

Article

A Hobbesian Argument for World Government

Henrik Skaug Sætra 

Faculty of Business, Languages, and Social Science, Østfold University College, N-1757 Remmen, Norway;
henrik.satra@hiof.no

Abstract: The legitimacy of government is often linked to its ability to maintain order and secure peace. Thomas Hobbes' political philosophy provides a clear description of why government is necessary, as human nature and the structures emerging out of human social interaction are such that order and peace will not naturally emerge to a sufficient degree. Hobbes' general argument is often accepted at the national level, but in this article, I explore why a Hobbesian argument for the international level—an argument for world government—is deducible from his philosophy. Hobbes builds his philosophy on his conception of human nature and argues that individuals' interests and preferences should be the determinant for evaluating the value of a political entity. By emphasising these aspects of Hobbes' theory, I argue that several contemporary phenomena suggest that a world government could be preferable to the states system. The cases used are the outbreak of war in Europe in 2022 and the continuing and accelerating environmental crisis. Through this examination, the continued relevance of Hobbes' political philosophy is demonstrated, and according to Hobbes' own logic, those who accept the argument should also seek to implement such a solution.

Keywords: Thomas Hobbes; cosmopolitanism; world state; realism; war; climate change



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1. Introduction

A commonly used argument in favour of government is that without it, we would have chaos. What sort of chaos, and how unfortunate chaos is, varies, but just about everyone agrees that such chaos would be undesirable. The legitimacy of governments tend to be based on their ability to reduce such chaos. Some arguments to this effect are based on ideas about the misery in the state of nature—a hypothetical or historical situation in which individuals live without a government [1]. Throughout the ages, as various governments have fought for their position and purported right to secure order, borders have been drawn, shifted, as various forms of governments have been established.

While governments can surely fail at their tasks, the challenges found on the supranational level are often argued to be qualitatively different [2], due to the current state system recognizing states as the ultimate sovereign entity. While international relations (IR) might not be pure anarchy [3], states currently exist in a situation in which there is no common power who can govern like national governments do on the domestic level. While long periods of peace in parts of the world lead some to argue that the states system can provide order [2], and that we are also moving in the right direction [4], here I focus on two cases that highlight the limitations of the current order. The two cases are Russia's war in Ukraine in 2022 and the ongoing environmental crisis. Both highlight crucial shortcomings of the states system, and both provide reasons to seriously contemplate whether we should seek a way out of the state of nature *between* states, or if we are in fact currently still in the state of nature due to the inability of the states system to secure peace and order to individuals.

The notion that the current order is limited is, of course, nothing new to those familiar with the history of political theory and international relations. However, several attempts have recently been made to the effects that new technologies and new challenges make the need for change more urgent. Coeckelbergh [5], for example, focuses on climate change and AI, while Bostrom [6] portrays the world as increasingly vulnerable due to various advances

in science and technology. While I agree that our current era is indeed characterised by vulnerabilities of various types, I argue that we should not treat these issues as novel challenges, but rather build on a long tradition in IR of analysing the limitations of the international system and anarchy [2].

Thomas Hobbes is a mainstay in most expositions of realism in international relations. Hobbes, alongside Machiavelli and Thucydides, are usually portrayed as the founders of the realist school of thought—for classical realism in particular. In this paper, I seek to re-evaluate how Hobbes should be interpreted with regard to the nature of international relations. I will show that while there are ample justifications for considering Hobbes a good fit for later IR-realism, another approach should be seriously considered; could Hobbes provide a justification for an effort to develop a world government? Following the theory of Hobbes, I test the argument that borders and nation states are both arbitrary and insufficient for allowing us to effectively face our challenges. If larger units—or one single unit—is the best path towards safety, or justice, a borderless world can easily be justified in a Hobbesian framework, as a Hobbesian IR theory emphasises the needs and interests of individuals, not states. The Hobbesian solution for the natural state of individuals is the creation of a strong state—the Leviathan—but the state itself does not become a unit of intrinsic value, as I focus on individuals as the origin of value, and not, for example, states or *peoples*, as Kant [7] proposes. It is somewhat paradoxical that the realists who followed Hobbes (and to a certain degree Hobbes himself) is so intent on eradicating domestic anarchy, while they regard the international anarchy as inescapable.

Firstly, a brief summary of how Hobbes tends to be read in IR is in order. Secondly, I examine what I consider Hobbes' core arguments, in particular his view on human nature and methodological individualism. I consider it essential to stay true to this core in the development of a Hobbesian IR-theory. His political philosophy is mainly a treatise on domestic politics, and the next task will be to critically examine the things Hobbes actually says about "international relations" (which is not much). Thirdly, I develop and discuss what I refer to as the Hobbesian argument for world government.

A necessary part of the effort to develop a Hobbesian argument for world government is a consideration of the arguments against the feasibility of a stable global political entity. My particular version of Hobbesian theory does not mainly aim at prescription but is deeply normative (and ironically quite idealistic). While I do not dispute potential claims that Hobbesian prescriptive theory should resemble the familiar readings of Hobbes, I do not, however, consider this the only possible path for developing Hobbesian IR-theory. In fact, most of Hobbes' writings consist of a somewhat unclear and uneasy mix of prescriptive and normative theory that should be recognised and taken into account in any effort to apply and develop his theoretical framework.

2. War and the Climate Crisis

Late February 2022, the Russian government, after a long period of amassing troops and military equipment around the border of Ukraine, engaged the sovereign state in outright war. World leaders repeatedly warned that this was about to happen, while Putin and his officials had insisted that the only purpose of their activity in the region was military exercises. While there are NATO countries abound in the near vicinity of Ukraine, no efforts to actively intervene militarily to stop Russia's encroachment were made. Leaders of most nations expressed their deepest sympathies but were unwilling to do what they arguably had the power to do: intervene. Non-intervention is deeply ingrained in the states system [2], and well reflected by the sitting secretary general of NATO, Jens Stoltenberg, who stated that "We are not part of this conflict", and "we have a responsibility to ensure it does not escalate and spread beyond Ukraine".¹

Condemnation was near universal, support in the form of money and equipment was provided, and economic sanctions were tougher than any seen in recent history. However, Russia was seemingly free to venture deeper and deeper into its neighbour, bombing cities, killing citizens, and even directing heavy weaponry at one of Europe's largest nuclear

power plants. This incident was arguably a clear testament to the truth of the notion that IR “tends to be a realm where rules are often broken with little consequence” [8]. But why is this? According to Mearsheimer [8], it is because of the “absence of a common sovereign” who could intervene and govern the relations of nations. Bull [2] explains lack of action of this kind with an acknowledgement that intervention would “represent violation of an operational rule of great power existence”.

