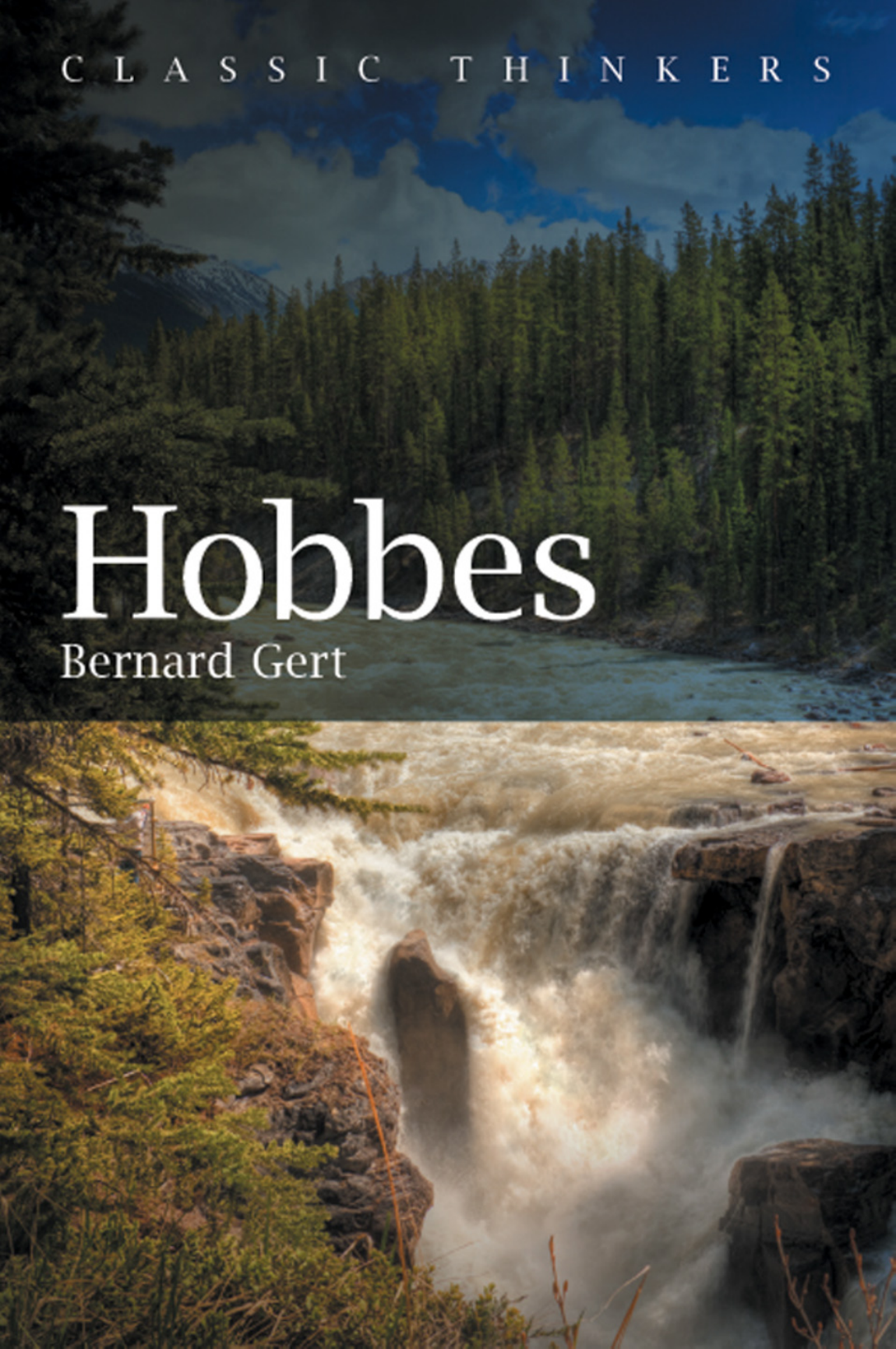
CLASSIC THINKERS

Hobbes

Bernard Gert



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Prince of Peace

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Preface

More than 45 years ago I finished my PhD dissertation on the *Moral and Political Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes*. More than 35 years ago I edited and wrote an introduction for a volume entitled *Man and Citizen*, which includes both *De Homine* (chapters 10–15) and all of *De Cive.* I have also written many articles about Hobbes and reviewed several books about him. More importantly, much of my own work on morality and human nature has been influenced by Hobbes. My own moral theory is a version of the natural law theory put forward by Hobbes in *De Cive* and *Leviathan*. The account of human nature that I am developing also owes much to Hobbes, in particular his account of reason, but also of the emotions and of pleasure and pain.

