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International anarchy? Modern adoption of Hobbes's state of nature

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Contemporary International Relations (IR) scholars tend to understand Hobbes's conceptions of the state of nature and sovereign state by imposing modern concepts and categories without paying enough attention to the historical and ideational contexts which shaped Hobbes's political thought. In doing so, they apply Hobbes's notion of the state of nature to apprehend international politics and claim that the international realm, from Hobbes's view, would be a realm of anarchy and, thus, deem that states are justified in conducting power-maximising practices without any moral consideration. Having been inspired by the contributions of a constructivist perspective, which emphasises the importance of historical and ideational contexts surrounding thinkers in the past, I argue that, to apprehend Hobbes's understanding of relations between states, it is necessary to realise that Hobbes developed the idea of the state of nature in response to Europe's religious-based violent conflicts, an intellectual debate between the Calvinists and Arminians, and England's expansion of colonial activities in America. By employing this alternative methodological lens, I argue that we can re-read Hobbes's understanding of international politics differently from the realist orthodox account mentioned earlier. First, I will address the methodological problems of the realist approach and offer the constructivist perspective and its contributions to understanding Hobbes's political thought. Second, I then explore a scholarly tradition historicising Hobbes's political thought. Third, I will examine the crucial historical and intellectual contexts that influenced Hobbes's notion of the state of nature. Lastly, I will re-read Hobbes's understanding of relations between states by considering the importance of the principle of the right of self-preservation.

KEYWORDS

Thomas Hobbes, state of nature, international anarchy, realism, constructivism

Introduction

Contemporary International Relations (IR) scholars tend to understand Hobbes's conceptions of the *state of nature* and *sovereign state* by imposing modern concepts and categories without paying enough attention to the historical context that shaped Hobbes's political thought. In doing so, they apply Hobbes's notion of the state of nature to apprehend international politics and claim that the international realm, from Hobbes's view, would be a realm of *anarchy* and, thus, assert that states are justified in conducting power-maximising practices without any moral consideration. Inspired by the contributions of a constructivist perspective that emphasizes the significance of historical and ideational contexts surrounding past thinkers, I argue that understanding Hobbes's conception of state relations necessitates recognizing that he formulated the idea of the state of nature in response to the domestic issues posed by religious civil wars. This context led him to ground his political theory on the fundamental principle of individuals' right to self-preservation, thereby providing a secular basis for political authority that seeks to mitigate both religious conflict and political unrest. By recognising this aspect, I argue that we can reinterpret Hobbes's understanding of international

politics in a way that is different from the realist orthodox account mentioned earlier. The first section of the article addresses methodological problems inherent in the realist approach and offers the constructivist perspective along with its contributions in understanding Hobbes's political thought. Section two explores a scholarly tradition historicising Hobbes's political thought. The third section examines the crucial historical and intellectual contexts influencing Hobbes's notion of the state of nature. The final section tries to re-read Hobbes's perception of relations between states by taking the importance of the principle of the right of self-preservation into consideration.

Modern adoption of Hobbes's political thought: epistemic implications and constructivist methodology as an alternative

Many modern realist theorists within International Relations consider Hobbes's political ideas as the crucial "foundations of modern international thought" (Amitage, 2006, p. 220) as well as regarding Hobbes as one of the founders of the realist tradition (Behr, 2010, p. 115). Such theories incorporate Hobbes's concepts of 'the state of nature' and 'sovereign state' in their understandings of international politics.¹ In short, Hobbes' conception of the 'state of nature' refers to an hypothetical condition where there is no 'common power' or a sovereign state to govern individuals. Under such a condition, each individual is in a perpetual fear of being harmed by everyone, which Hobbes deems the 'state of war', as there is no supreme authority to judge on disputes or any laws to adhere to. Hence, the state of nature is considered an anarchical condition where everyone can do anything in order to survive and ensure their existence (Hobbes, 1996, pp. 82–86).² Hobbes' notions of the state of nature and sovereign state underpin certain key and fundamental premises of realism, which posit that, due to the lack of common authority, relations between states are caught in a realm of anarchy (Wight, 1991, p. 7) where morality becomes irrelevant (Morgenthau, 1965, p. 5; Wight, 1991, pp. 16–17). Within such a 'moral vacuum', states are justified in disregarding moral considerations and can conduct power-maximising practices to survive under such harsh anarchic conditions (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 32–34). By referring his understanding of international political phenomena to the political