During the first months of this war, other events occurred and were largely neglected, due to all eyes being on the war. The IPCC released their two latest reports (AR6, working groups 2 and 3) on climate change, focusing on impacts, adaptation, vulnerability, and mitigation [9,10]. These were just the latest in a series of dire warnings about consequences of widespread human-induced climate change. It has, according to the IPCC, “caused widespread adverse impacts and related losses and damages to nature and people” [9]. The reports are quite clear in their prognoses of where we are headed if we continue along our current trajectory, as current efforts are nowhere near what is required to avoid exceeding 1.5 °C global warming, which entails “severe risks” [9]. There is no longer much controversy surrounding the severity of the threat we face. Furthermore, the IPCC now clearly states that despite the severity of the threats, there are clear paths we could choose to take should we wish to do so: facing the challenges is both technically and economically possible [10]. Despite this, states seem unable to effectively take the measures required to solve these issues, and it is increasingly clear that the main obstacle is *political*. This failure of politics has been met by a range of responses, including calls for stronger national governments and perhaps even bypassing democracy, which is perceived as inefficient [11–13].

However, in this article I pursue a different option, namely replacing the state system with a world government. The climate crisis constitutes a suitable case for exploring such an option, as there is an imminent threat arguably not being faced through the existing system. This is also an example that has been highlighted by many IR scholars, for example, Bull [2], Falk [14], but also Kant [2]. Furthermore, the climate crisis is global in scale and characterized by substantial variations between states when it comes to their contributions to the crisis, vulnerability, and the means to mitigate and adapt to the crisis [9,10]. The climate crisis is consequently more than just an environmental crisis, it is a full sustainability crisis simultaneously encompassing the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability [15]. More fundamentally, I argue that the two cases represent instances of fundamental challenges to individual security and social order that is not, and potentially cannot, be effectively met in a timely manner through continued tweaking of mechanisms present in the states system. The examples show why a more radical solution—a Hobbesian world government—might be required.

3. The Various Readings of Hobbes in IR

If you judge a philosopher by how many times he is mentioned in contemporary theory of IR, you will think Hobbes is very influential. The interesting thing is that people adhering to different theoretical perspectives use Hobbes in a variety of ways. He has been used for fundamentally different purposes, such as understanding the dynamics of war and arguing in favour of diversity and tolerance [16]. Others use Hobbes’ philosophy when arguing for cosmopolitanism [17], and while most see him as a progenitor of realism [18], others see him as a neoliberal constructivist [19]. Some have also proposed arguments similar to the one I propose in this chapter, but without necessarily going into much detail on how well Hobbes’ state of nature analogy transfers to the international system, and without a focus on engaging with the rich history of this topic in the IR literature [5]. Yet others propose quite similar arguments without even mentioning Hobbes, such as Immanuel Kant [7] in *Toward Perpetual Peace* written in 1795, long after Hobbes’ works were released, and by someone who clearly knew Hobbes’ work very well [20].

First of all, Hobbes is found in most accounts of classical IR realism—as a scholar that traces the dire situation in international affairs back to human nature; the fundamental struggle for scarce goods, the diffidence, and the quest for glory is argued to lead to conflict [1].

Classical realism examines states competing for power, and such competition—between *individuals*—has been thoroughly analysed by Hobbes. Morgenthau's *Politics among Nations* [21] is often regarded as the first—and preeminent—development of such a “Hobbesian” formulation of international affairs [18].²

Another appropriation of Hobbes can be seen in the rational choice approach to IR. Order is here perceived as a public good, and without a common power to direct us all, the incentive to free ride—and the fear of other free riders—leads to an underinvestment in the public good [22–24]. While useful for understanding the structural aspects of IR, such theories tend to remove themselves from the core of Hobbes' philosophy, which is his philosophy of individuals and human nature.

A third reading of Hobbes could be said to belong to the English school of IR. They acknowledge the existence of international anarchy, but deny the claim that this anarchy is analogous to the Hobbesian state of nature; according to Williams [25] “Hobbesian international theory, in this perspective, becomes a support for the rationalist emphasis on rules and norms in the constitution of ‘international society’”, where the difference between individuals and states is seen as a good reason for *not* extending Hobbes' contractual escape from the state of nature by individuals to states. The international society refers to something other than just the states system or a general international system—it refers to an international order in which certain values, interests, rules, and institutions are shared between states and manifest in a form of *order* [2].

Three readings of Hobbes—all in agreement about the fact that anarchy is the way of the world, and that a Hobbesian theory of IR is fine with that. The key questions then, are why Hobbes, who clearly recognized states as existing in a state of war, did not extend his social contract to the international level [25], and whether he would perceive the current states system as representing an exit from the state of nature. While Hobbes himself did not extend his argument to the international level, I will argue that there is a strong argument to be made that his philosophy can be interpreted to support a global social contract and world government. This argument is consequently Hobbesian, but no longer Hobbes' own.

As Kant [7] does not explicitly build on Hobbes, I do not consider his and similar efforts to be actual readings or varieties of Hobbesian theory. However, the argument he presents in *Toward Perpetual Peace* is so close to the one I here present that it is useful to contrast the two at certain stages of the analysis, and some also propose the idea that Kant actually extends Hobbes' argument [26]. Kant agrees with my argument that an anarchic international system does not sufficiently secure order, but rather than advocate for world government on the basis of a consideration of individual preferences and rights, he argues that a federation of republican states can ensure perpetual peace [7]. Furthermore, he diverges from the position I here develop by focusing on the interests of people and not individuals [7]. Kant's federation would, however, have no coercive power over what would remain *sovereign* states. This, some argue, makes the project little different from the current states system, and insufficient for securing global order [27].

