Hobbes and Merit
(Excerpt from the *Leviathan*)

I. Preliminary Remarks

Before we delve into the excerpt to examine it with some detail, a few general comments about Thomas Hobbes's political thought will be helpful to put his remarks on merit into context. Hobbes (1588-1679), as some of you might know, was an important English thinker. His text titled the *Leviathan* is a particularly important and influential work of political philosophy.

Hobbes is certainly one of the first thinkers in the western tradition to think of the creation of the state as the product of a social contract. In other words, he is one of the first examples of *Contractarianism*. In fact, Hobbes is one of the first thinkers to argue that before the creation of the state and political order, humans lived in a state of nature. That is, Hobbes argued that before the formation of society, humans live unregulated by a supervising state and unfettered from each other. Hobbes's conception of the state of nature, however, is particular and compelling. He argued that in a natural state, all human beings are equal, in so far nature has endowed us with competing natural talents. This state of "natural equality" is emphasized by our single most important interest: self-preservation. In other words, Hobbes believes that in a state of nature, every single individual is only interested in preserving his or her own life above anything else. However, because of this, the state of nature that Hobbes describes in the *Leviathan* is always potentially on the brink of war and anarchy. This is because, lacking the oversight and regulation of government, every single individual represents a threat to my life. According to Hobbes, anyone can potentially endanger my life, and thus everyone is potentially my competitor and therefore is also my enemy. In the state of nature my primary interest is to preserve my life and freedom; and, if necessary, I look to dominate others as a preventive measure to protect my life. Moreover, in this state of nature there is no form of justice, which means that nothing counts as an injustice.

Hobbes argues that the only way we can escape this state of nature is by entering into agreement, or contract, with everyone else. We create a social contract, or a covenant—as Hobbes calls it—the moment we are able to figure out that self-preservation can become a common goal. We enter this contract by selecting a sovereign (that is a person, like a monarch, or a group of people, like a parliament) who regulates the relations between individuals in order to guarantee that self-preservation remains a common goal in society. The sovereign must always play the basic

role of protecting and ruling over us, with the general intention of preserving our life. It is worth noticing that the pact is always between *everyone*—every single individual that is part of society—and never between only some individuals and not others. Moreover, the pact, or contract, is not a natural affair—if anything, it goes against nature, and it is a way of bypassing or suspending our natural state of "war" against each other. The moment we choose to enter into contract, and choose a government to rule over us, our natural freedom is lost (which, in a sense, is an absolute form of freedom to do anything), and it is replaced by a limited form of freedom that arises from the government's promise to defend our lives. The commonwealth that is born from the contract between individuals and government, is what Hobbes calls the Leviathan. Hobbes argues that we enter into this contract by selecting a sovereign that both rules over us and preserves our lives—that is, it is a government that both manages and protects our lives. However, if at any moment the sovereign fails in its central goal—the preservation of the life of the people—then it is only fair that the citizens be allowed to rebel and disobey the sovereign. In other words, the moment a sovereign doesn't fulfill its duty to protect the citizens of the nation, the individuals have no duty towards the sovereign and its laws.

As we will see below, Hobbes's idea of merit, or desert, is grounded on his notion of worth. And his notion of worth only makes sense within the context of the social contract. In a state of nature, worth and merit make little sense to Hobbes.

II. Worth, Worthiness, and Merit

As the brief introduction to the excerpt mentions (the one written by the editors) merit makes little sense for Hobbes outside the "institutional arrangement(s)" that are the product of the social contract. And, as Hobbes's own words seem to suggest, the same goes for worth, worthiness, and merit—outside the social contract, the worth or worthiness of an individual and his natural powers mean little to others. But: What is the difference between worth and worthiness for Hobbes? Is there any difference at all? And what is the relation of these to merit?

I have to be frank and give this warning: Hobbes is not at all clear about the differences between worth and worthiness. And upon repeated examination it is difficult to tell them apart in his text. In what follows I'll present what I find to be the best possible and coherent explanation for these two terms—if we assume them to be really different for Hobbes. But my own presentation

of their difference is subject to further inspection, examination, and challenge.