thought of a theorist from several centuries ago like Hobbes, Morgenthau deems realist accounts of international politics congruent with human nature and thus have a quality of transhistorical universal truth (Morgenthau, 1965, pp. 4–5). However, the way in which modern realist scholars make connections between their views of international politics and Hobbes's political thought is problematic. Amitage (2006, pp. 220–221) demonstrates that the interpretations of Hobbes' political thought have varied during different periods of time. Historically speaking, the idea of Hobbes as a thinker whose work is so relevant and significant to contemporary international thought is a recent creation, as recent as the early 20th century, following the establishment of the discourse of international anarchy in the discipline of political science and international law (Amitage, 2006, pp. 228–231). Besides, Hobbes's political thought was not the origin of the discourse; rather, it was later adopted by both the proponents and opponents of the discourse of international anarchy to substantiate either side's theoretical arguments (Amitage, 2006, pp. 232–233). Indeed, Hobbes himself formulated notions such as 'the state of nature' and 'sovereign state' due to their domestic relevance. In other words, Hobbes articulated these concepts with the primary focus on the relations between the sovereign state and its subjects, rather than on the interactions among different sovereign states, which is the emphasis of contemporary realist theorists (Amitage, 2006, pp. 219–220).

Having realised that Hobbes's political thought has been perceived differently in different epochs, the issue of methodology becomes crucial for studying history. Reus-Smit (2008) points out the limitations of the realist-materialist methodology that many IR scholars adhere to. Due to its empiricist epistemological ground, this methodological approach inclines these scholars to treat history as an 'objective realm' within which 'truths' can be accessed only via empirical facts (Reus-Smit, 2008, p. 401). The major weakness of this approach lies in its anachronistic view of history because it tends to render modern scholars unaware of their role in interpreting history, and it aids in their unwitting imposition of their own preconceived modern concepts and categories on understandings of historical thought. Hence, scholars who employ this conventional methodology tend to ignore specific meanings of historical thought that are politico-culturally bound to particular periods of history (Reus-Smit, 2008, pp. 402–403).

To avoid these methodological flaws, the constructivist approach might be considered an appropriate alternative strategy for studying historical thought (Reus-Smit, 2008). This approach not only acknowledges that researchers play pivotal roles both in selecting and interpreting history, but it also pays attention to specific political and "ideational" contexts within particular periods that may influence how political thought of past thinkers has been shaped and developed. In addition, it places importance upon historically specific meanings attached to the concepts or categories of those thinkers (Reus-Smit, 2008, pp. 404–406). Studying Hobbes's political thought in this way allows us to understand how he formulated his political projects in response to particular politico-cultural problems and intellectual debates of his time. Moreover, it also enables us to realise the politics of legitimacy in studying 'ideas in history'. It helps us to be sensitive to the ways in which thinkers in the past offered their political thought as justifications of desired political outcomes or practices, occurring alongside the mediation of their proposals by the prevailing accepted norms or values of their time (Reus-Smit, 2008, pp. 410–413).

1 The statement from Hobbes's writing which realist scholars often refer to as the evidence of realist assumptions embedded in Hobbes's political thought is that "though there had never been any time, wherein particular men were in a condition of war one against another; yet in all times, kings, and persons of sovereign authority, because of their independency, are in continual jealousies, and in the state and posture of gladiators; having their weapons pointing, and their eyes fixed on one another; that is, their forts, garrisons, and guns upon the frontiers of their kingdoms; and continual spies upon their neighbours; which is a posture of war" (Hobbes, 1996, p. 85; Tuck, 1999, p. 136).

2 Please note that Hobbes does not claim that the state of nature is a historical fact. Rather, he employs this concept as a heuristic tool for readers to imagine his hypothetical assumption of the condition where there is no common power or sovereign state to govern individuals. Hobbes apparently acknowledges this point when he says "though there had never been any time, wherein particular men were in a condition of war one against another..." (Hobbes, 1996: 85).