4. Hobbes' Philosophy—A Brief Overview

Before engaging with the international level, a brief exploration of Hobbes' basic political philosophy is in order, as I argue that this foundation is in fact solid and extendable beyond its original formulation to the international level.

4.1. *Individuals and Conflict*

Hobbes was a systematic theorist, who based his political philosophy on the belief that such a theory both could and should be built from a proper understanding of the smallest building blocks [1]. He was a mechanist, or even an atomist, but for all practical purposes it makes sense to consider him a methodological individualist [28]. A central feature of his philosophy is consequently that human nature plays a crucial part in any effort to understand both the dynamics of human affairs and how a state should, and must,

be organized in order to account for this nature [28]. This focus on human nature is also a central component of classical realism in IR.

Human nature is also the cause of the key problems humans experience, as there are three principal causes of quarrel portrayed as perennial whenever humans find themselves in an ungoverned condition. These are competition, diffidence, and glory [1]. Humans are not portrayed as evil, but our nature is such that our self-interest combined with structural conditions tend to make our efforts to secure survival conflictual. This is partly supported by Kant [7], who reiterates the idea that human nature—which he calls *malicious*—leads to a state of nature characterised by war, and that peace must consequently be established.

Another potential problem is that individuals rarely fully agree on what is good, and Hobbes' account of personal preferences and what is valuable is a pluralist one. There is, however, one thing everyone can, according to him, agree on. The ultimate evil, he argues, is the fear of violent death, and this is what Hobbes uses to construct a path out of the insecure situation he refers to as the state of nature. In this state, we all have a right to everything. However, since there is no government, this right is worthless, as we have no way to secure that which is rightfully ours, and we will compete for the same resources, to which everyone will in fact be entitled. A right, if it is to be meaningful, must be coupled with a corresponding “no-right”—or duty to respect such rights—by others [29].

From this situation Hobbes devises the notion of a social contract, one he argues everyone in the state of nature would be compelled by their desire to avoid the ultimate evil—the *summum malum*—to agree to. Such agreement need not be actual, and both explicit and implicit agreement to such a contract entail, in the Hobbesian version of the social contract, that all the authority deemed necessary to secure order is transferred to the sovereign. The sovereign will then be tasked with protecting the lives and comfort of all citizens, and they must allow everyone the maximum amount of liberty compatible with such freedom [1].

4.2. Politics in Hobbes' State of Nature

In order to use the state of nature analogy in IR, we must first understand what it entails. If one does not agree that states are like humans, a point I return to below, one has to tread extra carefully when using the state of nature as an illustration of the character of international anarchy [25]. Some argue, as seen in what I labelled the rational choice readings of Hobbes above, that there are certain structural aspects of the state of nature that applies also in international relations, and proceed to say that Hobbes' theory applies, while removing the foundation which describes why Hobbes believed that very structure emerged. One example is Malnes [30], who in his *Hobbesian Theory of International Conflict*, decides to strip the theory of Hobbes' “cynical and pessimistic” theory of human nature. However, I argue that if human nature is removed from the theory, there is no longer much need to anchor a theory in Hobbes' political philosophy. We must consequently see whether Hobbes' foundation can be retained.

The existence of groups—namely large groups referred to as states—is a fundamental element in the international anarchy. This could lead some to claim that Hobbes' state of nature is qualitatively different from an *international* anarchy, due to Hobbes describing the former as a thoroughly individualistic situation, whereas states are the main actors in the international anarchy. He said, after all, that the state of nature entailed “a war, as is of every man, against every man” [1]. Such statements might seem to be damning arguments against anyone attempting to equate complete anarchy in the state of nature with international anarchy. However, there is far more to Hobbes' state of nature than this, and this vital point is too often overlooked.

It is, indeed, a paradox that he describes the state of nature in this way, and there are several ways of trying to resolve the paradox. First of all: the word “war” usually evokes in us a very different situation from the one Hobbes is referring to. One of his few direct examples of the state of nature is the situation of the Native Americans in his own time [1]. However, Hobbes did not believe that every single Native American fought against every

other, that there was no cooperation, or that no coalitions—tribes if you will—were formed. So, what does this war of all against all entail?

It does not entail that everyone engages in war alone, as Hobbes explicitly states that there are coalitions in the state of nature. A key element of his theory is the notion that even the weakest individual can kill the strongest, “by secret machination, or by confederacy with others” [1]. Even the most powerful, then, must beware, as “others may probably be expected to come prepared with forces united, to dispossess, and deprive him” [1]. This state of competition, combined with the fundamental uncertainty and vulnerability, makes men “use violence, to make themselves masters of other men’s persons, wives, children, and cattle” [1], and the fear of these people makes it reasonable for men to seek to dominate others—as a way to acquire power to defend themselves. All of this takes place in Hobbes’ state of nature.

The possibility of cooperation and the existence of groups and alliances in the state of nature is relatively uncontroversial and reflected in most authoritative analyses of Hobbes’ philosophy [23,31]. The problem for Hobbes was not that cooperation in the state of nature was impossible, but that it was precarious, because without a governing body there is no way to gain “assurance of the other’s reliability” [31]. As should be clear by now, this reading of Hobbes suggests that his state of nature is quite close to what is usually understood as a Lockean state of nature, and that the difference between the two is more rhetorical than substantial on this particular topic. Gauthier [23] also states that even *political* groups existed in the state of nature, and there are many indications of *society* in this state [32]. One possible reason why groups and society in the state of nature were not too heavily emphasised by Hobbes is that he focuses mostly on the creation of the *Leviathan*—the commonwealth—through contract and not conquest.