As I've mentioned in the Syllabus for this course, many of the excerpts we are reading come from a book that focuses the relation of justice and desert[1]. It is in the context of exploring different conceptions of justice and desert that Hobbes's notions of worth, worthiness, and merit become interesting and meaningful. In this sense, the remark of the editors of the text is worth paying attention to, insofar it is significant for Hobbes to leave clear that most of his thoughts on worth, worthiness, and merit do not make much sense in the state of nature, perhaps because the idea of justice itself is devoid of meaning in the state of nature. For Hobbes, it seems, the ideas of the relation between even the vaguest conceptions of justice and the worth of an individual, and what comes from an individual's actions, make sense *only* once we have agreed to the common goal of the preservation of our lives. In the state of nature these notions have no meaning, precisely because Hobbes argues that there is no commonly share conception of justice—and no common interest to preserve life. Interestingly, however, even in the setting of the social contract, worth and merit, are dependent on how useful an individual's talents or powers might be—particularly to the common goal of the preservation of life. In this sense, it is worth noticing that those talents which might be useful to the preservation of my own life in the state of nature, might contribute to the common goal of the general preservation of life which is the goal of the social contract. And, depending on my natural talent, and how it contributes to the general goal of the preservation of life, my worth—although not necessarily my worthiness—as an individual, changes within the context of the social contract.

Notice, then, that Hobbes quickly declares that what he calls the 'worth' of an individual is determined by his or her 'original'[2] or 'instrumental' powers. Put in the simplest terms, *original or natural powers* are those which we are born with. Hobbes as in mind, in particular, faculties of the mind or the body. Hobbes means things like strength, agility, resistance, prudence, eloquence etc.—these are examples of powers of the body; but he also means things like eloquence, generosity, self-control, courage, prudence, etc.—these are examples of faculties of the mind. By *instrumental powers*, Hobbes means anything that can be achieved by the cultivation and exercise of these natural capacities. In the category of instrumental powers we find fortune, reputation,

[1] Pojman, L. and McLeod, O. (1999). *What Do We Deserve?: A Reader in Justice and Desert.* New York: Oxford University Press.
[2] He also calls these 'natural'.

friendship, etc. These are "powers" which are not inherent to our bodies or minds, but which can be gained through cultivating any natural power which is conducive to them. For example, perhaps if I am intellectually gifted, a good orator, and an extrovert, I might be able to become a well-known person in my community with an inclination to diplomacy and conflict resolution. Or perhaps if I am an exceptionally tall person in my community, I can corner the market for retrieving high-hanging fruit. (Imagine this to be helpful in a society without the appropriate tools for retrieving high-hanging fruit—otherwise it is a silly example.)

In this sense, what Hobbes seems to mean by worth is the general value of a person within the social contract. Hobbes says: "The value, or WORTH, of a man, is as of all other things, his price; that is to say, so much as would be given for the use of his power: and therefore not absolute; but a thing dependent on the need and judgment of another" ('Merit as Market Value', p. 21). If we pay attention to Hobbes's examples after this passage, we can notice that what he initially seems to mean is that worth is the value that is given to someone and her talents within the context of the social group. Thus, an individual who has shaped her natural and instrumental powers in such a way that she has become a general (I mean, a general in an army) might see her worth increase during a time a war, and decrease during a time of peace. Generals are needed during time of war, but not so much during times of peace. However, Hobbes is careful to specify that the worth of an individual is not fully dependent on that individual's natural and instrumental powers, or whether that person is able to perform any services or functions well. Instead, worth is dependent on how others perceive this individual. Individuals that are awarded high value are honored by others; individuals that are awarded low value are dishonored by others. And the overall general public worth of an individual is what we call dignity. Dignity is the value we give to others, which is manifested in the particular offices or titles that are awarded to said individual.

