of counsel in early modern England', in Dale Hoak, ed., *Tudor Political Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1995), 292-310.

Buckingham.³¹ Hobbes disliked this interference in general, and the particular opinions voiced.³²

Hobbes's reference to corrupt counsel slyly rebukes these headstrong parliamentarians. It also challenges civic humanism, the philosophy which underpinned the theory and practice of counsel. Civic humanists followed Cicero and others by idealizing the *vita activa* (active civic life) in which the *vir civilis* (virtuous citizen) was to use his disinterested reason to advise rulers on how to advance the common good.³³ A key tool was rhetoric, which in those days meant a specific set of skills, including literary devices like metaphor; the aim was to harness the power of eloquence to persuade one's readers and listeners.³⁴

Hobbes came to distrust the intellectual foundations and political consequences of civic humanism and of rhetoric. He despised the unthinking reverence for classical authors and the aim of arousing emotion, and feared the resulting passion for democracy and rejection of sovereign authority.³⁵ He was especially worried about rhetorical counsel in parliamentary assemblies. Rhetoric aims 'to make the unjust appear Just', appealing not to reason but to 'the passions of men's hearts' such that MPs vote 'not on the basis of correct reasoning but on emotional impulse' (DC 10.13, 123). This can cause civil war: 'the sole cause' of 'our land's present civil wars' was that 'certain evil men who were not asked for counsel thought that their own wisdom was less fairly valued and counselled the citizens to

³¹ S.R. Gardiner, ed., *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution, 1625-1660*. Oxford: Clarendon Press (3rd revised edition, 1906).

³² Johann Sommerville, 'Lofty science and local politics', in Tom Sorell, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1996), pp. 248-55, 262. See also pp. 264-5 on King Charles's own counsellors.

³³ John Guy, 'The Henrician age', in J.G.A. Pocock, ed., *The Varieties of British Political Thought, 1500-1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1993), 13-46, pp. 13-22.

³⁴ Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, pp. 19-211.

³⁵ Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, pp. 284-93.

take up arms against the king? (AWL 38.16, 424).³⁶ Hobbes makes similar claims time and time again.³⁷

Hobbes's precise views on rhetoric may have changed, but *Leviathan*, published in 1651, remains deeply concerned about the political dangers of rhetoric.³⁸ Chapter 25 firmly denounces its use in counsel. Hobbes states that a counsellor who uses exhortation and dehortation, two key tools of rhetoric, fails to 'tye himselfe ... to the rigour of true reasoning', producing advice that is 'directed to the Good of him that giveth the Counsell, not of him that asketh it'. This is why 'they that Exhort and Dehort, when they are required to give Counsell, are corrupt Counsellours, and as it were bribed by their own interest' (L 25, 177-8, OL 3, 192).³⁹ Because corruption was seen as the antithesis of humanist virtue, accusing such counsellors of corruption was probably an intentional insult. The Latin *Leviathan*, interestingly, refers here to being corrupted by 'cupiditate', or greed (OL 3, 192), but this is the closest one can get to 'interest' in Latin.

Hobbes treats the corrupted counsellor as his own corruptor, fusing cognitive and political corruption: being bribed mentally by his self-interest/greed, and then acting to abuse his office by giving partial rather than impartial advice. Even if a corrupt counsellor happens to give good advice, he is 'no more a good Counsellour, than he that giveth a Just Sentence for a reward, is a Just Judge' (L 25, 178). This highlights the cognitive essence of corrupt counsellors: what is corrupt is the counsellor's self-seeking motivation, even if he gives the right advice.

³⁶ I have modified Jones's translation (AW 38.16, 476).

³⁷ EW 8, xvi-xvii; EL 19.5, 105; 27.12-15, 169-72; DC 5.5, 71; 12.10, 138; L 17, 119-20; BH 2, 109.

³⁸ Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*, pp. 345-9.