While working out my own views, I have been struck by how often, when I arrive at what I take to be an original point, my next reading of Hobbes shows me that he had made that same point centuries before me. Hobbes did not get everything right, but it is surprising how much he did get right. His views about human nature, though pessimistic, are not unduly so. He was among the few moral and political philosophers whose views take into account that people differ from one another in significant ways. It is ironic that he should be criticized for holding that all people are completely selfish, because he held that one could not make any universal empirical claims about the motivation of all people. He does hold that the nature of the passions is the same in all people, e.g., fear and hope, but not the object of these passions. He says, "I say the similitude of the *passions*, which are the same in all men, *desire,*

fear, hope, &c, not the similitude of the objects of the passions, which are the things *desired, feared, hoped*, &c." (*Leviathan*, Introduction par. 3) Hobbes is doing philosophy; he is providing a philosophical analysis of the passions. He is not doing empirical psychology, making universal claims about the motivation of all people, for he realizes that people are different.

Hobbes acknowledges the extent and power of religious beliefs and realizes that they provide a continuing threat to civil peace. He is aware that the primary difference between religious beliefs and superstitious beliefs is that the former are generally looked on favorably whereas the latter are not. He realizes the importance of distinguishing morality from religion, and establishes a foundation for morality completely independent of religion. However, because he is aware of the impossibility of eliminating religious belief, he devotes an enormous amount of time and effort trying to show that Christianity, properly interpreted, supports his account of morality. He presents an interpretation of Christianity, the only religion that was relevant in seventeenth-century England, which is most compatible with his moral and political views. His views on religion are an area in which he holds a position held by many contemporary philosophers.

Hobbes's work on language anticipated many of the discoveries of philosophers of language of the twentieth century. He explicitly describes the performative use of language in the transferring of rights, as in promises. He is aware that the primary benefit of language is that it enables people to communicate with each other for practical purposes. He does not, as many philosophers do, consider the primary function of language to provide a description of the world. Even though Hobbes is considered a thoroughgoing materialist, he was not primarily interested in metaphysics, and often does not distinguish between different versions of materialism, e.g., reductive materialism and epiphenomenalism. He also was not greatly interested in epistemology and did not take skepticism seriously. His primary concern with epistemology and metaphysics is to discredit those religious views that he thought were responsible for civil unrest and war. This lack of interest in epistemology and metaphysics may explain why some philosophers do not consider him to be ranked with Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. But no one denies that he ranks with the very best of all time in political theory, and I would rank him in a similar way in moral theory.

My appreciation of the greatness of Hobbes's moral and political theories has led me to spend considerable time and effort correcting

some of the traditional misinterpretations of his views. I am pleased that I have played some role in changing the most egregious of those misinterpretations, that Hobbes held psychological egoism, i.e., the view that self-interest is the only motive for human action. That misinterpretation was used as a basis for criticizing Hobbes, and so it was not difficult to persuade those scholars who recognized the philosophical power of Hobbes's views that it was indeed a misinterpretation. It is more difficult to persuade such scholars that the standard interpretations of his views about reason or rationality are also mistaken because their misinterpretations of this concept are not used as a basis for criticizing him. Indeed, Hobbes is often credited with anticipating Hume's account of rationality as solely instrumental. I hope, however, to be as successful in changing this misinterpretation as I was in changing the misinterpretation of his views about human nature. Removing these misconceptions of Hobbes's views of human nature and rationality makes it possible for Hobbes's moral and political theory to be read more straightforwardly and sympathetically, and their power and relevance to become more apparent.

The state of nature, the right of nature, and the law of nature are central to Hobbes's accounts of human nature, rationality, morality, and politics. It may seem that his account of these technical terms, which are no longer in general use, are of interest only to Hobbes scholars. It is true that understanding these concepts are essential to understanding Hobbes's moral and political theories, but understanding them is also helpful in a more general understanding of how human nature and rationality are related to moral and political theory. Hobbes's discussion of the state of nature, the right of nature, and the law of nature are central to his justification of morality and of the political theory that he puts forward. When all of these concepts are given their proper interpretations, it becomes clear why Hobbes is considered one of the greatest political philosophers of all time. It is my view that Hobbes's moral theory is superior to other theories, such as those of Kant and Mill, which are generally regarded in a more favorable light.

