

Is the Hobbesian State of Nature Racialized?

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Abstract

Thomas Hobbes, like other early modern social contract theorists, has been accused of promoting racist views in his philosophy – ideas used to justify European imperialism and the devastation of Indigenous peoples. I argue that his philosophy does *not* assume or promote a naturalized racial hierarchy. I demonstrate that the logic of Hobbes's project requires rejecting a racially essentialist conception of human nature. His is a thoroughgoing and unrepentant anti-essentialism; he claims that there are no objective, immutable, necessary differences between 'civilized' people and 'savages.' Instead, I locate Hobbes's bias in his reliance on culturally-specific notions of government. Finally, I suggest that the Hobbes's natural law requirement of 'acknowledging' equality can be applied to questions about race. Though this was not its purpose, this requirement might provide a useful – and distinctively Hobbesian – tool to combat the impulse behind the problematic and persistent desire to find 'real' differences among racial groups.

Keywords

race – racism – colonialism – imperialism – state of nature – equality

Thomas Hobbes, like other early modern social contract theorists, has been accused of promoting racist views in his philosophy – ideas used to justify European colonialism and the devastation of Indigenous peoples. I begin by discussing how and why some interpreters of Hobbes have made that case against him, focusing on the accusation that the Hobbesian state of nature is racially essentializing. I argue that, whatever Hobbes's personal beliefs might have been, this perspective misses something fundamental about his philosophical commitments. Through textual analysis, I argue that his philosophy does *not*

assume or promote a naturalized racial hierarchy. I demonstrate that the logic of Hobbes's project, from his metaphysics to his politics, requires rejecting a racially essentialist conception of human nature. Indeed, positing natural or inevitable normative racial differences between Europeans and non-Europeans in order to justify colonialism or imperialism would introduce a fundamental inconsistency into the precepts of the theory. His is a thoroughgoing and unrepentant anti-essentialism; he claims that there are no objective, immutable, necessary differences between 'civilized' people and 'savages.' He insists on this view, even though it was deeply unpopular at the time and earned him the ire of some of his contemporaries. Instead, I locate Hobbes's bias in his reliance on culturally-specific (largely what we would now call 'Eurocentric') notions of government. Thus, the worry about Hobbes's state of nature is not that it rests on essentialist racial categories; the worry is that it assumes culturally-specific notions of civilization which serve to denigrate, exclude, and erase certain Indigenous ways of life. Finally, I suggest that Hobbes's natural law requirement of "acknowledging" equality can be applied to questions about race. Though this was not its purpose, this requirement might provide a useful – and distinctively Hobbesian – tool to combat the impulse behind the problematic and persistent desire to find 'real' differences among racial groups.

Though the secondary literature on Hobbes on race is relatively scant, there are a few canonical works – most famously, Charles Mills' *The Racial Contract*. While Mills targets the entire social contract tradition, he devotes a considerable amount of space to Hobbes in that book, as well as in other works.¹ Mills argues that the social contract is built on a racial contract, one which functions to establish and maintain white supremacy. Hobbes's state of nature, Mills claims, is inherently (if implicitly) *racialized*. Though it purports to describe the natural condition of mankind generally, Mills charges that it in fact only describes the conditions of nonwhite people, against which white people can compare themselves favorably.² The inhabitants of the Hobbesian state of nature are represented by the degraded and denigrated figure of the savage Indigenous American,³ used as a tool to demonstrate the superiority of

1 Charles W. Mills, *The Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997); Carole Pateman and Charles W. Mills, *Contract and Domination* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2007); and Charles W. Mills, "Artificial Persons, Natural Sub-Persons: Hobbes's Aristotelian Contractarianism," *Racism and Modernity* 35 (2011): 55–67.

2 Mills, *Racial Contract*, 64–67.

3 In this paper, I will use the (imperfect) term, 'Indigenous American,' a term that only comes into being through the colonial encounter. It is preferable to refer to particular tribes when discussing the Indigenous peoples of America, but people rarely made tribal distinctions in early modern philosophical discourse.

Europeans, and fated to be conquered or colonized by them. Crucially, Mills argues that Hobbes viewed Indigenous Americans as *perpetually* trapped in their natural condition, thereby creating an ontological hierarchy with them at the bottom. The racial difference in this picture is essentialized: the inferiority of Indigenous Americans is part of their nature, making their subordination both appropriate and inescapable; they are a different kind of being from Europeans.⁴ Many other contributors to the scholarship on Hobbes on race share similar views of Hobbes's state of nature as fundamentally disparaging to Indigenous Americans.⁵ Barbara Hall puts the charge starkly when she says that Hobbes "can justifiably be termed a racist."⁶

The centuries following Hobbes saw the horrors of imperialism, colonialism, and slavery reach their peak, and racist notions of the conquered, colonized, and enslaved lay at the center of the discourse that tried to justify these institutions. Some of Hobbes's ideas played a role in creating and supporting these discourses, but Hobbes did not have access to the notion of race that they generated. The definition of the term 'race' is contested today and the history of the term is complicated; however, it generally did not exist in common

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- 4 Mills repeatedly attributes to Hobbes a view that there are different 'kinds' of people such that some are inherently worse than others. For example, he says, "Insofar as Native Americans are humans, then, they are clearly humans of a radically inferior kind, non-contractors" ("Natural Sub-Persons," 65).
- 5 You can see other versions of this critique of Hobbes offered, for example, in the following: Pat Moloney, "Hobbes, savagery, and international anarchy," *American Political Science Review* 105(1) (2011): 189–204; Stephanie B. Martens, "The Invention of the Natural Man in Political Theory: Hobbes's Leviathan," in *The Americas of Early Modern Political Theory: States of Nature and Aboriginality* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 69–93; Stephanie B. Martens, "Aboriginalism: Representing Indigenous Peoples as 'Un-Civil' or 'Un-Civilized,'" in *The Americas of Early Modern Political Thought: States of Nature and Aboriginality* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 115–140; Srinivas Aravamudan, "Hobbes and America," in *The Postcolonial Enlightenment: Eighteenth-Century Colonialism and Postcolonial Thought*, ed. Daniel Carey and Lynn Festa (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013); Philip Manow, "'We are the Barbarians': Thomas Hobbes, the American Savage and the Debate about British Antiquity," in *Asymmetrical Concepts after Reinhart Koselleck: Historical Semantics and Beyond*, ed. Kay Junge and Kirill Postoutenko (Bielefeld, Germany: transcript Verlag, 2011), 141–164; and Mary Nyquist, "Hobbes, Slavery, and Despotism Rule," *Representations* 106(1) (2009): 1–33. While (often devastating) critique is the dominant mode in this scholarship, not everyone is convinced. Tommy Lott, for example, argues that the Hobbes did *not* put forth any racial bias toward Indigenous Americans, instead reading Hobbes's position on race in positive terms. See Tommy Lott, "Patriarchy and Slavery in Hobbes's Political Philosophy," in *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays*, ed. Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 63–80.
- 6 Barbara Hall, "Race in Hobbes," in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, ed. Andrew Valls (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 54.