³⁹ For more on exhortation, dehortation and counsel, see Charles Tarlton, '“The word for the deed”': Hobbes's two versions of *Leviathan*', *New Literary History* 27 (1996), 785-802, pp. 798-802.

V. Corruption of legal processes

Hobbes often denounces judicial corruption, a widely discussed problem in Stuart England,⁴⁰ as in his criticism of the ‘frequent corruption and partiality of Judges’ (L 26, 192, but not OL 3, 203).⁴¹ He also fears corruption in other parts of the legal process, such as juries whose decisions are ‘corrupted by reward’ (L 26, 195, but not OL 3, 205).⁴²

Mark Warren enjoins us to relate corruption to norms.⁴³ The first step is to recognise that Hobbes fears legal corruption because it can lead to a state of nature. Liberty and property are threatened by the ‘false judgements, robberies and theft [that] occur when judges are corrupt [*corrupti*], meaning that miscreants will go unpunished and ‘good citizens will be beset by murderers, robbers and swindlers’, until ‘the commonwealth itself is dissolved’ (DC 13.17, 152, OL 2, 310; EL 28.6, 175; L 27, 212). This view was hardly

⁴⁰ Donald Veall, *The Popular Movement for Law Reform 1640-1660* (Clarendon Press: Oxford, 1970).

⁴¹ Also: judges being ‘private men’ with ‘private ends, whereby they may be corrupted by gifts, or intercession of friends’ (EL 28.6, 175), judges who are ‘corrupt’ (*corruptas*) (DC 13 chapter summary, 142, OL 2, 297), the ‘learned and uncorrupt Judge’ (L 10, 63, but not OL 3, 70), ‘corruption either of Judges or Witnesses’ (L 30, 236, but not OL 3, 245), ‘the corruption of the Sons of Samuel’ (L 35, 282, but not OL 3, 293-4; see L 12, 85 for how the Sons of Samuel had ‘received bribes, and judged unjustly’), judges and witnesses corrupted by riches (‘*corruptuntur a divitiis*’) (OL 3, 214, LLC 27, 196, but not L 27, 205), ‘a corrupt or foolish judge’s unjust sentence’ (BH 37), ‘the Ignorance, or Corruption of a Judge’ (DP 31), and judicial decisions ‘undone by Error, or Corruption’ (DP 50). See also Hobbes’s comparison of corrupt judges to corrupt counsellors (L 25, 178), discussed above, and below for other references (DC 13.17, 152, OL 2, 310, twice; OL 3, 120).

⁴² Also: individuals who are corrupted when someone decides ‘to corrupt, or force’ others to speak against their conscience (L 7, 48, but not OL 3, 52), and rich/vainglorious men who ‘adventure on Crimes, upon hope of escaping punishment, by corrupting publique justice, or obtaining Pardon by Money, or other rewards’ (L 27, 204-5; but corruption is discussed differently at the equivalent point in OL 3, 214 – see the previous footnote). See also section 2 for the analogy with corrupt witnesses (EW 4, 443), footnote 41 for corrupt witnesses (L 30, 236), and below for witnesses corrupted by relatives (OL 2, 178; L 14, 98, OL 3, 110; L 26, 195, OL 3, 205).

⁴³ Mark Warren, ‘What does corruption mean in a democracy?’, *American Journal of Political Science* 48 (2004), 328-43.

uncommon; for example Sir Edward Coke also condemned judicial corruption for eroding the state.⁴⁴

This perspective gives a normative basis for Hobbes's attack on corrupt judges. The key is equity, an important but often overlooked part of Hobbes's norms (DC 3.15, 50; L 15, 108-9; DP 9, 68). Equity requires 'the equall distribution to each man, of that which in reason belongeth to him', but a judge who is 'partiall in judgment' deters men from using judges or arbitrators, 'and consequently ... is the cause of Warre', hence breaking the laws of nature (L 15, 108; see also DC 3.15, 50). Indeed, the English *Leviathan's* discussion of judicial 'corruption and partiality' becomes *iniquitate* in the Latin *Leviathan* – inequitable (L 26, 192, OL 3, 203).⁴⁵