Historicising Hobbes' political thought

Attempts to historicise Thomas Hobbes' political thought are by no means a new endeavour. Gabriella Slomp's edited volume *Thomas Hobbes* (Slomp, 2008) compiles essays by several scholars emphasising understanding Hobbes within the specific historical, intellectual, and political contexts that shaped his ideas. For example, Richard Schlatter's article 'Thomas Hobbes and Thucydides,' originally published in 1945, suggests that Hobbes' views of human nature and power politics have been significantly influenced by Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. Quentin Skinner's article 'Review: Hobbes' "Leviathan," originally published in 1964, emphasizes the importance of understanding texts as responses to specific political and intellectual contexts. In so doing, Skinner highlights the rhetorical strategies employed by Hobbes in relation to the political debates of his time. J.G.A. Pocock's chapter 'Time, History, and Eschatology in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes,' originally published in 1971, also focuses on the historical languages of political thought and how they shape political action. Pocock illustrates how Hobbes drew upon and transformed existing languages of natural law and political obligation during his time.

Raia Prokhovnik and Gabriella Slomp's edited volume *International Political Theory after Hobbes: Analysis, Interpretation and Orientation* (Prokhovnik and Slomp, 2010) also provides a collection of essays re-examining Hobbes' legacy in international political theory. Several chapters in this book challenge traditional realist interpretations of Hobbes as well as offering alternative interpretations to Hobbes' political ideas and their relevance to contemporary international politics. Gabriella Slomp's chapter 'The Politics of Motion and the Motion of Politics' proposes that Hobbes' views of self-preservation and anarchy are better understood in relation to his theory of motion. Glen Newey's chapter 'Leviathan and Liberal Moralism in International Theory' suggests that the modern analogy between the state of nature and international politics is mismatched. Camilla Boisen and David Boucher's chapter 'Hobbes and the Subjection of International Relations to Law and Morality' also urges readers to understand Hobbes' theory of natural law by setting him in the historical context of seventeenth and eighteenth-century international jurists.

Situating this article within this broader tradition of historicising Hobbes' thought, this paper is one of the attempts to re-read Hobbes with historical sensitivity and challenge traditional realist interpretations prevalent in International Relations.³ The next part of the article attempts to employ a constructivist perspective in understanding Hobbes' conceptions of the state of nature and sovereign state.

Specific historico-political and intellectual contexts shaping Hobbes' conception of the state of nature

As mentioned earlier, Hobbes did not formulate his ideas of the state of nature and the sovereign state with an emphasis on interstate relations

as modern IR scholars often assume; rather, he deliberately developed these political formulations by focusing on responding to the problem of domestic political arrangements, which was the crucial issue of his time (Amitage, 2006, pp. 219–220).⁴ From the constructivist perspective, it is necessary to examine and try to understand Hobbes's contemporary political problems as well as the underlying intellectual context functioning to justify political practices that particular groups propose (Reus-Smit, 2008, pp. 407–409). This article argues that the civil-religious conflict in early modern Europe and England's growth of colonial activities in America are two significant political issues that Hobbes' conceptions of the state of nature and sovereign state were constructed to address. Along with exploring these problems, this section discusses the intellectual debates pertinent to the issues.

The first major historical context which Hobbes's political project was shaped to deal with was the political turmoil across Europe driven by political movements questing for individuals' liberty (Doyle, 1927, pp. 337). As a result of the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation, the religious basis of political authority, which had previously been strongly established in the Middle Ages, was undermined by the proliferation of the values of humanism and individualism (Doyle, 1927, pp. 337–338). This political environment led to the movements calling for individuals' liberty both in political and religious matters, rendering early seventeenth-century Europe fraught with political turmoil (Doyle, 1927, p. 337). Hobbes's England was no exception. His theoretical accounts of the state of nature and the sovereign state were designed to deal with the tension caused by the demand for individual liberty and the fear of political unrest (Doyle, 1927, p. 354).

