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To Infinity and No Further: A Rejoinder to Alexander Coram

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We thank Alexander Coram for his comment¹ and for the opportunity he gives us to clarify some important issues that we were able only to hint at in our 1996 article.²

The main point raised by Alexander Coram is that the cost of (uncertain) death cannot be infinite. So, either we were incorrect in ascribing to Hobbes such a preposterous claim or, if Hobbes did make such a claim, so much the worse for him, for the notion of an infinitely bad payoff being attached to death is just nonsensical and counterfactual. Related to this substantive issue is the less interesting observation that infinity is not a real number and cannot be treated as such in calculating probabilities at a mixed-strategy equilibrium.

It is our contention that Hobbes's political theory is indeed predicated on *one particular type of death* being infinitely evil (not just really, really bad) and that our attempt to formalize his construct is as consistent as the rational-actor approach permits.

The context in which we introduced the assumption that "violent death at the hands of others" is infinitely evil (assumption S^∞) is of paramount importance to understand why death being infinitely bad not only is not "meaningless," but is indeed a cornerstone of Hobbes's political theory.³ The examples cited by Coram as instances of people taking

- 1 Alexander Coram, "To Infinity and Beyond: Hobbes and Harsanyi Still Nowhere Near the Abyss," this JOURNAL 30 (1997), 555-59.
- 2 Gabriella Slomp and Manfredi M. A. La Manna, "Hobbes, Harsanyi and the Edge of the Abyss," this JOURNAL 29 (1996), 47-70.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 60-61.

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the risk of being killed for finite payoffs (robbing banks, walking downtown in most large cities⁴) are just not relevant in the Hobbesian state of nature.

As a preliminary to explaining this crucial point, we may clarify a subtle distinction between honour, glory and “fame after death.”⁵ First, whereas glory is defined by Hobbes as one’s joy of being superior to others, honour is the recognition by others of one’s superior power. Because of the lack of common values in the Hobbesian state of nature,⁶ glory seekers cannot hope to achieve superiority in any field of human endeavour, except in what is valued by all—life. It is only after the social contract that the creation of artificial political arrangements allows for that “interesting class of action for the analysis of political behaviour” mentioned by Coram.⁷ Secondly, in an important passage of *Leviathan* (chap. 11) Hobbes draws a distinction, which seems to have escaped Coram’s attention, between “desire of fame after death” and desire of glory. The former, which disposes people to laudable actions and consists in “the present delight . . . of the benefit to their posterity” may entail risking one’s life.⁸ The latter, which consists in the pleasure of superiority, is incompatible with death, as dominion over others cannot be achieved if one dies. It is the existence of glory seekers that precipitates the drama of the Hobbesian state of nature; as we show with the “bees and ants game,”⁹ if everybody were a non-glory seeker (and known to be such) there would be no war in the state of nature.

We now come to our main claim, namely, that in Hobbes’s view the payoff for a glory seeker from being killed violently by others is *infinitely* bad. We shall provide three complementary arguments to substantiate our claim: (1) in terms of textual reference; (2) by providing a clarifying interpretation of the relationship between glory and self-preservation; and (3) by considering the implications for the functions of the political state.

(1) As to textual corroboration, we do not have to look further than the main quotation in the text (“of the good things experienced by men *none can outweigh* the greatest of the evil ones, namely, sudden death”¹⁰) and comparing it with the definition of a series of diverging

4 Coram, “To Infinity and Beyond,” 558.

5 For a comprehensive analysis of glory and related concepts in Hobbes’s political theory, see Gabriella Slomp, “From *genus* to *species*: The Unravelling of Hobbesian Glory,” *History of Political Thought* (forthcoming).

6 Slomp and La Manna, “Hobbes, Harsanyi and the Edge of the Abyss,” 59.

7 Coram, “To Infinity and Beyond,” n. 9.

8 *Leviathan*, in William Molesworth, ed., *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury* (London: J. Bohn), Vol. 3, chap. 11, part I.11,87.

9 Slomp and La Manna, “Hobbes, Harsanyi and the Edge of the Abyss,” 54–55.

10 *Ibid.*, 60.

to $+\infty$, helpfully reproduced by Coram: if a glory seeker's payoff for being murdered were not infinitely bad, one could always find a large enough positive payoff that could "outweigh" it. The payoff from violent death is indeed the limit of a series of diverging to $-\infty$.

(2) As we mentioned above, the "desire of fame after death" may imply risking one's life, a course of action not affordable by a glory seeker whose violent death would nullify the chance of achieving his ultimate end, namely, dominion over others. As we hinted in our 1996 article,¹¹ the best way of characterizing the relationship between glory and self-preservation is to see self-preservation as the *constraint* that has to be met in order for glory seekers to enjoy the pleasure of dominion. In this perspective, it is not so difficult to realize how infinite payoffs arise quite naturally.¹²

(3) In Hobbes's beautifully tight-fitting construct, there is a strict correspondence between the causes of conflict in the state of nature and the properties of the political state necessary to guarantee eternal peace. If, contrary to Hobbes's view and following instead Coram's suggestion, we assume that glory seekers do not attach an infinite value to their physical integrity, then the political state envisaged by Hobbes would unravel completely. In fact, the reason why citizens bestow *absolute* obedience to the Leviathan is that they realize that this is the only way in which they can have their self-preservation guaranteed.¹³ If their self-preservation were not guaranteed unreservedly, then at each relevant decision point they would have to choose between entrusting their life to a political arrangement that cannot safeguard it absolutely and renege on the social contract and hence become responsible for their own self-preservation.¹⁴

In conclusion, while we plead guilty to the charge of having used a mathematically sloppy notation,¹⁵ we stand by our claim that Hobbes not only attached an infinitely bad payoff to violent death (in the sense explained above), but he also made this a cornerstone of his political construct.

11 Ibid., 61, n. 39.

12 Consider a simple example, the choice facing an individual wishing to allocate her time endowment (say, 24 hours) between two competing time-consuming activities, L and W. The shadow price of the ensuing constraint ($L + W \leq 24$) is in fact infinitely high: no matter how much you are willing to pay for time, you cannot "buy" more than 24 hours a day.

13 Self-preservation, of course, is to be understood as preservation of one's physical integrity from attacks by others; immortality is not in the gift of the Leviathan.

14 We have explored further this point in Manfredi La Manna and Gabriella Slomp, "Leviathan: Revenue-Maximizer or Glory-Seeker?" *Constitutional Political Economy* 5 (1994), 159-72.

15 In our own defence, we had considered deploying a more rigorous notation, but rejected the idea so as not to put off non-mathematically inclined readers.