parlance to refer to groups of people before or during the first half of the 17th century when Hobbes was writing. Thus, in some ways, it may be anachronistic to talk about Hobbes's views on race, or to ask whether these views are racist. Nonetheless, serious scholarship does commonly use these terms. For example, two volumes, *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays* and *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, help themselves to the words 'race' and 'racism' when discussing the history of philosophy from Plato on.⁷ Scholars differ about how to understand race and racism in the early modern era and suggest different ways of handling the worry about anachronism. Andrew Valls, the editor of *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, for example, asks us to think about which philosophical doctrines are "hospitable" or "inhospitable" to racism as we currently know it.⁸ Scholars tend to agree that Kant's work was pivotal in this history, often crediting him with "inventing" the biological conception of race.⁹ The fact that Hobbes preceded Kant by a hundred years deepens the dilemma about terminology for Hobbes scholars.

While these kinds of locutions are common in the literature, they can be ambiguous. It is important to be clear about what is meant when using a term like 'racism' in an analysis of a philosopher who wrote before the term had its modern meaning. My use of the term 'racism' in this paper refers to the claim that members of one group are essentially inferior to some other group – that is, inferior in their very essence and nature – specifically when both groups are defined by (to risk circular reasoning) what we would now call 'race.' I in no way mean to suggest that racism ought to be defined this way in general; there are many forms of racism that are not essentialist.¹⁰ But because critics

7 Julie K. Ward and Tommy L. Lott, eds., *Philosophers on Race: Critical Essays* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002); Andrew Valls (ed.), *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005). Both volumes have chapters on Hobbes.

8 Andrew Valls, "Introduction," in *Race and Racism in Modern Philosophy*, 2–3.

9 See Robert Bernasconi, "Who invented the concept of race? Kant's role in the Enlightenment construction of race," in *Race*, ed. Robert Bernasconi (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 11–36; and Pauline Kleingeld, "Kant's second thoughts on race," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 57 (2007): 573–592.

10 Kwame Appiah's notion of *racialism* is helpful here. He defines racialism as the view that "we could divide human beings into a small number of groups, called 'races,' in such a way that all members of these races shared certain fundamental, biologically heritable, moral and intellectual characteristics with each other that they did not share with members of any other race. The characteristics that each member of a race was supposed to share with every other were sometimes called the *essence* of that race; they were characteristics that were necessary and sufficient, taken together, for someone to be a member of that race" ("Race," in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Lentricchia and Tom McLaughlin (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 276). There is a clear parallel between Appiah's definition of racialism and Mills' definition of racism.

who charge Hobbes with racism most often rely on the essentialist sense of the term, that is the best definition for discussing Hobbes on the issue.

Mills is the clearest example of such a critic. Mills describes how he understands racism, saying,

We should see racism not as necessarily involving distinctions of color, but instead in non-question-begging terms as the regarding of individuals and groups of people as superior or inferior because of ‘collective traits, physical, mental, and moral, which are constant and unalterable by human will’. By this criterion, Aristotle’s views would certainly count, and serve as a prototype for modern racism.¹¹

It is *in this sense* that Hobbes is a racist; according to Mills: “Hobbes’s ‘natural savages’ are akin to Aristotle’s ‘natural slaves.’”¹² On Mills’ reading of Hobbes, nonwhites are “born *unfree* and *unequal*.”¹³ The essentialism is clear in Mills’ ascription of immutable qualities that make nonwhites inferior to whites: “subject races” are “biologically destined never to penetrate the normative ceiling established for them below white persons.”¹⁴ Mills attributes to Hobbes’s philosophy a naturalized racial hierarchy in which Indigenous Americans – “natural sub-persons” as Mills terms them – are such that they can never rise above *physis* in order to institute government rationally.¹⁵

Just as we need to be explicit about what we mean when we use the term ‘racism,’ we also need to recognize a distinction between the *content* of a philosopher’s theory and the *influence* that theory had on later thinkers and discourses. It is widely accepted that some of the European discourse used to justify imperialism, colonialism, and slavery along racial lines can be traced to how Hobbesian ideas were taken up by later thinkers. Indeed, a common theme for scholars discussing Hobbes on race is how contemporaneous and subsequent apologists for colonialism invoked his ideas. Pat Moloney describes Hobbes’s ideas about “New World savagery” as having a “long after-life.”¹⁶ Srinivas Aravamudan contends that Hobbes “laid the theoretical basis

11 Mills, “Natural Sub-Persons,” 63. In the middle of this passage Mills quotes Benjamin Isaac, *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 23.

12 Mills, “Natural Sub-Persons,” 55.

13 Mills, *Racial Contract*, 16.

14 Mills, *Racial Contract*, 17–18.

15 Mills, “Natural Sub-Persons,” 64.

16 Moloney, “Hobbes, savagery, and international anarchy,” 195. See also Richard Ashcraft, “Hobbes’s Natural Man: A Study in Ideology Formation,” *The Journal of Politics* 33(4) (1971): 1076–1117.

for territorial and corporate forms of colonial acquisition.¹⁷ This is undoubtedly true and has been well-documented. It is important, however, to differentiate Hobbes's own position from later claims about his ideas. Moloney, for example, admits that Hobbes himself was not primarily trying to "justify the actions of colonists in the New World," but that his ideas later were used toward that end.¹⁸ We should be careful to distinguish between the actual content of Hobbes's views and the appropriation of Hobbesian rhetorical resources for the later and larger colonialist and imperialist projects. This paper focuses on the former, not the latter.¹⁹

Focusing on the actual content of Hobbes's writing when he considers the indigenous populations of the New World does reveal a tension. On the one hand, he associates some peoples of the Americas with savagery and brutality, participating in a discourse used to justify colonization. On the other hand, I hope to show that he outright denies any essential differences between Europeans and Indigenous Americans, sometimes describing the latter in neutral terms or stressing the fundamental sameness of the two. I argue that the strength and primacy of his commitment to denying biologized or naturalized views of inequality renders theories of racial hierarchy incompatible with the Hobbesian project.