Doyle (1927) raises the point that the theological debate between the Calvinist doctrine of "predestination" and the Arminianist doctrine of "freewill," often called the "Arminian Controversy," was the intellectual backdrop underlying this religious-based conflict, which inevitably had a strong influence on Hobbes's political thought. From the formulation of Calvinism, all human beings were sinful and incapable of attaining a good life or salvation. Therefore, the church-state government, receiving legitimate authority from God, was necessary to direct their subjects to the righteous way by governing them with God's moral laws (Doyle, 1927, pp. 338–339). In addition, since the Calvinists had a premise that all human fates have already been "predestined" by the omnipotence of God, the only duty of man was to "automatically" obey the laws (Doyle, 1927, p. 339). In this aspect, the Calvinist doctrine of predestination seems to justify this type of ecclesiastical political arrangement in which the Church still had important roles in state affairs. On the contrary, Arminianism denied the Calvinists' demand for subjects' absolute obedience to the ecclesiastical authority by postulating that if God had predestined everything, including the actions of sinful individuals, God would become a source of evil Himself (Doyle, 1927, pp. 340–341). According to this argument, the Arminianists asserted that God left men to exercise their free will as well as to be responsible for their own actions (Doyle, 1927, p. 342). As a result, they deemed that the right to worship was an individual's affair and in turn called for the separation of

³ Delphine Thivet's work 'Thomas Hobbes: a Philosopher of War or Peace?' (Thivet, 2008) is another example of the attempts to re-read Hobbes' ideas as well as providing alternative understandings. In this article, Thivet renounces classical realists' interpretation that Hobbes does not apply morality to war. Thivet argues that Hobbes himself offers a normative doctrine of war as he apparently posits some moral restraints on the conduct of war.

⁴ Wilson, 2000 (pp. 42–43) also points out that the concept of sovereignty in 17th-century European intellectual debates was primarily "inward-looking" sovereignty, focusing on the internal supremacy of the sovereign rather than emphasising the external relations between sovereigns as conceived in a modern sense.

religious matters from the sphere of the state (Doyle, 1927, p. 343). The Calvinists perceived the Arminianist doctrine of freewill as subversive because it undermined all theories of “political obligations that rested upon religious grounds” and was “equivalent to a denial of all control” (Doyle, 1927, p. 341). Thus, to respond to the issue of the co-existence of the sinfulness of man and God’s omnipotence they developed “the fall of man” explanation, which posited that “[m]an was created good, but he had at a specific moment in time forfeited all potentiality to good by his disobedience to God—and then become unregenerate and abandoned to the dictates of nature” (Doyle, 1927, p. 341). In this sense, it is obvious that the Arminian Controversy had a strong influence on Hobbes’s political thought, as he proposes that the devastating natural conditions of man “would necessitate an absolute state with illimitable power over individuals” (Doyle, 1927, p. 354).⁵ In other words, Hobbes’s account of the state of nature is an atheist version of the Calvinist determinism reaction to individualism (Skinner, 1966, p. 297).

Another issue that forms the intellectual background to Hobbes’s conceptions of the state of nature and (the need for) the sovereign state, which directly engaged with the issue of religious-civil conflict, was the development of the natural law tradition of political theory. During the time of Grotius, Pufendorf, and Hobbes, all of whom were the founding thinkers of the natural law tradition, many states in Europe were experiencing political disturbances and violence caused by the imposition of moral principles of different religious or ideological groups (Tuck, 1987, p. 117). At the same time, there was a growth of the ethical sceptical doctrine which cast doubt on Christian moralists’ claim of the universality of their moral principles (Tuck, 1987, p. 102). Founded on their “empirical basis,” and inspired by the Renaissance’s scientific spirit, the ethical sceptic observed religious “beliefs and practices” from different societies and deemed that there was no universal moral principle to which humans in all societies adhered (Tuck, 1987, pp. 109–110); rather, they perceived religious morality as social conventions locally determined by particular groups of people (Tuck, 1987, pp. 102). Grotius, an explorer of modern natural law theory, realised the contribution of the ethical sceptic doctrine, which denied using religious principles as justifications for conducting political violence. Nevertheless, he was also aware of the problem of political disorder which might derive from the lack of a common ground for ethical judgement that the sceptic’s view brought about (Tuck, 1987, pp. 109–110). Hence, Grotius dealt with the problem of ethical scepticism by positing that there was still a universal natural principle compatible with the empirical basis of the sceptic, which was the natural right of individual’s self-preservation (Tuck, 1987, pp. 110–111). Grotius argued that an individual’s right of self-preservation was a fundamental ground for laws of nature not only because all living creatures possessed a desire for survival, but also due to the fact that this principle naturally