One law of nature even refers specifically to judicial corruption. Because 'no man is a fit Arbitrator in his own cause', no one should arbitrate 'to whom greater profit, or honour, or pleasure apparently ariseth out of the victory of one party, than of the other; for hee hath taken (though an unavoydable bribe, yet) a bribe; and no man can be obliged to trust him' (L 15, 109; see also DC 3.21-2, 52). As the marginal summary puts it, 'no man [is] to be Judge, that has in him a natural cause of Partiality' (L 15, 109). Hobbes does not talk of corruption here, but he does at the equivalent point in the Latin *Leviathan*: such an arbiter is corrupted by human nature ('[c]orruptitur ... a natura humana') (OL 3, 120). So, judges who would benefit more from one decision than another are *already* corrupted.

This reference to corruption is purely cognitive: the mental fault occurs before the judge officially makes a ruling. Here, judicial corruption is cognitive because judges reach decisions on the basis of misplaced self-interest rather than by equity, harming their real long-term interest by encouraging a state of nature. This is why Hobbes writes, as discussed

⁴⁴ Linda Levy Peck, *Court Patronage and Corruption in Early Stuart England*, London: Unwin Hyman (1990), p. 165.

⁴⁵ Corruption is also conceptualised in terms of deviations from impartiality by Oskar Kurer, 'Corruption: an alternative approach to its definition and measurement', *Political Studies* 53 (2005), 222-39.

in the previous section, that a corrupt counsellor who gives good advice ‘is no more a good Counsellour, than he that giveth a Just sentence for a reward, is a Just Judge’ (L 25, 178).⁴⁶ Again, what is corrupt is the judge’s unsound motivation, even if he happens to make the right ruling. Hobbes also fears that onlookers, seeing judges making decisions for inappropriate reasons, will seek further corruptions of the legal process, or even settle disputes themselves, violently.

Greed is not the only trigger of cognitive corruption. Consider Hobbes’s comment that judges can be ‘corrupted [*corrupti*] by gifts, influence *or even pity*’ (DC 13.17, 152, emphasis added; OL 2, 310). Pity is defined in *Leviathan* as ‘Griefe, for the Calamity of another’ (L 6, 43), and is once even defined specifically with reference to judges (DH 12.10, 61). Hobbes is clearly worried about judges who pity a guilty defendant and, whether they realise it or not, rule in the defendant’s favour to stop themselves feeling unhappy. This is very similar to the corrupt counsellor’s self-corruption. It also offers more evidence that Hobbes may have thought of rhetoric as potentially corrupting: pity is one of the passions most easily aroused by rhetoric (EL 9.11, 53), and Hobbes dislikes lawyers using ‘the faculty of Rhetorick to seduce the Jury, and sometimes the Judge also’ (DP 11; see also L 8, 51-2).

Hobbes is not alone in seeing that pity could corrupt. Even the anonymous author of the ancient rhetorical treatise *Ad C. Herennium* writes that ‘witnesses can be corrupted by bribery, or partiality, or intimidation, or animosity’.⁴⁷ Both authors depict corruption as neglect of public duties for self-oriented motives, but this notion of self-oriented motives is

⁴⁶ A related example is in the speech of the Plateans, in Hobbes’s 1628 translation of Thucydides. Expecting the Spartans to be impartial arbitrators, the Plateans in fact found ‘the judges partial’, ‘not judges of the truth, but respecters only of ... profit’, assessing their fate not by ‘justice’ and ‘equity’ but according to how much the Plateans had helped the Spartans (EW 8, 317-27). The Plateans thus begged the Spartans to ‘judge uncorruptly’ (EW 8, 324). (They didn’t.)