17 Aravamudan, "Hobbes and America," 20.

18 Moloney, "Hobbes, savagery, and international anarchy," 194.

19 The issue of slavery also looms large in the secondary literature on Hobbes and race. Scholars have long sought to trace a connection between Hobbes's writings and the transatlantic slave trade's racialized notion of slavery. Some of Hobbes's biographical details may seem telling; for example, he worked for the Virginia Company. However, positing a close connection between his writings and the transatlantic slave trade generally requires grouping him with social contract theorists who lived several decades or even centuries later – such as Kant – who explicitly asserted a racialized essentialism about Africans and Indigenous Americans in ways that explicitly justified enslaving the former and conquering the latter. Moreover, as demonstrated by scholars such as Deborah Baumgold and Noel Malcolm, Hobbes's own philosophical account of slavery was *not* in fact about transatlantic slavery (see Noel Malcolm, "Hobbes, Sandys, and the Virginia Company," *The Historical Journal* 24(2) (1981): 297–321; and Deborah Baumgold, "Slavery discourse before the Restoration: The Barbary coast, Justinian's Digest, and Hobbes's political theory," *History of European Ideas* 36(4) (2010): 412–418). Rather, he was referring either to classical slavery or to barbary slavery. For this reason, I will set aside the issue of slavery and instead focus on investigating Hobbes's views on Indigenous Americans. Of course his views on slavery could still be applied to transatlantic slavery even if they were not explicitly referring to it. In fact, Barbara Hall's critique of Hobbes is on exactly this point: she argues that his theory is racist in part before it offers no grounds to condemn the practices of the transatlantic slave trade (see note 6).

This is not to say that Hobbes *the person* did not hold racist beliefs. Nor, again, is it to deny the impacts, which continue to this day, of the racialized conceptions of the state of nature which were inspired by the discourse in which Hobbes participated. Rather, it is to complicate interpretations which either condemn or exonerate. Because critiques of Hobbes have tended to charge that he characterizes the state of nature in a racist way, this paper focuses on the question of whether the Hobbesian state of nature is necessarily racialized. In other words, I take up the question of whether the state of nature in Hobbes's philosophy is fundamentally associated with people defined by their membership in a denigrated group. Returning to the definition of racism offered earlier, I underscore that my understanding of a racialized association is one that is *fundamental* and *negative*. Thus, I ask: Is Hobbes's state of nature racialized in this sense of fundamentally and negatively representing the 'race' of the indigenous peoples of the Americas?

1 The Text

What do we find in Hobbes's texts about Indigenous Americans? This section looks more deeply into the textual evidence that makes some scholars think it is racist, before offering evidence to the contrary. The most cited piece of textual evidence for the critique of Hobbes comes from the (in)famous chapter 13 of *Leviathan*:

It may peradventure be thought, there was never such a time, nor condition of warre as this; and I believe it was never generally so, over all the world: but there are many places, where they live so now. For the savage people in many places of *America*, except the government of small Families, the concord whereof dependeth on naturall lust, have no government at all; and live at this day in that brutish manner, as I said before.²⁰

The "brutish manner" that he "said before," of course, is this:

In such condition, there is no place for Industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain: and consequently no Culture of the Earth; no Navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by Sea; no commodious Building; no Instruments of moving, and removing such things as require much force; no Knowledge of the face of the Earth; no account of

²⁰ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Noel Malcolm (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2012), 194 [63].

Time; no Arts; no Letters; no Society; and which is worst of all, continually feare, and danger of violent death; And the life of man, solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.²¹

In reading this passage, Mary Nyquist emphasizes that the Hobbesian state of nature is at bottom a condition of “privation.”²² It is characterized by what it lacks – industry, culture, commodious living, knowledge of the earth, arts, letters, society, etc. Critics emphasize Hobbes’s identification of the state of nature with “the savage people in many places in *America*” who only have “the government of small Families” which is basically “no government at all.”²³ Their existence is considered to be “brutish” and devoid of all that is good in life, and all pains should be taken to avoid it, particularly forming and maintaining civil society. Like Mills and others, Nyquist concludes that Hobbes’s state of nature, one of the fundamental ideas of his philosophical system, is itself racialized, meaning that it rests on racist ideas (particularly negative stereotypes and tropes) about the lives of Indigenous Americans. Indeed, part of the logic that informed European colonialism was this idea that indigenous populations lived in the horrible and horrifying condition of ‘nature.’

Interestingly though, Hobbes actually says very little about Indigenous Americans in particular. Noel Malcolm counts four mentions of Indigenous Americans in Hobbes’s corpus; Ioannis Evrigenis adds an additional five.²⁴ In addition to *Leviathan* chapter 13’s identification of the state of nature with Indigenous American “savages,” Hobbes invokes the ignorance of “the Savage people of America” to defend his idealization of the perfect commonwealth.²⁵ He directly addresses the issue of colonization in chapter 30, suggesting it as a possible solution for overcrowding, but admonishing colonists not to “exterminate” local populations.²⁶ However, it is not clear whether this passage is

21 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 192 [62].

22 Mary Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 256 and passim.

23 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 194 [63].

24 Noel Malcolm, *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 2002), 75–76; and Ioannis D. Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy: The Rhetoric and Science in Hobbes’s State of Nature* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 220.

25 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 522 [176].

26 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 540 [181].