functioned in preserving “social existence” (Tuck, 1987, p. 112).⁶ Hobbes’s account of the state of nature follows this line of argument by asserting that individuals in natural conditions had a fundamental desire for their own preservation as well as the natural right to do so, but the catastrophic outcome of the lack of a common authority in such a pre-social condition would force them to assemble together and establish their sovereign authority to provide protection for them (Hobbes, 1996, pp. 82–86). In this aspect, the secular minimalist ethics of the natural law tradition responds to the historical problem of early modern European states. It contains a pluralist stance in denying the claim on universal moral principle, which is congruent with the co-existence of people from different moral beliefs as well as still providing a basis for political order (Tuck, 1987, p. 117).

Keene (2005, p. 125) points out that the advancement of scientific knowledge after the Renaissance also had a strong intellectual impact on the way in which modern natural law theorists like Grotius and Hobbes shifted the ground of political legitimacy from Christian moral principles to the right to self-preservation. The Copernican revolution, that is the idea that the universe has no objective centre, subverted Aristotelian-Christian geocentric theology, which believed in the centrality of God and presumed that all things were directed toward their own inherently predetermined destinations, and in turn affected the way scholars were inclined to understand and explain changes and motions of things in terms of “physical laws” instead of Aristotelian-Christian determinism (Keene, 2005, p. 126–127; Doyle, 1927, p. 355). In addition, the breakthrough of Newton’s laws of gravitational attraction also particularly influenced Hobbes’s idea of human psychology (the desire for self-preservation) as the first cause of all motions (Keene, 2005, p. 127).⁷

The second important historical condition which Hobbes’s political theory was moulded to respond to was the European colonisation of America. During Hobbes’s time, early modern European powers, such as Spain, England and the Dutch, were actively competing in expanding their colonial activities in the New World (Tuck, 1999, p. 109). The crucial difficulty those European states were facing was not the lack of military force to conquer the land from the indigenous people, but the lack of justification in occupying the natives’ land because the religious claim on the Pope’s authority, which had been commonly employed, became problematised by the secular movement after the Reformation (Keene, 2005, pp. 120–121). In this sense, thinkers of the natural law tradition, inspired by the scientific spirit as mentioned earlier, offered a secular and humanist justification for European practices of colonisation by theorising the laws of nature relating to property ownership (Tuck, 1999, pp. 109–110; Keene, 2005, pp. 127–128). Grotius, a founder of the natural law tradition who greatly influenced Hobbes’s thinking, created an explanation of

⁵ Hobbes inevitably became involved with the Arminian Controversy not only because the dispute was a widespread intellectual debate both in Cambridge and Oxford while Hobbes was conducting his academic career, but also because the relevancy of the debate to English politics, especially since the rule of Henry VIII and his rejection of papal authority and his dominion over religious matters. The debate continued its significance until the reigns of Elizabeth and James at the time of Hobbes (Doyle, 1927, p. 345–346).

⁶ In his work *The Right of War and Peace*, Grotius demonstrates that the right of self-preservation has its root in nature by referring to the character of animals as follows: “the first impression of nature [is] that Instinct whereby every Animal seeks its own Preservation, and loves its Condition, and whatever tend to maintain it” (Grotius 1738, cited in Tuck, 1987, p. 112).

⁷ The way in which natural law theorists explained the fundamental basis of political legitimacy by replacing God’s moral laws with temporal language, like individuals’ right to self-preservation, was considered very dangerous in early modern Europe, where religious authorities still played an important political role, and meant one could be prosecuted by the charge of being blasphemous or iconoclastic (Skinner, 1966: 315–316).

property in natural conditions by arguing that there was no individual ownership in the state of nature and, thus, everyone had their natural right to all things (Keene, 2005, pp. 128).⁸ Grotius based his account of common ownership on the natural condition of individuals' natural right to self-preservation as he posited that in the state of nature individuals were justified to claim anything necessary for their own preservation (Keene, 2005, pp. 128–129). According to this premise, individuals' property existed only after the establishment of a political community. This description of natural law theory was undeniably congruent with the interest of European states over the appropriation of America since they could claim that the primitive way of life of those natives implied that they were still in the state of nature (Keene, 2005, p. 130).⁹