When reading Hobbes, it is consequently quite important to be aware of the rhetoric at play. The war of everyone against everyone might not be as individualistic as it first appears, and even if Hobbes describes this situation as one in which there is “no place for industry”, “no culture of the earth”, no time, arts, letters, or even society [1], he does at other times acknowledge that these things will to some extent exist, and merely be uncertain and fragile. Life as “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” [1], might, then, be something of an exaggeration, or part of a polemic intended to highlight the need to provide the sovereign with all the authority Hobbes felt was required [32]. Hoekstra [32] contextualises Hobbes’ quotes, and argues that his form of writing is a part of a standing tradition:

Most strikingly, his famous litany of what that condition lacks (“there is no place for industry, . . . no culture of the earth, no navigation . . . , no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society”) is an adaption of a hyperbolic trope, characterizing uncivilized peoples by a negative list, which became conventional in the century after Columbus landed. [32]

Hoekstra [32] goes on to provide other examples of writers making similar lists “to prove the importance of a particular art by considering the human race without it”. Aristophanes, Suetonius, and Horace wanted to promote poetry, without which “humans were in a desperate fight for mere survival, and without any of the benefits of civilization” [32]. Rhetoricians, sophists, and philosophers have also maintained that their area of expertise has saved the world from the condition described in Hobbes’ “litany”; while this does not prove that Hobbes was wrong, it does establish that his description of the state of nature in *Leviathan* makes use of a well-known—and quite effective—rhetorical device.³

If we are to understand Hobbes literally, we have to consider the state of nature a state of extreme misery. Just after the quote on the general misery in state of nature, Hobbes says that people, generally, have not lived in such a state, but that there were, in fact, people in his time that lived in the state of nature. When describing “the savage people in many places of America”, he says that they—apart from the rule of small families—are without government [1]. Hobbes here describes people in the state of nature as organised in families, and this is far less trivial than it may seem. These families are important, considering Hobbes’ statement in *De Cive* that “a family is a little city”, and a city in this

book is something akin to a commonwealth in *Leviathan* [34]. This is clearly not a mistake on Hobbes' part, since he also later in the book states that a great family is a kingdom, and a little kingdom a family [34]. These quotes make it reasonable to assume that Hobbes is not simply talking about couples with children when discussing families in the state of nature. Larger groups of people living under a master is by Hobbes construed as families, and even a political group.

The fact that Hobbes equates the state of nature with modern (to Hobbes) states, should be enough to make us cautious about a literal reading of his list of things missing in the state of nature; unless, of course, one is willing to claim that maps, watches, and knowledge in general disappears with the outbreak of war. One could claim that the things just mentioned could not easily be developed in a state of nature, but even this seems like a stretch, considering that the state of nature is, in general, not a condition of continuous war and fighting.

If Hobbes limited the state of nature to a state of utter misery, like the one in his famous quote, much of what he writes elsewhere would become completely meaningless. This is an argument against reading the quote as a literal description of the state of nature. If, however, we view the quote as a description of the worst case, or even an exaggeration to make a point, we (and Hobbes) are better positioned, and, not least, we are in a situation in which Hobbes himself states that the state of nature is a situation in which political groups exist in a sort of anarchy.

As noted, this implies that authors like Bull [2], who argue that the international anarchy might be similar to a Lockean—but not a Hobbesian—state of nature, might be mistaken. Furthermore, if we accept that the domestic state of nature is far less extreme than it first appears, this also indicates that Hobbes' argument might indeed be applicable to the current state system despite this system not being characterised by total and utter chaos and war at all times.

Hobbes' use of rhetoric in *Leviathan* is a key reason to suspect that the quote about the misery in the state of nature may be an exaggeration.⁴ Skinner [36] points to Hobbes' statements in *The Elements of Law* and *De Cive*, regarding scientific arguments being sufficient to convince the reader, and that he seems to have changed his mind when writing *Leviathan*, as he is there more liberal in employing rhetorical devices to make his points.⁵ This is made clear in the following quote from *Leviathan*: "Again, in all deliberations, and in all pleadings, the faculty of solid reasoning is necessary: for without it, the resolutions of men are rash, and their sentences unjust: and yet if there be not powerful eloquence [rhetorics], which procureth attention and consent, the effect of reason will be little" [1].

This begs the question: how does Hobbes describe the state of nature in his two earlier publications? In *The Elements of Law* he says the following:

[. . .] as we know also that it is, both by the experience of savage nations that live at this day, and by the histories of our ancestors, the old inhabitants of Germany and other now civil countries, where we find the people few and short lived, and without the ornaments and comforts of life, which by peace and society are usually invented and procured [. . .]. [33]

The description of the state of nature in *De Cive* is quite similar:

They of America are Examples hereof, even in this present Age: Other Nations have been in former Ages, which now indeed are become Civill, and Flourishing, but were then few, fierce, short-lived, poor, nasty, and destroy'd of all that Pleasure, and Beauty of life, which Peace and Society are wont to bring with them. [34]

It is obvious that the problems connected to the state of persistent war were considered dire by Hobbes in these books as well. It is, however, a marked difference between lacking the "ornaments and comforts", or "that pleasure and beauty", provided by civilization, and lacking everything Hobbes lists in *Leviathan*. That life is short and brutal is the main

point, and this, considering the rest of Hobbes' philosophy, is sufficient to explain why individuals seek to remove themselves from this situation.

The atomistic understanding of the state of nature as all versus all—literally—must be nuanced, and certain larger molecules must be allowed entry into this state. This does not necessarily change the fact that (almost) all people have conflicting interests, and in that respect can be understood as potential enemies. It simply means that everyone does not actively fight everyone at all times. Some people, even in the state of nature, can find interests they share with other individuals. Hobbes also explicitly states that mothers are lords of their children in the state of nature, "For since by naturall necessity we all desire that which appears good unto us, it cannot be understood that any man hath on such termes afforded life to another, that he might both get strength by his years, and at once become an enemy; . . . And thus in the state of nature, every woman that bears children, becomes both a Mother, and a Lord" [34]. That a mother and her children, or close relatives in general, are at war in a state of nature, does not seem to be a reasonable interpretation of Hobbes' portrayal of human nature. Gauthier also points to this duality in Hobbes:

There is an apparent incompatibility between Hobbes's account of the family and his account of the state of nature. If men are born and raised in families, and if each family is a small-scale society, then how can men ever exist in the condition of war of all against all? [23]

Gauthier [23] "solves" this problem by considering the state of nature a "logical abstraction"; he then claims that the individuals Hobbes places in this abstraction are not creatures "born and raised in a family". While this solution makes it possible to stick to the image of all versus all in utter misery, I find it inconceivable that Hobbes, with his insistence on discovering the fundamental human nature, knowable to all who examine themselves, suddenly bases his argument on some completely different conception of humans. I therefore consider the state of nature a real possibility for mankind, consisting of real human beings, usually born and raised in families of some kind. Other have gone much further than Hobbes in developing and effectively using a hypothetical state of nature, and the approach mentioned by Gauthier is more reminiscent of, for example, Rawls' [37] original position than Hobbes' use of the state of nature.