⁴⁷ Anonymous, *Ad C. Herennium de Ratione Dicendi*, ed. and tr. Harry Caplan, London: William Heinemann Ltd. (1954), 2.7.11, p. 79.

broader than most modern ideas of corruption, where greed and personal gain are the main drivers. A different cognitive trigger arises when testifying against a relative: such testimony is ‘corrupted by Nature’ because a witness’s feelings about his relative contaminate his judgement (L 14, 98, OL 3, 110), a point also made in *De Cive* (‘a natura corrumpi praesumitur’) (OL 2, 178, DC 2.19, 40) and, as noted earlier, in reference to partial judges in the Latin *Leviathan*.

So, Hobbes’s references to legal corruption are often strongly cognitive, and at least one comment is purely cognitive – the corrupted arbiter. Sometimes he fuses cognitive and political corruption, as when comparing corrupt counsellors and corrupt judges: he fears not only distorted legal reasoning but also the ensuing actions, such as inequitable rulings. But some of Hobbes’s comments on legal corruption are so brief that we cannot know exactly what he meant. It is entirely possible that he sometimes uses the standard language of corruption as bribery, without any cognitive component; these would be straight examples of what I have called ‘political corruption’. But overall, we can conclude that for Hobbes, corruption in legal settings involves failing to reason and/or act impartially, especially due to emotions like greed and pity. The immediate result may be inequitable rulings, and in the longer term, a return to the state of nature.

VI. Conceptual summary

There is a strong cognitive basis to Hobbes’s comments on corruption of the people, of counsellors, and of legal processes. Corruption of the people solely involves cognitive corruption – corruption of mental processes, by faulty reasoning or by anti-civic dispositions and emotions. Corruption of counsellors fuses cognitive and political corruption but is still essentially cognitive, as are several comments about corruption in legal contexts. In short, corrupt individuals misjudge their self-interest, potentially leading to actions weakening the commonwealth.

Except for the semantic corruption discussed in section 2, Hobbes does not use the language of corruption to refer to distorted political language – faulty definitions, rhetorical redescription, and so on.⁴⁸ But such linguistic contortions are both symptom and partial cause of corrupted judgement, and may lead to political instability. We often disagree about definitions, and about how to reason deductively from definitions to conclusions (for example, whether a tax is necessary, and what types of taxes are best). Because both disagreements are destabilizing, we should let the sovereign decide on definitions and deductions, and treat the sovereign's laws as equivalent to right reason (see for example AW 30.22, 377; EL 29.8, 180-1; L 5, 32-3; 18, 124-5). Hobbes's sovereign is the 'Great Definer',⁴⁹ and the sovereign's power is 'fundamentally epistemic'.⁵⁰ These epistemic issues are closely related to Hobbes's concerns over cognitive corruption. Hobbes's cognitive idea of corruption also meshes closely with his concerns about disruptive emotions, like ambition and glory.⁵¹

Aside from one effort in *Anti-White*, Hobbes never defines corruption. This is curious: he defined many important and politically contentious terms. Perhaps he was mostly unaware of just how he used the word, although the pun on corrupt counsellors, and the reference to corruption of commonwealths, are probably exceptions.

⁴⁸ Euben, 'Corruption', pp. 224-5, 231; Skinner, *Reason and Rhetoric*.

⁴⁹ Sheldon Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought*. London: George Allen & Unwin (1961), p. 260.

⁵⁰ Richard Tuck, *Hobbes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press (1989), p. 152; emphasis removed

⁵¹ Deborah Baumgold, 'Hobbes's political sensibility: the menace of political ambition', in Mary Dietz, ed., *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory*. Kansas: University Press of Kansas (1990), 74-90, pp. 76-8, 81-5; Mary Dietz, 'Hobbes's subject as citizen', in Mary Dietz, ed., *Thomas Hobbes and Political Theory*. Kansas: University Press of Kansas (1990), 91-119, pp. 96-111; Gabriella Slomp, 'Hobbes on glory and civil strife', in Patricia Springborg, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hobbes's Leviathan*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, (2007), pp. 183, 190-2.