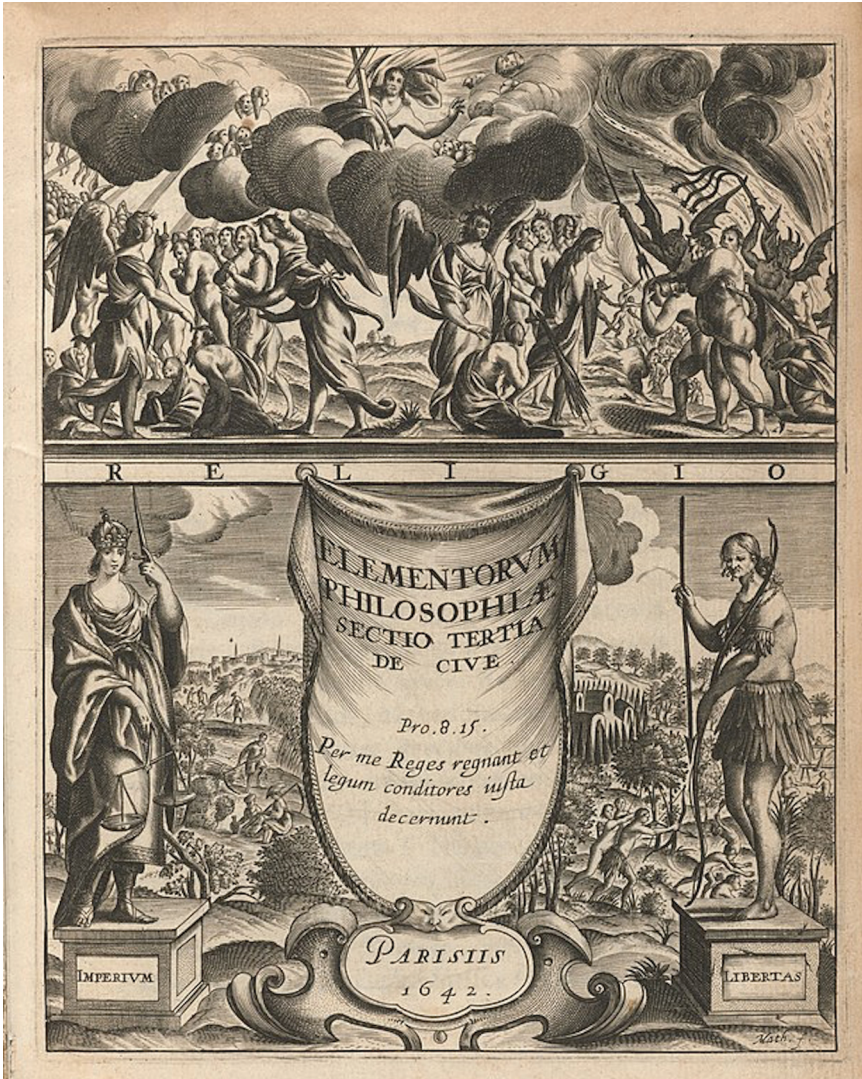
meant to refer primarily to Indigenous Americans; Hobbes might have had Athenian imperialism in mind. Though he does not specify the Americas here, we cannot divorce the claims here from colonial efforts happening in Hobbes's time.²⁷ He endorses taking land, though this endorsement is not justified in racial terms. The other relevant passages will be discussed below.

To my mind, the most negative association of the state of nature with Indigenous Americans is conveyed not with words but with an image. The frontispiece of the 1642 edition of *De Cive* contrasts "Imperium" with "Libertas," where the former is a figure of beauty, serenity, and obvious goodness, while the latter is depicted as brutal and wanton misery. Scholars have documented both the obvious and the subtle racial markers here and agree that *Libertas* is meant to portray an Amerindigene.²⁸ *Libertas* hunches, scowling and emaciated, surrounded by scenes of poverty and violence, including cannibalism. *Libertas* is meant to convey the horrors of the state of nature, to be contrasted with the radiant advantages of the *Imperium* of civil society. This image is so striking that Stephanie Martens reproduces it as the cover image of her recent book about portrayals of Indigenous Americans in early modern political philosophy.²⁹ Martens and others see the *De Cive* *Libertas* as the epitome of racist imagery employed by 17th century European philosophers as part of the conquest of the New World.

27 According to Patricia Springborg, the Jamestown Massacre and downfall of Virginia Company was the primary context for Hobbes's references to Indigenous Americans. She shows how he used the "agricultural argument" to justify colonialism but argues that his position is pragmatic and he is even ultimately skeptical about European imperialism ("Hobbes, Donne and the Virginia Company," *History of Political Thought* 36(1) (2015): 113–164).

28 Scholarship on the sources of this image, particularly the sketches of John White and the conventions it evokes may further complicate the interpretation of this image. See, for example, Nyquist, *Arbitrary Rule*; Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy*; Moloney, "Hobbes, savagery, and international anarchy"; Martens, *The Americas of Early Modern Political Theory*; and Quentin Skinner, *Hobbes and Republican Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

29 Martens, *The Americas in Early Modern Political Theory*.



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Clearly, Hobbes invokes negatively valenced stereotypes about Indigenous Americans in order to illustrate the undesirability of the state of nature. But does that mean that Hobbesian state of nature *itself* is necessarily racialized? Several textual and contextual points suggest that indicting his philosophy as fundamentally racialized might be too quick.

First, consider that while Indigenous Americans are given as an example of people living in the state of nature, they are by no means the *only* example of its inhabitants. In *Leviathan* chapter 13, discussed above, the “savages” of

the Americas are one of three examples to illustrate real-life states of nature. The other two are societies in the midst of a civil war and independent nation states.³⁰ If Hobbes is disparaging the indigenous populations of the Americas, he is disparaging European people living through civil wars in the same way: both are living in the state of nature. The example of the English Civil Wars, which lasted from 1640 to 1649, was surely at the forefront of Hobbes's mind. People living during civil war are in a state of nature because there is no "common Power to keep them all in awe" – the very definition of the "naturall condition."³¹ In a civil war, subjects recognize more than one political authority; hence there is no "common power" above them all. For Hobbes, the only difference between Englishmen in the 1640s and Englishmen in the 1650s was that the former were living without a common power to keep them all in awe, and the latter were living under the common power of Cromwell, the Lord Protector. There was no difference in the *characters* of the people in these two time periods – in fact, they were largely the same individuals. Rather the relevant difference was one of political organization. Similarly, on Hobbes's account, the difference between Englishmen in the 1650s and Indigenous Americans in the same time period is that the former have a government (a "common power"), and the latter do not. That is all. This comparison suggests that the state of nature is *not* inherently racialized. What Hobbes decries is the absence of law, not anything about the qualities or essential natures of the various inhabitants of the state of nature, a point we will return to shortly. Other texts and other parts of *Leviathan* offer even more examples of people living in the state of nature. When Hobbes translated *Leviathan* into Latin in 1668, he adds the story of Cain and Abel to his list of examples of people living in the state of nature.³²

Second, Hobbes uses the word "savage" as a pejorative, but he did not use it to refer only to Indigenous Americans. In *The Elements of Law*, for example, he associates "the old inhabitants of Germany" with the "savage nations that

30 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 196 [63]. Indeed, Ioannis Evrigenis (2016) shows that in the arc of Hobbes's discussions of the state of nature, the example of the Americas becomes "demoted" as he writes and rewrites his political philosophy. In his early works, it is one of two examples, but two additional examples are included in *Leviathan* and a third is added in the Latin *Leviathan* ("The State of Nature" in *The Oxford Handbook of Hobbes*, ed. A. P. Martinich and Kinch Hoekstra (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016), 237).

31 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 192 [62].