An alternative understanding of Hobbes's relations between states

Having examined the significant political and intellectual contexts of Hobbes's time, it is obvious that the most important historical problem that Hobbes's political thought was formulated to deal with was the religious-civil war as a result of political disobedience (Heller, 1980, p. 22). Consequently, Hobbes, as a proponent of the natural law tradition, grounded the principle of individuals' right to self-preservation as the most foundational principle of his political project, since this principle could avoid employing religious moral beliefs to justify political violence as well as still provide a basis of political order by asserting the necessity of an absolute common power or sovereign state in guaranteeing the protection of individual subjects. In this sense, it is critical to realise that the principle of individuals' self-preservation is the essential core in comprehending Hobbes's political theory. More importantly, utilising this awareness, which can be considered as a contribution of the constructivist perspective, to approach Hobbes's understanding of relations between states would allow us to gain a new insight on the matter which is different from the mindset of mainstream modern IR scholars.

Many IR realists tend to simply extend Hobbes's notion of the state of nature from an individual level into an interstate level, and in turn often infer that, due to the anarchical condition of international systems, the issue of morality would be irrelevant in the international sphere for Hobbes (Wight, 1991, pp. 7, 16–17; Morgenthau, 1965, p. 5). Accordingly, states would become justified in conducting state affairs without moral consideration and to maximise their own power in order to survive in international anarchy (Mearsheimer, 2001, p. 32–34). However, by juxtaposing Hobbes's basic principle of individuals' right to self-preservation with this realist view of Hobbes's understanding of relations between states, this orthodox account becomes problematic.

First, having emphasised on Hobbes's fundamental basis of individual's right of self-preservation, I argue that many realists

misconceive that moral consideration is not possible in Hobbes's scheme of state of nature and misassume that interstate relations is an amoral realm (Morgenthau, 1965, p. 5). Malcolm (2003) notes that, for Hobbes, there exists one moral principle, characterised by both universality and objectivity, applicable across all domains irrespective of the presence of sovereign state; this minimal morality is individual's right to self-preservation. Hobbes regards this principle as a fundamental universal morality since it is a “basic condition for the fulfilment of [all other desires] for all human beings” (Malcolm, 2003, p. 437). Moreover, individuals' right to self-preservation is considered by Hobbes as a law of reason since this principle will guide individuals to pursue peace, which is a condition most conducive to the continuation of individuals' lives (Malcolm, 2003, p. 437). Forsyth (1979, pp. 199–200) raises the point that modern IR theorists assume that Hobbes's state of nature is an absolute anarchical and amoral realm, where there is “war of every man against every man” because these scholars are unaware that Hobbes's conception of state of nature can be differentiated into two stages, i.e., the “original bare state of nature” and the “state of nature modified by the laws of nature.” The bare state of nature is the sphere where each individual takes only their absolute right of self-preservation into consideration (Forsyth, 1979, p. 198). This kind of state of nature is a sphere of anarchy, since individual asserts their absolute freedom and right to do anything they deem congruent with their preservation, which will generate a state of fear for war of all against all among them (Forsyth, 1979, pp. 198–199). The second type of state of nature, or the state of nature modified by the laws of nature, is the sphere in which moral consideration and reason are possible for Hobbes. Within this phase of state of nature, despite the lack of common authority, the laws of reason guide individuals to avoid the devastating conditions in the “bare” state of nature to establish certain mutual-reciprocal relationship among them as groups or allies by limiting their originally absolute freedom as well as recognising each other's right (Forsyth, 1979, pp. 199–200, 203–204). In forming an alliance, individuals have used the law of reason to pursue their long-term preservation as this action allows them to differentiate friends from enemies and, thus, enables them not to be in a state of war of all against all (Forsyth, 1979, p. 208). According to this insight of the two phases of state of nature, we can infer that relations between states from Hobbes's view are not an amoral realm of war of all against all as many realists hold, since the fact of the establishment of the state implies that individuals employ the laws of reason to seek their long-term preservation by aggregating together into a unitary political body which reduces “their risks of attack” both internally and externally (Forsyth, 1979, pp. 207–208). In this aspect, although there is no common higher authority, states in Hobbes's formulation, as comprised of individuals guided by reason, are not in the relations of absolute anarchy; rather, they have been directed by the laws of nature to pursue peace by establishing a certain level of mutual recognition of the right of each other to protect their own citizens (Forsyth, 1979, pp. 208–209).¹⁰ In short, Hobbes does not exclude moral aspects from his notion of the state of nature, either at