That cooperation can occur in the state of nature seems obvious, and objections to this can partly be attributed to another misconception of Hobbes' writing: that no contracts or agreements can be made in the state of nature. Russel Hardin promotes this view, and claims that "a contract in the state of nature is void" [38]. That Hobbes was of the impression that such contracts could be entered, however, seems clear:

Covenants entered into by fear, in the condition of mere nature, are obligatory. For example, if I covenant to pay a ransom, or service for my life, to an enemy; I am bound by it: for it is a contract, wherein one receiveth the benefit of life; the other is to receive money, or service for it; and consequently, where no other law, as in the condition of mere nature, forbiddeth the performance, the covenant is valid [1].

The fear of some (any) spiritual power is also often enough to make contracts reliable, in Hobbes' view. The same goes for honour and pride in not having to renege on one's agreements. These factors combined strengthen words and covenants in the state of nature [1]. There is also a contract between parents regarding the dominion over children [1]. Ryan [39] promotes a similar perspective on contracts in the state of nature, and thinks Hobbes "did not think that all covenants in the state of nature are rendered void by the absence of an enforcing power"; if one expects the other contracting partner to honour his part of the contract, and honouring the contract is safe, the contract is valid in the state of nature [39]. People often honour such contracts, because of fear, something Machiavelli also noted:

For love is sustained by a bond of gratitude which, because men are excessively self-interested, is broken whenever they see a chance to benefit themselves. But fear is sustained by a dread of punishment that is always effective [40].

Communication, and some degree of cooperation, is in Hobbes' view possible in the state of nature. Covenants will to a certain degree also be valid there. "To a certain degree", as Hobbes obviously did not consider the strength of such contracts, or the stability of that cooperation, to be sufficient to make the situation bearable. This is, I argue, also what we find to be the case in the current international system, as we regularly experience acts of outright war, while governments continually sit still as environmental challenges grow to become obvious threats to both individual security and social stability. This is also similar to the argument proposed by Locke, as he argued that the state of nature was not a state to covet [41]. That coalitions in the state of nature are unstable, however, is not the same as them not existing. Von Neumann and Morgenstern [42] have emphasised how important coalitions are in any situation in which cooperation of some kind is possible:

E.g., it is clear that if certain great groups of participants will—for any reason whatsoever—act together, then the great number of participants may not become effective; the decisive exchanges may take place directly between large "coalitions," few in number, and not between individuals, many in number, acting independently. Our subsequent discussion of "games of strategy" will show that the role and size of "coalitions" is decisive throughout the entire subject [42].

This description goes well with another description Hobbes gives of the state of nature—the state of sovereigns with regard to each other [1]. While von Neumann and Morgenstern [42] analyse the relationship between coalitions in cooperative games, Nash's theory of non-cooperative games, as it appears in his article "Non-Cooperative Games" [43], is based on the absence of coalitions, as it is assumed that each actor acts independently of, without cooperating with or communicating with, the other actors [43]. I find no reasons to apply these assumptions to Hobbes' philosophy; people can obviously communicate, and they also have the opportunity to enter contracts, even if these contracts might at times be precarious.

This discussion of the structure of the state of nature is particularly important in the efforts to formalise Hobbes' philosophy, something I will not attempt to do here. The main point of this discussion of the state of nature is to show what Hobbes actually wrote about it. Many of the interpretations of Hobbes that I have disputed here come from writers attempting to use rational choice and game theory to elucidate Hobbes' philosophy. While I consider that project to be quite valuable for elucidating certain key challenges of human society, it seems clear that there are also some pitfalls one must avoid if one is not to lose sight of Hobbes' full philosophy in the attempt to simplify it.

Furthermore, this interpretation of the state of nature suggests that a broader set of conditions could be considered a manifestation of the state of nature, and consequently problematic. This is important, because as soon as we define a situation as a natural state, Hobbesian logic suggests that we should take action to escape such a state through the institution of a sovereign. I have shown that the existence of political units is not proof that there is no state of nature, and this opens up for the consideration of whether the current states system is in fact still a state of nature. As I have argued above, the existence of permanent and serious threats to individuals is a key criterion for identifying a situation in need of remedy, and the examples used in this article highlight both permanent and serious flaws with the states system.

One reason often given for rejecting the application of Hobbesian theory to the states system is, as mentioned above, that there are important differences between individuals and states. One obvious point is that a key driver of conflict and diffidence on the individual level is the purported natural equality of individuals, and how this leads to everyone being vulnerable to death, for example by assassination, poison, etc. This, some would argue, does not apply to states. Beitz [44] provides four reasons why he believes the analogy between individuals and states does not hold. Firstly, he mistakenly argues that individuals are always isolated, and that there are no families, groups, etc., in the state of nature, while coalitions abound in international affairs. I agree with the latter, but I have shown above that this also holds for the former.

Secondly, he argues that individuals are more equal in power than states are, and that certain strong states are not vulnerable in the same way that individuals are in Hobbes' natural condition. However, globalization, information technology and new weapons have made states increasingly vulnerable. Nuclear weapons, for example, arguably *do* make entire states vulnerable to sudden demise. Digital technologies and social media have also been shown to enable foreign powers to discreetly and indirectly undermine and challenge the integrity of states [45]. Furthermore, what matters in practical political affairs and considerations might not be the survival of some fictional entity called a "state", as those who consider their situation and political courses of action are always individuals susceptible to the very vulnerabilities described by Hobbes. This is also emphasised by Kant [7], who suggests that for states to achieve perpetual peace, the very methods discussed by Hobbes as a cause of individual diffidence—such as the use of assassins and poisoners—must be avoided at all costs. This suggests that even before nuclear weapons, state vulnerability—or perhaps more importantly state leader's vulnerability—was a very real thing.

Thirdly, Beitz [44] states that individuals are solitary and "completely independent" of each other, something already shown to be false. Fourthly, he argues that there are no means to enforce contracts in the state of nature, while there is on the international level. This has also been discussed and partly dismissed above.