32 For a discussion of the addition of Cain and Able in the Latin *Leviathan*, see Helen Thornton, "Cain, Abel and Thomas Hobbes," *History of Political Thought* 23(4) (2002): 611–633, and Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy*.

live at this day.”³³ In *A Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student, of the Common Laws on England*, he explicitly calls the early inhabitants of England a “savage and heathen people” who lived “only by war and rapine ... written laws they had little, or none.”³⁴ The key thing to notice here is that his use of the word “savage” is broader than Indigenous Americans, and includes his own cultural ancestors, people many would today call ‘white.’³⁵ In *Behemoth*, Hobbes even refers to the Lords of Parliament as having “warlike and savage natures” (though this seems more of a metaphorical than literal use of the term).³⁶ He also makes clear that not all inhabitants of the New World count as savages in the state of nature; he specifies that it is “the savage people in many places of *America*.”³⁷ Hobbes made an exception for the societies found in Inca Peru and Aztec Mexico, which conformed more to his commonwealth model than the small family one he associates with the state of nature.³⁸ Being an Indigenous American was thus neither necessary nor sufficient for being a savage, on Hobbes’s account: there were Indigenous Americas who did not count as savages, and savages who were Europeans.

Various scholars have demonstrated the complexities and ambiguities of Hobbes’s use of the term “savage” and the nature of the connection between that term and Indigenous Americans. Robert P. Kraynak demonstrates

33 Thomas Hobbes, *The Elements of Law: Natural and Politic*, ed. Ferdinand Tönnies (London: Frank Cass, 1969), 73 [pt. 1 ch. 14 §12].

34 Thomas Hobbes, “A Dialogue between a Philosopher and a Student, of the Common Laws on England,” in *Thomas Hobbes: Writings on Common Law and Hereditary Right*, ed. Alan Cromartie and Quentin Skinner (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167.

35 Of course, to label the Saxons as ‘white’ is also anachronistic, since the racial category of white did not exist yet. Ladelle McWhorter points out that “Whiteness as a racial classification did not exist in the seventeenth century” (*Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 63). Indeed, McWhorter argues that “the white race was the very first race to be morphologically defined – as distinct from races such as the Saxon and the Norman that were defined by lineage and tradition – and that it came into existence through the course of the eighteenth century in the tobacco colonies of Anglo America” (*Racism and Sexual Oppression*, 64). Considering the history of discourses about Normans and Saxons serves to illustrate just how complicated it is to talk about ‘race’ in this time period. My point here is that for Hobbes “savage” was not associated exclusively with certain kinds of people associated with morphological differences.

36 Thomas Hobbes, *Behemoth or the Long Parliament* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 69.

37 Hobbes, *Behemoth*, 69.

38 See Girolamo Imbruglia, “The Invention of Savage Society: Amerindian Religion and Society in Acosta’s Anthropological Theology,” *History of European Ideas* 40(3) (2014): 291–311. Similarly, James Hamilton points out that Hobbes was not referring to the Inca empire in this passage (“The Origins of Hobbes’s State of Nature,” *Hobbes Studies* 26 (2013): 158).

at length that the paradigmatic savages for Hobbes are actually the early Europeans. Drawing on the account of the development of human society given in *A Dialogue* and *Behemoth*, Kraynak traces the ways in which Hobbes's descriptions of the violence, brutality, and insecurity of tribal life are taken from prefeudal European history.³⁹ Making a similar point, Lott argues that Hobbes's "use of terms such as 'barbarian' and 'savage' was influenced *more* by his study of the classics ...than the ethnographic accounts available to him about Indigenous Americans."⁴⁰ Hobbes's centering of European "savages" challenges the claim that a division between Europeans and Indigenous populations lies at the heart of his theory.

In fact, when Hobbes explicitly considers the differences or similarities between Indigenous Americans and Europeans, it is to *deny* the existence of natural differences. In *Elements*, he argues that there are no innate or immutable differences between peoples from different parts of the world. In his quasi-anthropological telling, scientific achievements were made possible in some societies by the advent of leisure, which can itself be traced to contingent factors. He says, "we differ from such savage people as are now the inhabitants of divers places in America; and as have been the inhabitants heretofore of those countries where at this day arts and sciences do most flourish. . . . all of which supposed away, what do we differ from the wildest of the Indians?"⁴¹ The rhetorical question signals his insistence that "we" *do not* "differ from the wildest of Indians." Here Hobbes simply denies any kind of natural European difference or superiority. He is what we would now call an anti-essentialist about race.

This makes sense in light of his larger commitments. Hobbes claims that human minds are originally like "white paper" ready to be imprinted by education and custom.⁴² Thus, anti-essentialism is arguably implied by his metaphysics of psychology. As explained above, on Hobbes's account, the only difference between (most) Indigenous Americans in 1651 (the publication date of *Leviathan*) and the English in 1651 is the fact that the former had not yet enjoyed the advantages that civil society and scientific advancement makes possible, while the latter had (with of course the exception of the decade of

39 "Of the various historical peoples from which this general description [of barbarism] is drawn, the ones that Hobbes discusses in greatest detail (and seems to regard as the paradigm of savage people) are the Germanic and Saxon tribes of prefeudal Europe" (Robert P. Kraynak, *History and Modernity in the Thought of Thomas Hobbes* (Cornell University Press, 1990), 13).

40 Lott, "Patriarchy and Slavery in Hobbes," 71 (emphasis added).

41 Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, 65 [pt. 1 ch.13 §3].

42 Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, 51 [pt. 1 ch.10 §8].

civil war). Hobbes has nothing to say about the characteristics of the humans involved; in other words, these are not qualitative judgments being made. Early modern Europeans and Indigenous Americans were not different kinds of people, they were simply living in different political arrangements – one of which happened to be more conducive to peace and “commodious living.”⁴³ Hobbes simply does not have a notion of innate, immutable characteristics that apply to different groups of people in a way that tracks anything like what we now call race.

It is worth noting how radical this kind of anti-essentialism would have been in Hobbes's time. It was commonly (though of course not universally) accepted that Indigenous Americans had certain qualities *as* Indigenous Americans, qualities which made them, in this racist view, less than fully human. The qualities of full humanity were reserved for the colonizing countries of Europe. One set of racist discourses circulating in popular essays and intellectual circles in this era took Indigenous Americans to be naturally innocent and childlike and adopted a paternalistic attitude towards them. While Indigenous Americans were considered to be brutish and beastly in these discourses, this was not understood as an attitude of hatred; it was, rather, patronizing. Montaigne, for example, described Indigenous Americans as wild and bestial but simple and peaceful – they were culturally inferior but not hostile.⁴⁴ An even more pernicious set of discourses took Indigenous Americans to be naturally degenerate, immoral, and vicious, sometimes though not always because they were not Christian.