Hobbes wrote about human nature, morality, and politics over a long period of time. The account of human nature expressed in his earliest work, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic* (at one time considered as two separate works, *Human Nature* and *De Corpore Politico*), might be taken as egoistic. This non-authorized and only privately circulated early work, which was a draft of *De Cive*, provides most of the support for the misinterpretation of Hobbes as a

psychological egoist. *De Homine*, published in 1658 but not translated into English until 1972, cannot possibly be taken as supporting psychological egoism. I am concerned with Hobbes's mature views, which start with the publication of *De Cive* in 1642 when he was already over 50. His philosophical views did not change much after that time, although he made successive refinements. He did, however, become interested in having more political influence, which may explain why *Leviathan*, published in 1651 (the same year that the English translation of *De Cive* was published), was initially published in English rather than Latin. (It was published in Latin in 1668). Although *Leviathan* is a very long work, Hobbes wrote it to influence an audience wider than that of *De Cive*.

Philosophers are situated in a particular time and place and their writings are a response to the problems with which they are presented. Hobbes's moral and political theories were clearly influenced by the religious controversies and civil wars that England was embroiled in during the much of the seventeenth century. In the Author's Preface to the Reader in *De Cive*, he even says that it was the impending civil war that led him to write *De Cive*, the third part of a trilogy, before writing the two works that were to precede it, *De Corpore* and *De Homine*. The Thirty Years War started when Hobbes was 30, so he was aware that the problems caused by religious beliefs were not peculiar to England. He was also aware of the conflict between religion and science. When Hobbes was in his mid-40s, Galileo published *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* and was punished by the Inquisition for publishing it. Hobbes fled to France to escape the English Civil War, which broke out when he was 54, the same year that *De Cive* was published. It is not surprising that he was concerned with the evils caused by religious controversy and devoted increasing space in his political writings to discussing religion. Nor is it surprising that he thought that applying the new scientific method to moral and political philosophy might provide a way to establish peace and stability.

I am interested in Hobbes's views because I think that they are important and mostly correct. When they are not, I shall suggest modifications of his views to correct them. I am not the kind of philosophical scholar who treats the writings of his favorite philosopher as if they were sacred texts, so that they have to be interpreted in order to rule out any mistakes. Hobbes made mistakes. Most of them were in matters of detail, not in the general theory. However, even in stating his general theory, there are problems, usually due to Hobbes's tendency to hyperbole. I shall try to distinguish clearly

between my interpretations of Hobbes's views and my clarifications and revisions of them. For example, Hobbes seems to hold that, absent appropriate religious beliefs, it is irrational to sacrifice your life to save others. He comes close to giving up this view in the fifth paragraph of A Review and Conclusion in *Leviathan*, when he adds a new law of nature, "*that every man is bound by nature, as much as in him lieth, to protect in war the authority by which he is himself protected in time of peace*." However, in most of his writings he assumes the irrationality of sacrificing your life for others, and seems mistakenly to think that this position is an essential premise of his moral and political theory.

Despite centuries of being attacked on the basis of mistaken interpretations of his views, Hobbes has maintained his reputation as the leading English political philosopher. It is a fully deserved reputation. I hope to show also that he should be ranked as highly as a moral philosopher and even as a philosopher of human nature. There are many philosophers who are very impressive upon first reading, but who become somewhat less impressive with each successive reading. Hobbes, on the other hand, is one of those few philosophers who become more impressive on each successive reading. Although his writings were occasioned by what was happening around him, we do not read him today because of his immersion in the problems of his times. We read him because his solutions to those problems incorporate solutions to problems that every age faces. I hope that my account of his moral and political philosophy will make clear how impressive his account of human nature and his moral and political theories views are.