In sum, I have shown that Hobbes' state of nature is much more complex than simplistic presentations might suggest. While there are certainly differences between individuals and states, the similarities between Hobbes' natural condition and the condition of states in the states system, are similar enough for the same dynamics to potentially apply.

4.3. States or Individuals—Who and What Matters?

The current international system is the states system, dating back to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648 [2]. The pre-eminence of states is an unavoidable fact of current international relations, and this takes us to a key question for the realist tradition of IR: what is the value of states, and how do we balance the interests and needs of individuals against those of states? Much IR theory concerns itself with the analysis of states as the primary units of interest, and some even treat the state as a unitary and rational actor—referred to as the "rational actor model" [46]. This easily provides the foundation for exploring the "interests" of states, their "preferences", and even "goals". As a consequence, what is referred to as order and a purported goal of international relations is the welfare, protection, and safety of *states* [2]. International order could consequently be concerned with the welfare of states, potentially without any regard to the people living in them. Bull [2] contrasts international order—the welfare of states—with world order, which concerns itself with individuals, and is based on the realization that "states are simply groupings of men". Kant [7] also focuses on "the rights of *peoples* in relation to each other", and also indicates that each "people" has one state. His focus on peoples represents a clear break with the Hobbesian approach based on individuals. While he does acknowledge that a state is a "society of human beings" [7], his path to peace arguably builds on the pre-eminence of peoples and states over the individuals in them.

The difference of focus between these two approaches is crucially important, and realist IR theory has tended to use Hobbes to analyse IR as an arena in which states take the position of Hobbesian individuals. This leads to theories in which the state of nature is directly transposed to the international anarchy, and in which unitary and rational states are seen to be in a state of war of all against all. This has, consequently, led to controversy, as states are, arguably, *not* the same as individuals. Of the three causes of quarrel, competition is still highly relevant, but legitimate suspicion has been cast upon the role of diffidence and glory. States are not quite as vulnerable to sudden and violent death as individuals [47], and the desire for glory is based on human psychology in a way that is difficult to say would apply equally to a state.

Hobbes [1] himself did suggest that the international anarchy could be a good analogy for the state of nature. For example, he stated that no actual humans had even been “in a condition of war one against another”, but that sovereigns and kings were in fact in such a position.

... because of their independence, 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. [1]

This quote is a key reason why many seek to transpose the state of nature to international anarchy. However, we must also note that Hobbes explicitly stated that this situation was *not* equal to the state of nature for individuals. Since sovereigns still manage to uphold “the industry of their subjects; there does not follow from it [international state of war], that misery, which accompanies the liberty of particular men” [1]. While interesting, I have already noted that the individualistic state of nature should be understood as less miserable than what is often presumed, and Hobbes’ own admission of the presence of small and even larger groups and societies in the state of nature suggest that some industry will be maintained here as well.

Regardless of how one perceives the state of nature, there are two different ways to build a Hobbesian argument for a world government. Firstly, we might claim that states are similar *enough* to individuals for Hobbes original argument to apply. As Hobbes [1] notes that “the law of nations, and the law of nature, is the same thing”, this would then suggest that states are urged by reason to make a world government by covenant or—that failing to materialize—through conquest. Bull [47] argues that there is nothing in Hobbes’ writings to suggest that he entertained the notion that sovereigns should make a contract like the individuals in the state of nature. However, he does suggest that Hobbes’ theory “does seem to leave us without any good reason to resist the establishment of a world government by conquest as opposed to one established by contract” [47].

Secondly, I will propose a quite different path in the remainder of this article, and argue that states are purely incidental, arbitrary, and devoid of intrinsic value—an approach which is drastically different from Kant’s [7] attempt to find peace through a federation of “civilized” states of peoples. Hobbes, strictly speaking, did not choose states as the form of his commonwealth—states are in a sense chosen for him as he happens to live in a time where they exist, and he chooses to defend the state as the organising unit created to uphold domestic peace. However, if we for a moment remove all historical context from Hobbes’ philosophy, is there any reason to assume that the states system is the natural constellation that would follow from individuals seeking their way out of a state of nature? The historical reasons for the state may have been myriad, valid, and related in large part to the need to defend against external aggression [1]. Like the emergence of the state-like security firms of Nozick [48], it is easy to see how a Hobbesian logical argument would support the creation of state-like entities. But is this really where the Hobbesian argument ends? While Kant [7] defends states, and argues strongly in favour of factoring in practical considerations in the search for lasting peace, I here test an argument where arbitrary historical facts are not allowed to constrain our search for the best solution to humanity’s challenges.

If states are purely arbitrary, and we take Hobbes’ methodological individuals seriously, it follows that the only way to evaluate any political system or entity is as he himself did: by asking to what degree it is conducive to produce peace? The only determinant of value to Hobbes is individual interests and preferences. Peace is instrumentally valuable because it allows individuals to escape the dangers of violent death. States, if they have any value at all, are only valuable to the extent that they enable the reaching of individual goals.

This gives us a reason to ask why individuals should not be assumed to covenant to erect a world government, or to desire one to come into being through conquest? This idea did not, according to Bull [47], occur to Hobbes, and neither did it “to any of the contract theorists in the long line from Plato to John Rawls”. But if the preceding propositions

are correct, a Hobbesian argument is agnostic as to whether the states system or world government is most valuable, and simply refers to the criterium: which is most conducive to peace?

Hobbes states outright that loyalty to the sovereign is dependent on them fulfilling their function—maintaining order—and in his discussions of commonwealth through conquest he even argues that loyalty to the old sovereign dissipates as soon as a greater power renders the old one unable to secure its inhabitants, and also that loyalty is owed to the new conquering sovereign if they actually secure peace [1]. This suggests that Hobbes had no romantic notions of the commonwealth, or that “nation states”, for example, are the sacred manifestation of *peoples* in a political community [7]. On the contrary, Hobbes “does not provide any reason why an individual person should prefer his own sovereign to a foreign one” [47], and this separates Hobbes from Kant [7]. When we proceed to consider the Hobbesian argument for world government, we do that on the basis of an acknowledgement that individuals are the foundation of rights, relevant interests and preferences.