Hobbes's account of corruption overlaps with the dominant idea of corruption today – the misuse of public office for private gain. But Hobbes's conception is broader in three respects. In terms of what can be corrupt, Hobbes includes mental processes as well as actions; most writers now talk only of the latter. In terms of who can be corrupt, most writers now talk only of public officials as corrupt; Hobbes includes citizens, as did civic republicans like Machiavelli. This difference partly reflects a change in the notion of public 'office', which once included duties. Finally, in terms of which cognitive triggers can corrupt, most commentators see personal gain as the main motivation, but Hobbes includes opinions about the merit of democracy, dispositions such as hostility to monarchy, and emotions like fear, pity and vainglory.

Yet Hobbes's account of corruption is narrower in one key respect. Most writers now see corruption in terms of private gain; Hobbes only addresses *misjudged* private gain – thinking or acting in terms of one's apparent rather than real self-interest. Corrupt citizens ignore their higher-order interest in self-preservation, prioritizing interests that are lower-order and shorter-term, such as disobeying laws that they dislike. Corrupt counsellors do not advise impartially, which is in everyone's long-term interest, and instead advise out of self-interest, using rhetorical tools which deter listeners from calculating what is in the common good. Corrupt judges decide cases not through equity but through greed, pity or friendship, ignoring the encouragement that this gives to further lawbreaking.

This point is worth emphasising, as Hobbes is often seen as the champion of subjective self-interest.⁵² True, Hobbes writes that 'the proper object of every mans Will, is some Good to himselfe' (L 25, 176). But recall Hobbes's distinction between real and apparent goods. The 'good' that we pursue is not always our greatest real good – self-preservation (DH 11.6, 48). Hobbes is intensely worried about people making choices

⁵² For example, D.D. Raphael, *Hobbes: Morals and Politics*. London: George Allen & Unwin (1977), pp. 42-7, 65-8.

which are only in their short-term self-interest. This undermines the state, leading to unrest or civil war.

In summary, corruption for Hobbes is not quite the same as the misuse of public office for private gain. Rather, political corruption is neglect of public duties for misjudged private gain; cognitive corruption in general is false reasoning or improper attitudes; and cognitive corruption in political contexts is the false reasoning or improper attitudes that may cause neglect of public duties, where public duties are defined as what the laws of nature require for civic peace.

VII. Other interpretations

My interpretation differs to varying degrees from the interpretations of the few writers who have written in English about Hobbes's views on corruption. As far as I know, the only writer who is explicit about Hobbes's cognitive notion of popular corruption is Geoffrey Vaughan, who writes that 'in *Behemoth* the corruption of the people means their instruction in the wrong doctrines Ignorance of duty seems to be the result, rather than a cause, of corruption'.⁵³ I would add that corruption is not only instruction in the wrong doctrines but also involves incorrect mental processes: had citizens reasoned correctly and lacked rebellious attitudes, they would have rejected these received doctrines. I would also expand Vaughan's account to include corruption of judges, witnesses and counsellors. But Vaughan's account is essentially right.

Richard Kraynak also identifies faulty doctrines as central to corruption in *Behemoth*. However, Kraynak seems to me to misconstrue precisely what is involved here. He writes that corruption as understood today – 'a compromise of principles for the sake of private gain' – is 'exactly the opposite' of Hobbes's idea of popular corruption:

⁵³ Geoffrey Vaughan, 'The audience of *Leviathan* and the audience of Hobbes's political philosophy', *History of Political Thought* 22 (2001), 448-71, p. 470.

when Hobbes speaks of the corruption of the people, he means ... [that] they abandoned their natural indifference to partisan opinions and ignored their natural preference for private gain; their corruption consisted in acquiring an artificial concern for general and abstract principles in the form of opinions and doctrines of right. In *Behemoth* corruption is the process by which the people are indoctrinated by intellectual authorities ... in the literal sense of being filled up with doctrines and turned into zealous partisans.⁵⁴