Richard Ashcraft has demonstrated how Hobbes's position differed from both the common paternalistic rendering and the vilified one.⁴⁵ Indeed, Ashcraft observed the deep unpopularity of Hobbes's insistence that the *sole* difference between Indigenous Americas and Europeans was the existence of a sovereign. This was a deeply uncomfortable and threatening idea to those invested in treating Indigenous Americans as innately and inevitably inferior. Ashcraft notes that the objection of Hobbes's contemporaries was “not

43 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 196 [63]

44 Michel de Montaigne, “Of the Cannibals,” in *The Complete Essays*, trans. M. A. Screech (London: Penguin, 2003), 228–241.

45 Richard Ashcraft wants to articulate the precise way in which Hobbes engaged in “ideology formation” and emphasizes how he took advantage of existing prejudices and tropes to paint his picture: “But, precisely because the Americans were viewed as inferior beings, Hobbes's equation of their existence with a state of nature to be avoided fused together his contemporaries' cultural prejudices and their fear of a return to civil war and anarchy into an effective ideological picture of anarchy as savagery” (“Hobbes's Natural Man,” 1108). But, I would point out, this does not mean that those prejudices are part of the logic of his system.

so much to Hobbes's reference to the Indians, whom they were prepared to concede were wild and savage, as to the implication that civilized Englishmen without the proper form of government were no better than savages."⁴⁶

There is of course an importance difference between the pre-political or apolitical state of nature and the state of nature that occurs because of massive political failure such as civil war. My point here is that this difference is not one between different kinds of people. This gives us reason to be skeptical of Mills' attribution to Hobbes of the essentializing claim that Indigenous Americans are perpetually in the state of nature and will never leave it. If that were true, it would imply that Hobbes saw some immutable difference between the Indigenous Americans and the early Saxons. As we saw earlier, Mills voices this perspective when he analogizes Hobbes's "savages" to Aristotle's "natural slaves." On Mills' reading, there is some natural characteristic about Indigenous Americans for Hobbes that differentiates them from the early Saxons: the former cannot exist the state of nature while the latter obviously did. But I see no textual evidence for imputing such a strong and implausible claim to Hobbes. Given his story about how 'civilization' emerged in Europe, there is no reason to think it could not in emerge in the Americas.⁴⁷

But therein lies the rub.

Implicit in Hobbes's account is the assumption that the goal is a European-style society with certain cultural and political markers: philosophy and scientific knowledge (as Hobbes understands them); civilization in the form of "commodious living"; enclosures and improvement of land underpinning a system of private property; and statehood marked by formal institutions of government. The way of life of the "savages of the Americas" is inferior for Hobbes, but not because of essentialized differences between Indigenous Americans and Europeans. Hobbes likely believed that the Indigenous Americans could live "well," as Europeans do, if only they were to develop these superior social and political structures. This is consistent with what Hobbes recommends in his discussion of colonialism: colonists should teach native populations how to cultivate the land.⁴⁸ The problem I am underscoring here is Hobbes's

46 Similarly, Ashcraft tells us that "Bishop Tenison rebukes Hobbes as a Christian for failing to uphold those standards of decency that separate 'us' from 'the barbarous will of that savage man' Hobbes has taken for his model of natural man" ("Hobbes's Natural Man," 1109).

47 Indeed, Patricia Springborg argues that for Hobbes, civilization would eventually emerge in the New World: "Not in his day, certainly, but Hobbes does believe that Native Americans will participate in the normal social development that will bring them to statehood" ("Hobbes, Donne and the Virginia Company," 147).

48 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 540 [181].

implicit reliance on a Eurocentric model of what counts as civilization (though he wants to include the presumably ‘advanced’ societies of the Aztecs and Mayans, as we saw earlier). Because the standards he is assuming are culturally specific, the social organization of the “savages” of North America are indeed found not to meet them.⁴⁹ If racism in early modern philosophy involves an essentializing or naturalizing claim about people, then it is not the most useful notion to describe what is worrisome about Hobbes’s account. What he finds wanting is forms of social organization, not kinds of people.

It is difficult to say whether or not Hobbes should have known better. As Evrigenis points out, “there was abundant testimony that for the most part, the Indians of America lacked sophisticated institutions of the kind that one found in Europe, and that even where their society displayed signs of organization, their way of life was largely primitive and their existence precarious.”⁵⁰ However, explorers’ accounts available at the time described highly organized political structures in the Americas, discrediting the idea that Indigenous Americans lived in the “warre of all against all” that characterizes the Hobbesian state of nature. Indeed, some of Hobbes’s contemporaries – most notably Clarendon, Cowley, and Lucy – insulted Hobbes for his ignorance of the actual state of affairs in the Americas. Clarendon pointedly criticizes Hobbes for not acknowledging the existence of “Princes” in America:

Nor will the instance he gives of the inhabitants in *America*, be more to his purpose than the rest, since as far as we have any knowledge of them, the savage People there live under a most intire subjection and slavery to their several Princes.⁵¹

Scholars debate the reasons Hobbes could have had for offering such a distortion of Indigenous life. Some claim that he misremembered the relevant details.⁵² Others contend that he purposefully misdescribed the situation in order to make his rhetorical point.⁵³ The intended audience for *Leviathan* was

49 For example, see Moloney, “Hobbes, savagery, and international anarchy,” 197.

50 Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy*, 222.

51 Clarendon, *A Brief View and Survey...*, 30, cited in Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy*, 221 (see also Cowley, *The True Effigies of the Monster of Malsbury*, 7–8, and Lucy, *Observations, Censures, and Confutations of Notorious Errours in Mr. Hobes His Leviathan and Other His Books*, 156).

52 See, for example, Aravamudan, “Hobbes and America.”

53 See, for example, Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy* and Ashcraft, “Hobbes’s Natural Man.” Springborg, “Hobbes, Donne and the Virginia Company,” is also relevant in this context. There is much debate about what Hobbes did or did not know about the Americas, as well as debate about where his knowledge (or lack thereof) shows up in the text.

of course the English, and notice that the state of nature only works as a threat if and to the extent that its inhabitants are like the English. If the Indigenous inhabitants of the state of nature were different *in kind* from the English, then their purportedly “brutish” condition would not serve as the cautionary tale that Hobbes intended.

In sum, Hobbes does not say much about Indigenous Americans, but when we consider all that he does say, we can conclude that essentialist disparagement of Indigenous Americans (or any ‘race,’ for that matter) is inconsistent with at least one of his explicit statements on the matter – his insistence that the differences between the “wildest of Indians” and Europeans are contingent.⁵⁴ He does speak pejoratively about Indigenous Americans in other passages; though, as we have seen, he disparages them no more than he disparages the early Saxons or European people living through civil wars.