5. Discussion: A Hobbesian Argument for World Government

The overarching goal of political activity is, according to Hobbes, to escape from the state of nature. More specifically, this is so because the state of nature generates dangers that no individual can fully escape. To what degree then does it make sense to argue that the states system has not really solved the challenges discussed by Hobbes, but should more properly be conceived as a way-station on our path to a true commonwealth? If so, modern states are little more than Nozick’s security companies, and true peace might only come about when we transcend the anarchy of states and erect a true global power to keep us all in awe.

The two cases in point were the war in Ukraine and the environmental crisis we are currently facing. In 1977, Hedley Bull foregrounded three general phenomena that could conceivably lead to developments towards world government, and the fear of war and an emerging ecological crisis were two of the three. The final one was the calls for economic and social justice, as Bull was writing in a time of decolonialization and the emergence of China as the self-prescribed champion of the third world [2]. So, what has changed, if anything, to suggest that the argument for world government is stronger now than it was 45 years ago?

Reading Bull’s *The Anarchical Society*, one is struck by the relevance of the observations regarding great power politics, spheres of influence, and the dynamics between the US and Russia. Bull noted that technological change and the globalizing effects of information and communication technology (ICT) were important, but that it might have been somewhat overstated, and that we were far away from a situation in which McLuhan’s “global village” had been realized [2]. It could be, however, that while ICT itself might not be sufficient to bring about a world government, the way ICT enables the communication of war across the globe certainly engenders a situation in which war is perceived as more of a reality to citizens worldwide, and not just those experiencing it at any particular location and point in time. As people see and experience Russia invading a country somewhat like their own, the Hobbesian fear of violent death is spread far beyond a single war zone, and both citizens and leaders across the world have responded in a way hardly seen before during the existence of the states system. However, this tendency was hinted at by Kant already in 1795, as he discussed the growing feeling of community among peoples of different nations, and how “the violation of right at any *one* place on the earth is felt in *all* places” [7].

In addition to global events being experienced as increasingly local, the acceptance of war as a legitimate foreign policy tool could be changing. Bull [2] describes war as perennial, and a natural part of the international system. That might well be, but this raises the crucial question: if war is integral to the international system, might the current form of the international system no longer be acceptable? A system in which war is to be expected is not a system compatible with Hobbes’ philosophy, and a Hobbesian argument

can consequently be made to the effect that to avoid war, we must institute a sovereign with global power. This will be based solely on the interests of *individuals'* interests and safety, and not the interests of states. States will by this line of reasoning become obsolete, and while a world government might in practice resemble a federal state, states will no longer be sovereign, as they are in Kant's solution [7].

The second example is the current environmental crisis, which relates to everything from plastic waste, increased toxicity in our environment, reduced biological diversity, and anthropogenic climate change. As already noted, the perceived threat of ecological or environmental breakdown is not new. Rachel Carson [49] is often credited with being the first to point out how interconnected all life is, and how human action can cause drastic changes in remote branches of our environment. Following this, a range of environmentalists, and -isms, have followed [50]. Arne Næss [51] introduced his deep ecology in the early 70s, and this could serve as an early example of how environmentalists highlighted both the interconnectedness of all forms of life, but also the global nature of the challenges. Furthermore, Næss heavily emphasised that environmental challenges cannot be faced without realising that they are also economic and social challenges. While Bull [2] separated ecology and justice as reasons to consider a world government, the environmental movement has always seen them as two sides of the same coin. This is also reflected in the popular original of the term sustainable development—from the Brundtland commission—who names social sustainability one of three sustainability dimensions [15]. This has been accepted ever since, and is also reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals and the Agenda 2030 [52].

There is a long history of warnings about impending environmental disaster, perhaps most famously from Meadows, et al. [53], report to the Club of Rome, *Limits to Growth*, and I have already mentioned Falk [14] who focused on the IR implications of the environmental challenges. The latest instalment in the saga of dire warnings comes from the IPCC, who regularly publish reports on the scientific basis of climate change, which become increasingly stark in their projections. Year by year, evidence has accumulated and shows with greater certainty that climate change is anthropogenic, that we must drastically cut greenhouse gas emissions, and that we are not even close to doing enough to reach the current goals of limiting warming to 1.5 °C [9,10].

One problem is that warning about environmental disaster is beginning to sound like old news, or the boy who cried wolf. What, if anything, is different now? And has anything really changed since 1977, when Bull [2] suggested that the environmentalists may have been a bit too pessimistic in their outlook? While the topic might be old, the realisation that the challenges are real is increasingly taking hold, and over the years, numerous international treaties have been made to solve various global challenges. Barrett [54] analyses what he refers to as global public goods and highlights the barriers associated with solving such challenges within the current international system. While states seemingly managed to face the threat to the ozone layer and reduce the use of CFC gases, for example, facing climate change has proven to require action that is beyond the historical or current reach of national and international politics [54].

Hobbes' philosophy is relevant because it allows us to see how any serious threat to order and social longevity allows for radical political action and moving past the current states system. Hobbes states that in order to be effective, any commonwealth must be designed to last as long as mankind, and this requires that we face both the basic conditions of life related to our environment, and also that it secures internal order [13]. While Hobbes did not discuss environmental challenges, Sætra [13] has shown that his philosophy shows why politics based on short-termism and the neglect of environmental challenges would be unstable and not conducive to secure peace. While Hobbes' philosophy is clearly anthropocentric, he also places great emphasis on the longevity of commonwealths, and since environmental challenges threaten the stability of both state's political system and international order, Hobbes' philosophy arguably provides a strong foundation for a politics of environmentalism of self-interest [13]. When this is coupled with the facts that

(a) environmental challenges are global [54], and (b) we are rapidly running out of time [10], the foundation of a Hobbesian argument for world government emerges. Firstly, this provides a political system with the executive prerogative required to take strong action to face threats to stability. Secondly, the application of this system on a global level allows us to tackle the remaining challenges related to facing environmental threats, such as problems related to externalities, the fear of free-riders, and competition between states.

The states system is fundamentally challenged by the increasingly global nature of our challenges, and the notion that we have a shared fate here on *Spaceship Earth* [55] is an oft-used metaphor. Bull [2] refers to the spaceship metaphor, and how it is effective in communicating how anyone in such a situation must work together and abstain from internal conflict for the good of both themselves and everyone else. This metaphor has also been used to support Hobbes' insistence of political efficacy over the "bargaining and compromise that characterize customary politics" [12].