8 In Grotius' work *Mare Liberum* (The Freedom of the Seas, or, the Right which Belongs to the Dutch to Take Part in the East Indian Trade), it is interesting that we can see the way that Grotius explained this point by mediating the language of natural science with Christian religious tone: “God had not given all things to this individual or that, but to the entire human race” (Grotius, 1916, cited in Tuck, 1999, p. 117).

9 It is arguable that Hobbes himself also had direct involvement in colonial affairs since he was working for Lord Cavendish who worked in Virginia Company which played important roles in colonisation of America (Tuck, 1999, p. 128).

10 Hobbes clearly expresses his view that desirable relations between states are possible in international state of nature as follows: “leagues between commonwealths, over whom there is no human power established, to keep them all in awe, are not only lawful, but also profitable for the time they last” (Hobbes, 1960, cited in Forsyth, 1979, p. 209).

interpersonal or interstate level. Nevertheless, since Hobbes grounds the right of individual's self-preservation as the most basic principle of his political theory, moral consideration is not obliged if it is contrary to individual's preservation (Malcolm, 2003, p. 438).

Second, I argue that Hobbes does not agree with the realist view that states are justified to conduct power-maximising practices despite the lack of a common authority in the international arena. Realist scholars tend to apply Hobbes's principle of individual's self-preservation to states level and infer that states justly need to maximise power in order to guarantee their own preservation (Mearsheimer, 2001, pp. 29–34; Wight, 1991, p. 7). This widespread view among realists is problematic because Hobbes's basic moral principle of the right to self-preservation is applicable only to individuals, not states (Malcolm, 2003, p. 434). Charles Beitz points out that the existence of states and individuals are different—the death of a state does not necessarily mean that its citizens will die under the reign of other states (Malcolm, 2003, p. 434). Heller (1980, pp. 25–26) elucidates further that the existence of the state is based on the maintenance of its authority over citizens, which can be derived from protecting citizens' lives. The only “objective” and “justified” ground that Hobbes would allow states in conducting warfare is “necessity,” i.e., to protect their citizens (Malcolm, 2003, p. 441). In this sense, the act of maximising the power of state would be considered by Hobbes as a “mistaken judgement,” since it tends to increase risks to citizens' lives, which is opposed to the law of nature or “long-term interest” of individual's self-preservation (Malcolm, 2003, pp. 441–443).

Conclusion

For over a century, Thomas Hobbes' notion of state of nature has been employed as a foundation of realist accounts of international anarchy. Such a premise of anarchical condition in an international realm has shaped worldviews, affected ways of understanding international phenomena, and influenced the decision-making of many policy makers and practitioners adhering to such a theoretical lens. This article demonstrates that Hobbes' conception of state of nature was formulated to address the problems of religious conflict and domestic political unrest during his time. Hobbes' state of nature primarily focuses on relations between individuals rather than states as realist scholars posit. Moreover, despite the anarchical condition caused by the lack of sovereign authority, Hobbes' state of nature governed by the laws of nature is still inclined towards seeking collaboration and peace so as to mitigate risks to self-preservation. A constructivist perspective, therefore, provides a critical insight that the realists' take on international anarchy as transhistorical truth is problematic in that it is not aware of the historicity of Hobbes' political thought and historically-bound meanings attached to the concept of the state of nature.

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- By employing a constructivist approach in understanding Hobbes' ideas, this article offers some unique alternative insights. First, the article problematises the domestic/international demarcation of contexts in understanding Hobbes by pointing out that Hobbes' political thought was a response to both domestic religious conflict and the issue of European colonisation. Second, the article provides a more nuanced understanding of Hobbes' conception of the state of nature by emphasising the two stages of Hobbes's state of nature (the “bare” state and the state “modified by the laws of nature”). Finally, by challenging the realist interpretation of Hobbes, this article opens up new possibilities for thinking about ethics and cooperation in international politics.

Author contributions

KM: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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