2 Equality

Perhaps the strongest argument for resisting the characterization of Hobbes's conception of human nature as inherently racist lies not in his writings that mention race but in a foundational moral principle that undergirds his whole philosophy.

When Hobbes introduces the idea of human equality in the opening sentence of *Leviathan* chapter 13, he points to the fact that humans have roughly equal mental and physical capacities; there are not such great differences between any two people such that one can claim something that the other cannot claim as well:

Nature hath made men so equal in the faculties of body and mind as that, though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he.⁵⁵

The weakest may kill the strongest in various ways. Equality in this sense seems to be about equal vulnerability to death. This passage has been widely

⁵⁴ See note 42.

⁵⁵ Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 188 [60].

discussed by Hobbes scholars, including those interested in race. For example, Barbara Hall says,

Here, Hobbes articulated what can only be taken to be an expression of the fundamental equality of all men and the basic superiority of none. If Hobbes did in fact presume some qualitative differences between peoples regarding their capacities for advancement, then he was being unnecessarily disingenuous in making this claim. Certainly, he could have equally well put forth the thesis that some peoples do in fact have inferior or lesser capacities than others. At this point in history, a view such as this would likely have provided welcome confirmation to nascent ideas supporting slavery and New World Conquest.⁵⁶

What is noteworthy here is Hall's observation that Hobbes *could have* said otherwise. Hobbes denies that some people are superior to others, *but he didn't have to*. Indeed, as Hall points out, this denial put Hobbes outside the norm; a statement about natural superiority would have been more welcome in his particular historical moment.⁵⁷ However, it would not have been so easy for Hobbes to simply say otherwise. On pain of inconsistency with the basis of his political philosophy, he could *not* have said that some people were naturally superior to others, or at least not in the sense that some people naturally rule others. To say that would have been to imply that some people naturally have obligations to follow the commands of others. And this is something Hobbes cannot say because it would contradict a founding principle of his philosophy: that all relations of rule are artificial, the result of a contract, the voluntary act of giving up a natural right. The whole point of *Leviathan* is to describe the artifice that is rule or authority.

While it is true that Hobbes sometimes describes equality in terms of equality of capacities, it is also true that sometimes he very much does not. In particular, he seems to insist on *inequality* of capacities. But this does not mean that Hobbes was not an egalitarian; rather, it calls for a more sophisticated

⁵⁶ Hall, "Race in Hobbes," 46.

⁵⁷ To be sure, Hall and others claim that *despite* this egalitarian ideology, Hobbes manifests certain prejudices and constructs his theory on the basis of those prejudices. Mills, as we have seen, attributes to Hobbes the view that nonwhites are qualitatively inferior and necessarily so, but he also acknowledges Hobbes's purported egalitarianism and universalism (Mills, "Natural Sub-Persons," 64). Unsurprisingly, then, he locates a contradiction in his account. But what is important is the foundational role critics assign to the nonwhiteness of the state of nature. They do not see this as contingent or peripheral for Hobbes but rather at the very heart of the whole project.

understanding of what equality means on Hobbes's account. Kinch Hoekstra, for example, argues that Hobbesian equality, properly understood, is "attributed" or "admitted."⁵⁸ Taking the ninth law of nature as his guide, Hoekstra explains that Hobbesian equality is predicated (even necessarily so) on *differences* in capacities among individuals.

Consider first Hobbes's various well-documented statements about the distinctions among people as to the qualities of body and mind. Hoekstra sums up the relevant textual evidence, saying, "Hobbes regards humans as naturally unequal in every aspect of human nature that he specifies: strength of body, experience, reason and passion."⁵⁹ Some people are stronger than others; some people are smarter than others. He acknowledges both natural and acquired sources of inequality of bodily and mental powers. Bodily strength is the easiest to trace back to something natural or given from birth, but he also credits birth as endowing people with unequal mental faculties. Acquired assets might be even more important than natural ones. Hobbes claims, for example, that experience can have more of an effect on one's capacities than wit or natural reason.⁶⁰ And different passions may lead people to different judgments of good and evil. All these differences exist not only between different people but also between younger and older versions of the same person.

Despite these differences – or, according to Hoekstra, because of them – Hobbes insists on equality as part of his foundational moral philosophy. Not only does he assert an equality of natural liberty and right, but he also makes the acknowledgement of equality a law of nature. Importantly, this signifies a shift from claims about actual states of affairs to claims about moral imperatives: from what is the case to what ought to be the case.

Here is how Hobbes formulates the law of nature "against pride" in *Leviathan*:

If nature has made men equal, that equality is to be acknowledged; or if nature have made men unequal; yet because men that think themselves equal, will not enter into conditions of peace, but on equal terms, such equality must be admitted. And therefore for the ninth law of nature, I put this *that every man acknowledge every other for his equal by nature*. The breach of this precept is *pride*.⁶¹

58 Kinch Hoekstra, "Hobbesian Equality," in *Hobbes Today: Insights for the 21st Century*, ed. S.A. Lloyd (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 76–112.

59 Hoekstra, "Hobbesian Equality," 81. Gabrielle Slomp makes this point as well ("Hobbes and the Equality of Women," *Political Studies*, XLII (1994): 441–452).

60 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 42–43 [10].

61 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 234 [77].

His explanation for this law of nature is revealing. Taking aim at the first book of Aristotle's *Politics*, he simply denies that there is natural superiority and inferiority with respect to worthiness to rule or command. Hierarchy is natural for Aristotle, who argues that there are natural slaves (though for him this is not a racialized category: natural slaves are defined as those with lesser rational capacities). Men are superior to women; masters are superior to slaves; and Greeks are superior to non-Greeks. On Aristotle's view, the purpose of human life – its only route to fulfillment – is full personhood and participation in the political community. This fulfillment, however, is available only to some: women and slaves are excluded by their very nature. For Hobbes, on the other hand, differences in status originate in and are legitimized by the “consent of men” not by “difference of wit.” Inequalities of power and worth are “introduced by the laws civil.”⁶² He derides the traditional view that some people rule over others due to their superior “natural aptitude,” arguing that this view is “not only against reason, but contrary to experience.”⁶³ In fact, Hobbes denies the viability of the very notion of “merit.”⁶⁴

Hobbes continues by pointing out that most people think themselves better at ruling than others but react badly when others make the same assumption about *themselves*. Hoekstra describes this as “people’s proclivity to pride and their vexation at perceived contempt.”⁶⁵ In other words, we are both egotistical and thin-skinned. That combination makes it the case that refusing to acknowledge others as equals will lead to hostility, resentment, and other emotions that undercut peace and stability. It is thus clear that for Hobbes the law of nature requiring the acknowledgement of equality holds whether there is actual equality or not.