I have argued that individuals' interests have clear precedence over state interests—if such a thing even makes sense—in Hobbes' philosophy, and this allows for the argument that a world government should be constituted to coordinate and effectuate action to face our environmental challenges. Incidentally, such a world government would also by necessity be forced to address global social and economic inequality, as this is necessary for achieving sustainable development [15,51].

The Ideal and the Possible

Before closing, it must be noted that this account of a Hobbesian argument for world government is only a partial account, and that a full account must naturally also factor in if and how such a world government could be realised. I have focused on the theoretical argument for a world state, and while that *may* be sound, there could still be counter-arguments that imply that such an ideal cannot or should not be pursued.

Firstly, practical considerations regarding the governance of a world state must be considered. It might be, for example, that states of a certain size—smaller than a world state—are far more stable than larger units [56]. Kant [7], for example, explicitly argued that a world state would be too large to be effective, and consequently discards that idea despite acknowledging that it would otherwise seem to hold the greatest promise for promoting peace [27]. If this is correct, a world government might be a theoretical construct that would not work.

Secondly, the transition to a world government might entail such high dangers of both human and environmental loss that it should not, despite potentially being preferable, be pursued. If world government by covenant is not an option, as Bull [2] adamantly argues that it is not, world government by conquest is the option that remains. Such a transition, in a world of countless nuclear, biological, chemical, and traditional weapons, could easily deter any serious effort to arrive at a world government. Rather, a transition will most likely have to occur through the gradual transfer of power and authority to an organization such as the UN, but realists are clearly correct in arguing that such a development seems unlikely. Kant [7] also mentioned what he assumes to be an unwillingness of peoples to relinquish their sovereignty as a reason to dismiss the project of world government in favour of a federation of states. Nevertheless, if a world government is in fact necessary for solving challenges such as those represented by the examples here used, it cannot be discarded on the grounds of being difficult.

Thirdly, the nature of a world government has not been discussed. If Hobbes' theory is used as the foundation of such a government, the door for non-liberal and non-democratic politics is opened in ways that many will find objectionable. Exploring the form and organization of a world government has been the focus of historical accounts, and these debates can also be coupled with more recent defences of more technocratic rule premised on the need to overcome the shortcomings of democracy and solve urgent challenges [57].

6. Conclusions

Thomas Hobbes is read and interpreted in a myriad of ways, and this article presents a novel interpretation of Hobbes' theory, while dealing with a field in which Hobbes has often been used, referred to, and usually discarded. Hobbes himself said a few things, but very little, about international relations, and this has led to a wide array of applications of his theory in IR. The different realist schools of IR draw on Hobbes' philosophy in various ways, but most emphasise his description of power and conflict and focus on the level of sovereigns or commonwealths. Some even go so far as to make commonwealths a unitary rational actor taking the place of Hobbes' individuals. In this article, I argue that while such usage of Hobbes might be instrumentally valuable, an approach truer to Hobbes' methodological and ethical commitments is of even more interest.

Such an approach places individuals in the foreground, and recognises that order and peace, and the existence of political entities, only have value to the extent that they secure individuals. States are consequently only instrumentally valuable, and by analysing Hobbes' description of the state of nature, I suggest that the current states system may in fact be an instance of a late-stage state of nature rather than a situation in which the state of nature has been fully escaped. Alliances and groups, families and political communities, are clearly a part of Hobbes' state of nature, but unless these units are constituted in a way that secures order and maintains the peace, we must continue the quest for the final exit from the state of nature.

By exploring two contemporary challenges to order and peace, namely the Russia–Ukraine war and the environmental crisis, I suggest that the international system is not fit for the task, as ample evidence suggests that sovereign states both generate conflict and facilitate the exploitation and impoverishment of our natural environment. There is nothing in Hobbes' philosophy that suggests that a world government should not be considered. However, there are clearly a number of practical barriers to the erection of such a government. A world government by covenant seems highly unlikely in the short-term, and a world state through conquest is likely to increase rather than reduce the dangers of both large-scale wars and environmental degradation. Nevertheless, Hobbes originally suggests that anyone who understands the logic of his argument is obliged by reason to seek peace through the means he describes [1]. I argue that this, by extension through the argument here developed, suggests that the search for viable paths towards world government should both be analysed and prepared, and whenever a way to effectively transition is facilitated, the Hobbesian argument for a world state suggests that such a way should be pursued.

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Notes

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iK69WP9t4o0&feature=youtu.be> (accessed on 1 April 2022).

² Morgenthau is obviously not *identical* to Hobbes, and he clearly deviates from Hobbes with regard to their view on morality for example. Still, as Bull [18] writes: "Morgenthau was a leading representative of what may broadly be called the Hobbesian tradition in his approach to international relations".

³ In *De Corpore* we find a quote that is very similar to the one from *Leviathan* we just considered: "Now, the greatest commodities of mankind are the arts; namely, of measuring matter and motion; of moving ponderous bodies; of architecture; of navigation; of making instruments for all uses; of calculating the celestial motions, the aspects of the stars, and the parts of time; of geography &c" [33].

⁴ A detailed analysis of Hobbes' use of rhetoric is beyond the scope of this paper, but it is important to note that Hobbes' rhetoric is important, and an appreciation of how he employs rhetoric is needed to fully understand what Hobbes is really trying to convey;

“[. . .] a considerable and quite diverse number of contemporary scholars of Hobbes, ranging from Victoria Kahn to David Johnston, who claim that Hobbes disguises but depends upon rhetoric [. . .] in order to manipulate his readers and develop a workable theory of state power and political authority. [. . .] These authors claim that Hobbes’s famous and outspoken dislike for rhetoric is a ruse, allowing him to practice it in secret while denouncing the use of rhetoric by others (potentially dangerous rivals to his own rhetorical production of sovereign authority)” [35].

- 5 This is made clear in the following quote from *Leviathan*: “Again, in all deliberations, and in all pleadings, the faculty of solid reasoning is necessary: for without it, the resolutions of men are rash, and their sentences unjust: and yet if there be not powerful eloquence [rhetorics], which procureth attention and consent, the effect of reason will be little” [1].

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