But Hobbes's concern is not that citizens 'ignored their natural preference for private gain': they just confused their real and apparent private gain. 'General and abstract principles' about doctrines of right are not corrupt: Hobbes wants citizens to accept his own general and abstract principles of right. Kraynak's final sentence might imply that all indoctrination corrupts, but for Hobbes only faulty indoctrination corrupts. Scientific reasoning is hard to learn (L 5, 35), so Hobbes wants men to be exposed over time to 'true doctrines conforming to their own understanding' (DC 13.9, 146-7; EL 28.8, 176; L 30, 233; LLC 47, 487-8; DP 12). I would call that indoctrination; others might not. Ultimately, I do not see Hobbes's idea of corruption as being 'exactly the opposite' of the modern idea, indeed as just noted they share the same general structure, albeit with certain particular differences. But Kraynak is certainly right that faulty doctrines are a key part of how Hobbes understands corruption.

Kenneth Minogue depicts corruption for Hobbes as 'private desires (for profit, of ambition) escaping from the private realm and determining public affairs', and suggests that the 'source of such corruption' is 'a kind of subjectivity' which leads to 'beliefs which can

⁵⁴ Robert Kraynak, *History and Modernity in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 37.

threaten the stability of the state’.⁵⁵ Minogue is right that Hobbes wants to keep corrupt desires in the private realm. For example, ambition ‘cannot be removed from men’s minds’ (DC 13.12, 148), so Hobbes seeks to avoid ‘institutional arrangements that give encouragement to political ambition’.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, Minogue’s public/private distinction does not quite capture Hobbes’s concerns: as explained above, the problem is *misjudged* private desires. I think we get more leverage by using Hobbes’s distinction between real versus apparent goods: corruption involves desires for short-term, apparent goods overcoming desires for long-term, real goods. This may be in the presence or absence of reason: perhaps reason fails to make those real goods clear, or perhaps it cannot overcome short-term desires.

The account which differs most from my reading of Hobbes is that of Peter Euben.⁵⁷ This partly reflects different methodologies: I examine Hobbes’s use of the term ‘corruption’, Euben draws inferences from Hobbes’s broader political theory to what he may have said about earlier ideas of corruption. For example Euben takes Thucydides’s notion of *stasis*, which Euben treats as a Greek version of ‘corruption’, and then examines what Hobbes might say about this idea.⁵⁸ Yet when Hobbes translates Thucydides, he follows Philemon Holland’s 1603 text in translating *stasis* as ‘sedition’ (for example, EW 8, 348).⁵⁹ As I have shown, Hobbes sees sedition as the state of rebellion occurring *after* widespread cognitive corruption.

What Hobbes calls corrupt thus differs from what Euben treats as Hobbesian corruption. Euben suggests that for Hobbes ‘[c]orruption cannot be the triumph of private

⁵⁵ Kenneth Minogue, ‘From precision to peace: Hobbes and political language’, *Hobbes Studies* 3 (1990), 75-88, p. 88.

⁵⁶ Deborah Baumgold, *Hobbes’s Political Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1988), p. 78.

⁵⁷ Euben, ‘Corruption’.

⁵⁸ Euben, ‘Corruption’, pp. 223-6, 230-1.

⁵⁹ Philemon Holland, *Plutarch’s Moralia: Twenty Essays*, ed. E.H. Blakeney, n.d. [c. 1912], London: J.M. Dent & Sons Limited, p. 55.

interest over the public good’,⁶⁰ but Hobbes actually depicts corruption as second-order private interests defeating first-order private interests; the public good, civic peace, requires us to follow the latter. So, Hobbesian corruption can indeed be conceived as the triumph of private interest over public good, as long as we interpret ‘private interest’ and ‘public good’ along the lines suggested in this paper.

Euben writes that for Hobbes ‘there is no standard of public conduct except how the sovereign does in fact conduct himself’,⁶¹ but Hobbes does outline standards of public conduct and links their violation to corruption. Euben also sees Hobbes’s idea of corruption as largely amoral, implying that writers like Machiavelli were themselves immoral in using ‘corruption’ as a critical term.⁶² But we have seen that Hobbes’s own language of corruption is usually normative and critical.

