

dominate the political landscape since Hobbes’s time. In three crucial respects his thinking marks the transition from the pre-modern to the modern world of politics.

First, Hobbes’s political philosophy is self-justifying: it explains politics in terms of the value of politics, not in terms of some external set of values. Ancient and medieval conceptions of politics invariably sought to justify politics with reference to something else. For the ancients, politics rested on an idea of virtue: the point of being a citizen was to lead a virtuous life, to become the best person you could be through politics. For medieval thinkers it rested on religion: earthly power has its source in God’s plan for the world (hence, for instance, the doctrine known as the ‘Divine Right of Kings’). Hobbes thought this was all rubbish. And worse, it was dangerous rubbish because it just gave human beings one more thing to fight about. Which virtues? Whose God? Civil wars have broken out over far less. He thought politics would only have a secure hold over us if it could prove its usefulness for *us*: people as we are. Politics justified by its utility for regular human beings is a distinctly modern view, and one that still exercises a strong grip.

Second, although Hobbes thought politics is the most important thing, he didn’t think it is the all-important thing. The idea that he was a forerunner of totalitarianism is completely wrong. Rather, he was there at the invention of what we have come to call private life: the space in which people are free to do their own thing. The point of settling the basic arguments about politics was to enable people to get on with living their lives unencumbered by endless political

disagreement. A stable civic existence gives us the time and the space to do all the other things we want to do, which for Hobbes includes arguing and squabbling and competing and posturing and generally trying to come out on top. These are all potentially fruitful activities if they can only be prevented from becoming deadly. They give rise to invention and romance and excitement and variety and knowledge. They are compatible with both love and grace. They are just not compatible with political monomania.

Hobbes believed it was futile to try to achieve the good life through politics. Instead, politics exists to enable us to pursue the good life for ourselves. He never thought sovereigns could make people happy. He just thought you had no chance of being happy in the absence of a sovereign. This makes Hobbes a ‘liberal’ in the classic modern European sense: he sees personal fulfilment as requiring political protection but not political instantiation. It is not the only view of modern politics available, but over time it has become the dominant one. Certainly it is the dominant one today.

Finally, Hobbes’s idea that politics is founded on an agreement between individuals to let a sovereign take decisions for them was expressed through one of the keywords of modern politics: ‘representation’. In *Leviathan* he calls the sovereign ‘representative’ of his subjects. By this he doesn’t mean that the sovereign is answerable to his subjects and certainly not that they can get rid of him if they don’t like what he does: that was always anathema for Hobbes. What he means is that the sovereign speaks for his subjects and that they must agree to be spoken for by him. Out of this