

they will behave like individuals in the state of nature: by being fearful, mistrustful and trigger-happy. This is another misreading of Hobbes. The lawlessness of international politics does not have to result in a war of all against all. That’s because there is a crucial difference between states and individuals: well-organised states are very hard to kill. You can’t take them out when their backs are turned. Their backs are never turned: a state, unlike an individual, never switches off. States are not like people. They are like machines.

The vast, powerful, artificial entities created by modern politics have no real incentive to attack each other pre-emptively. The more powerful they are, the less incentive they have. The most powerful states of the modern age have been democracies (or ‘republics’, in Kant’s terms), the United States being the most powerful of all. States like this have an excellent/terrifying record in war, depending on your point of view. They are hard to rouse but fearsomely difficult to defeat once roused and brutal in their willingness to deploy excessive force. Democracies may not fight each other, but they rarely lose the wars they do fight against non-democracies. (Their success rate in these contests is around 80 per cent.) So it is possible that one reason democracies don’t fight each other is that they know better than to take on something so frightful. The democratic peace may not be proof of how nice democracies are. It may be evidence of how nasty they can be.

This is the most negative version of democratic peace theory. There are less negative versions, which suggest that liberal democracies encourage peace by facilitating free trade and the free

movements of peoples among themselves. On this account, the European Union serves as an exemplification of what Kant had in mind. Yet even on this account, it is very hard to see how there could be any short cuts to peace, any more than there are currently short cuts to EU membership. (Turkey has been waiting for more than two decades now.) The problem remains that, outside of the magic circle of perpetual peace, its benefits are extremely unevenly distributed: democracies that exchange goods and people freely with each other can be very reluctant to extend those courtesies to anyone else. It is almost impossible to imagine the circumstances that would provoke the democracies of Western Europe to start fighting each other again. France is not going to resume its war with Germany any time soon. But it is not so hard to imagine the EU using force against some external enemy, if sufficiently alarmed and sufficiently confident of its ability to prevail. A future conflict with Africa – perhaps over mass migration – in which the Europeans deploy excessive force to get their way is still perfectly possible. What price perpetual peace then?

The truth is that we don’t know how to fight wars for peace. We don’t know how to turn democratic negatives into democratic positives. We don’t know how to spread the benefits of politics to the people who need it most. We only know that we could do it better.

DROWNING CHILDREN

So far in this chapter I have been talking about the difficulties of doing good through politics. If it is so hard, why not bypass the politics altogether and simply focus on the need to do good? There