Euben states that for Hobbes, ‘[t]o call a regime corrupt is to say something about the speaker’s preferences, not about the regime itself’. Hobbes’s subjectivist take on corruption thus ‘dissolves the rhetorical force of calling a government or citizen corrupt.’⁶³ True, Hobbes scorned the Aristotelian typology of tyranny, oligarchy and anarchy as corruptions of monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. The first three ‘are not the names of other Formes of Government, but of the same Formes misliked’ (L 19, 130; see also EL 20.3, 110-1). One minor quibble is that as section II noted, Hobbes does himself call a regime corrupt when it involves mixed government (EL 27.7, 167). He would not see this as simply reflecting his personal feelings: the very concept of mixed government is a contradiction in terms, he would say. More importantly, I do not agree that Hobbes’s subjectivism removes the rhetorical force of calling citizens corrupt: as we have seen,

⁶⁰ Euben, ‘Corruption’, p. 231.

⁶¹ Euben, ‘Corruption’, p. 230.

⁶² Euben, ‘Corruption’, pp. 230-1, 235.

⁶³ Euben, ‘Corruption’, pp. 230-1.

Hobbes explicitly accuses citizens of corruption, and does so using criteria for real/apparent private interest.

I would therefore suggest that Euben pushes Hobbes's subjectivism too far. I wonder if this is based on quoting out of context Hobbes's nominalist argument that we call good what we desire, '[t]here being nothing simply and absolutely so'.⁶⁴ By cutting off Hobbes's statement early, Euben implies that Hobbes was an out-and-out moral sceptic. Yet Hobbes goes on to say that we only lack a common rule of good and evil *in the state of nature*: in society, the sovereign makes these rules (L 6, 39). And when common rules of good and evil exist, we can decide what is corrupt. Jean Hampton writes: 'Hobbes is a subjectivist who nonetheless seeks to espouse objective moral principles'.⁶⁵ Hume said he left his scepticism behind when he left his office; Hobbes left his scepticism behind – partly – when he left the state of nature. In short, Hobbes does have principles for how citizens and public officials should think and act, and this gives him criteria for deciding when things are corrupt.

This helps us resolve a tension between two adjacent comments of Mark Philp. Philp rightly states that Hobbes sees 'the public good' as 'the ultimate end' of sovereignty, but I do not agree that for Hobbesians corruption 'has no moral content' and is 'simply what people accuse each other of when they see them acting against their interests in some way'.⁶⁶ It is precisely because Hobbes esteems the public good that his account of corruption has moral content. Hobbes defined a 'common good' as something that is 'useful to many, or good for the state' (DH 11.4, 47). Avoiding death is in everyone's interest, so supporting the sovereign is literally vital. Therefore, failing to do one's duty to the sovereign – whether one is a citizen, a counsellor or a judge, whether this failure reflects greed or spurious emotions like pity, and whether the error involves one's own

⁶⁴ Euben, 'Corruption', p. 230, quoting L 6, 39.

⁶⁵ Jean Hampton, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press (1986), p. 50.

⁶⁶ Philp, 'Defining political corruption', p. 454.

incorrect reasoning or is also fostered by external agitators – is cognitively and politically corrupt, and threatens everyone’s life and liberty.

VIII. Conclusion

Hobbes’s language of corruption is primarily cognitive: corruption involves distorted judgement, through faulty reasoning or emotions which hinder civic peace. Corruption means that citizens think they benefit from sedition, counsellors advise with self-interested rhetoric rather than impartial logic, witnesses lie, and judges settle cases by bribes or pity. Hobbes saw corrupt counsellors and corrupt citizens as key causes of the civil war which had cast England into a state of nature, and believed that the same could happen again. Given Hobbes’s emphasis on right reason and the importance of averting a state of nature, corruption should have a prominent place in the study of Hobbes’s political theory.