Since Hobbes’s views on equality are often at play in discussions of how to understand his views on race, it is worth revisiting those discussions in light of Hoekstra’s intervention. Scholars who talk about Hobbes on race do not tend to focus on Hobbesian equality in the attributed sense, and scholars interested in the ninth law of nature do not tend to talk about race.⁶⁶ In a way this makes sense: Hobbes’s discussion of the acknowledgement of equality does

62 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 234 [77].

63 Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne, trans. Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 49 [ch. 3 §13].

64 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 148 [46].

65 Hoekstra, “Hobbesian Equality,” 99.

66 The second footnote of Hoekstra’s essay reads, “For reasons of space, I do not discuss what Hobbes says about gender or racial equality or such aspects of his normative theory as the requirement that justice be meted out equally within the commonwealth” (“Hobbesian Equality,” 77). See also see Joel Kidder, “Acknowledgements of Equals: Hobbes’s Ninth Law of Nature,” *The Philosophical Quarterly* 33(131) (1983): 133–146.

not make reference to group membership based human difference (except to deny its importance) and appears at a different location in the text from the mentions of “savages.” But, still, we can ask how the two bear on each other. How do Hobbes’s views on racial difference and (in)equality and the ninth law of nature requirement relate to one another?

Understanding Hobbesian equality as something that is attributed – as opposed to observed or discovered – allows us to completely bypass discussions of empirical differences between humans. I argue that this is *by design*. Hobbes’s account begins with the assumption that there are all sorts of variations in human abilities. But none of these differences among people detract from the requirement that people must acknowledge each other as equals. This acknowledgement requires us to bracket any positing of human difference or inequality; indeed, it deters focus on those kinds of questions altogether. The only inequalities that are relevant are contingent and artificial ones, the result of sovereign command, which need not – and probably do not – track actual capacities at all.

Of course, the Hobbesian duty to acknowledge others as equals only applies to other subjects in your commonwealth. It is a duty owed by subjects to each other. There is no requirement that the English acknowledge the French, the Spanish, or the Indigenous Americans as equals, because members of those groups have not agreed to the same social contract. In my view, Hobbes’s conception of equality is useful insofar as it turns attention *away* from the question of capacities, which, as many have pointed out, was a building block in justifications of colonialism. But it would not have required anything positive on the part of citizens of one commonwealth to people outside that commonwealth. It is worth noting that in a multiracial society, though, the ninth law of nature would indeed require the acknowledgement of equality between races. Here again, we see that Hobbes’s theoretical principles force him, despite his cultural context, to stress human equality. While multiracial societies would not have been something Hobbes imagined, he has no patience, as we have seen, for the idea of difference based on group membership. This impatience is clear in his ridicule of “ignorant men,” who think that one person’s blood is better than another or that one person is born more excellent than another.⁶⁷ Both of those ideas were associated with Aristotelianism and were favorites of the aristocracy who wanted to ground their superior social standing in a notion of natural superiority over commoners.

67 Hobbes, *The Elements of Law*, 87–88 [pt. 1 ch. 17 §1].

What is crucial for my purposes is that Hobbes adamantly repudiates the debate about empirical ‘natural’ differences between peoples. Consider scientific racism, with the eugenics movement and craniometry being particularly good examples of the (much later) desire to find such differences.⁶⁸ In his domestic philosophy, Hobbes renders any such differences between individuals moot. In his global philosophy, he renders any such differences contingent. Either way, the Hobbesian move is away from theories of, or even attention to, ‘natural’ difference or inequality.

Appeal to essentialized racial difference has not, of course, been the only way people have rationalized racism, but it has been among the more powerful. At the heart of scientific racism in the 19th and 20th centuries was the assertion of ‘natural’ racial differences. The Hobbesian project clearly resists not only that line of inquiry but the impulse behind it. Hobbesian equality is, to (mis)use John Rawls’s phrasing “Political not Metaphysical.”⁶⁹ As a normative tool, it has limitations, obviously. But despite these limitations, Hobbes’s account of human equality undercuts certain justifications for racism, those founded on claims about a people’s ‘nature.’ Even if readers completely reject Hobbes’s philosophical conclusions – who endorses absolute monarchy today? – his move to disregard empirical differences among people would have had real political bite in the 17th century and is still true today.

3 Conclusion

I have endeavored to show that on the Hobbesian view, cultures – not peoples – are superior or inferior. A close examination of his writing shows that the inferiority of the Indigenous American culture described there flows from the

68 Let us not pretend that this kind of desire was a thing of the past. Consider the recent controversy about the scientific study of race: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/racial-pseudoscience-on-the-faculty>. See also <https://www.chronicle.com/article/should-all-genetics-research-on-intelligence-be-off-limits>. One can imagine constructing a Hobbesian argument against these sorts of endeavors. In fact, insisting on the existence of essentialized racial inequality or attempting to find a scientific basis for it might be seen, on this reconstruction, as an act of contumely or a violation of the natural law requiring complaisance. For useful discussions of these concepts in Hobbes, see Teresa Bejan’s work: “‘If It Be Without Contention’: Hobbes and Civil Silence,” in *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 82–111; “Hobbes against hate speech,” *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* (2022): 1–18; and “Hobbes and Hats,” *American Political Science Review* (2023): 1–14.

69 Rawls, John, “Justice as Fairness: Political Not Metaphysical,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 14 (1985): 223–51.

lack of a certain kind of political structure, namely, authorized sovereignty. The adamant insistence on a hierarchy of forms of political organization goes hand in hand for Hobbes with an equally adamant denial of naturalized or essentialized hierarchies of people.

Ultimately, Hobbes resists easy accommodation into either a hero or a villain narrative. Still, I have suggested that the Hobbesian project may offer, in its fundamental commitment to the acknowledgment of equality and its refusal of inquiry into empirical difference, a potential tool for thinking in our contemporary context about the persistent plague of racist ideas.

It must be acknowledged that analytic philosophy's fetishization of logical consistency might lend itself to a sanitizing impulse when reconstructing the work of canonical figures such as Hobbes. I do not want to downplay the ways in which Hobbes's texts actively disparage Indigenous Americans. Nor do I want to downplay the central role these kinds of disparagements had in the ideological justification of imperialism and genocide. I have argued that rather than the essentialist racism he has been charged with, Hobbes is guilty of smuggling in culturally specific ideas. This is not to deny that Eurocentrism had racist impact: it did then and it does today. A careful look at Hobbes's texts themselves reveals a complicated picture: he contests the disparagement of nonwhite people even as he participates in it. Tensions, ambiguities, and omissions, however, are as much of a part of the colonial legacy as its clearcut bigotry.

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