It seems, however, that Hobbes is suggesting that the worth of an individual is almost entirely dependent on the opinions that others hold of her. And the honors and dignity awarded to this individual are mostly the product of the accumulated perception of the rest of the individuals of the society she is a part of. However, moral or political uprightness, or the capacity to efficiently deliver practical results doesn't determine the worth of an individual. In other words, it seems as if Hobbes is saying that the worth of a popular politician who has been elected into office, for example, is not necessarily the product of good moral and political standing. The worth might be the same, regardless of whether this person was elected into office in an honest and transparent

election, or whether she secretly manipulated the electoral power (say, by paying off election officials, or threatening them) to favor her. As long as others *perceive* this individual as deserving a title, a public office, a professional position, etc., then this person will be perceived as deserving honor and dignity (or the opposite of these). (And now, as you can see, we have entered the territory of merit and dessert.)

Worthiness, Hobbes claims, is something different from worth. And his words do suggest this—even if in a confusing way. Hobbes says: "Worthiness is a thing different from the worth or value of a man, and also from his merit or desert, and consists in a particular power or ability for that whereof he is usually said to be worthy; which particular ability is usually named fitness or aptitude" ('Merit as Market Value', p. 22). The worthiness of an individual seems to be much more closely connected to our natural powers, for Hobbes. He seems to suggest that worthiness is dependent on my natural disposition (fitness or aptitude) to do something well. However, my ability to perform well something specific doesn't necessarily mean that I will be perceived as valuable in a social setting. Thus, merit, for Hobbes, has nothing or little to do with worthiness. In this sense, *worth* (not worthiness) seems to be much more dependent on my ability to somehow become and remain socially powerful—not matter how I achieve that. Worthiness, in contrast, seems to be dependent on my natural aptitude to do something well. For example, for Hobbes, becoming the first violinist of the New York Philharmonic is not solely dependent on my natural talent and training to play the violin well—it is not dependent on being the best at playing violin among the violinists of the New York Philharmonic. Instead, it is dependent on my ability to wrangle up the right amount of social, political, and institutional power that will allow me to be perceived as deserving to be the first violin of the New York Philharmonic, regardless of how good I am at playing the violin.

This example, of course, is silly, because I would have to still have to be able to play the violin quite well in order to be a violinist in the New York Philharmonic. However, if anything, the silliness of the example shows how radical Hobbes's conception of worth, and its relation to merit is. Overall, he seems to be suggesting that worth is almost essentially the product of social, political, or economic power, whereas worthiness is dependent on my natural and cultivated abilities to perform or do something well. Moreover, when it comes to merit, the only thing that determines whether I *deserve* something is my worth within the context of the social contract. In other words, just as Hobbes suggests regarding the general notion of justice—which exists only

after the fact of the social contract, and never in the state of nature—merit doesn't seem to be a notion that might even occur to humans in his version of our natural state. Merit is only the product of the regulated social interaction that comes along with the social contract. And even in this setting, the status of merit is somewhat dubious, insofar it is more the product of power than of aptitude, skill, and ability.

A few final remarks on the section titled 'Of Merit' might be pertinent. However, I deliver these final remarks with another warning: I find this separate section on merit to be overly confused (although not necessarily confusing). If anything, it muddies the waters of everything that Hobbes had said regarding merit in the previous section. The only redeemable part of this section is that Hobbes points out that along with merit comes what he distinguishes as its due. In other words, Hobbes simply seems to be distinguishing between the *state of deserving something*—it doesn't matter what—and the actual act of obtaining it, or the act of being awarded what I deserve. It is a simple distinction, but one worth mentioning. It is on account of this distinction that we can say that we merit or deserve something, but not have it effectively delivered to us. In other words, I might deserve an Olympic gold medal for being the fastest runner, but until I am actually awarded the medal the "merit" is not fulfilled—until I don't receive the medal, I haven't received my due. (Think of someone who has been wrongfully accused and imprisoned for a crime. Several years later, if this individual is found to be innocent, we can say, the moment this becomes clear and is acknowledged by the pertinent institutions: "That man deserves to be free". However, until he is *actually* free from imprisonment, the *due* that comes with this *merit* has not yet been delivered, so to speak).