1

Hobbes's Life, Times, and General Philosophical Views

Hobbes's Life and Times

Hobbes lived in troubling times. In his Verse Autobiography, he says that he was born prematurely on April 5, 1588 because of his mother's fear of the impending arrival of the Spanish Armada sent to invade England. He refers to this event by saying, "my mother gave birth to twins: myself and fear." Somewhat surprisingly, Hobbes seems to be proud of being a fearful person. When he left England for France in 1640, he claims that he was among the first to flee the civil war. But since Hobbes held that the primary goal of reason is to avoid avoidable death, it may be that his claim that he was a timid person was a modest way of claiming that he was a rational person. However, his writing shows no hint of timidity. He put forward views that he knew were quite controversial, when to publish controversial views about politics or religion was far more dangerous than it is now in England and America. Even now, in many parts of the world publishing controversial views about politics or religion may result in imprisonment or even death, and England during Hobbes's lifetime was more like these parts of the world than present-day England. Both the Roman Catholic Church and Oxford University banned the reading of his books, and there was talk, not only of burning his books but also of burning Hobbes himself. Actually, a few years after Hobbes died, Oxford University did burn copies of *De Cive* and *Leviathan*.

Hobbes was intimately involved in the political and religious controversies of his time, so that a proper understanding of his

moral, political, and religious views requires some understanding of these controversies. Queen Elizabeth died in 1603 when Hobbes was almost 15 and James VI of Scotland became James I of England. James died in 1625, and his son, Charles 1, became king. Charles I, like his father, believed in the divine right of kings, and was almost continuously in conflict with the Parliament of England, precipitating two civil wars. He was defeated by parliamentary forces in the first civil war (1642–5) and was asked to approve a constitutional monarchy, but he would not do so, and in the resulting second civil war (1648–9) he was defeated again. The monarchy was then abolished and the Commonwealth of England was established with Cromwell as its leader. In 1646, the son of Charles I, Charles II (1630–85), fled to Paris, and Hobbes, who had fled there himself in 1640, became his mathematical tutor for two years. They must have developed a close relationship, for after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, when Charles II became king, Hobbes was welcomed to his court and provided with a small pension. This happened even though Hobbes had presented Cromwell with a copy of *Leviathan* when he returned to England in 1651.

Because the politically perilous times that Hobbes lived through were due in large part to religious conflicts, it is no surprise that in trying to fashion his political theory Hobbes pays far more attention to religion than is common for contemporary political philosophers in the west. However, in the Islamic world, where religion is taken as seriously today as it was in seventeenth-century England, Hobbes's concern with religion may be far more relevant. But although Hobbes was concerned with religion, religious beliefs play no essential role in his moral and political theories. He presents his views so that those for whom religion is important can take God as the source of morality, but he is quite clear that morality can be based solely on human nature and rationality. Although he defines the laws of nature, which incorporate the moral law, as the dictates of reason, he says that they can also be considered as the commands of God. He says this because he knows that most people are far more influenced by their religious beliefs than by philosophical arguments. It is because he wants to influence the way people behave that he sometimes writes in a way that can be interpreted as if the force of morality did depend on the laws of nature being the commands of God.

In Hobbes's time, neither atheism nor deism was a position that any person seeking to influence the way people should behave or how a commonwealth should be organized would put forward.

Indeed, if a person hoped to have any practical influence, he would also not put forward any non-Christian view. Hobbes lived in a Christian world, and all of the religious controversies were controversies between different branches of Christianity. In England these were Roman Catholicism, Anglicanism, and Presbyterianism, whereas on the continent the controversies were between Catholics and Protestants. Less than 10 years after Hobbes graduated from Magdalen Hall, Oxford, the Thirty Years War (1618–48) began on the continent. This war started as a religious controversy but later became more of a political war. It involved so much death and destruction that many felt the need to find a moral view that was independent of any particular religion and could command acceptance from all rational persons. Probably the most important writer putting forward such a view was Hugo Grotius. Although Grotius was born only five years before Hobbes, on April 10, 1583, his influential book, *On the Law of War and Peace* (1625) was published 15 years before Hobbes wrote the first draft of a book on moral and political philosophy. That draft, *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, which was clearly influenced by Grotius's book, was not written until 1640. Although Hobbes circulated it in manuscript, he realized that it had serious problems and did not have it published. Nonetheless, this first draft of a book continues to be taken by many commentators on Hobbes as presenting the clearest account of his views on human nature. This has resulted in a serious distortion of his considered and mature views on human nature and morality.

Hobbes's considered views on human nature and his developed moral and political theories are presented in *De Cive*, his first published book on moral and political philosophy. This book, written in Latin (1642, Notes and Preface added in 1647), was translated into English as *Philosophical Rudiments Concerning Government and Society* in 1651, the same year that the English edition of *Leviathan* was published. (The Latin version of *Leviathan* was published in 1668.) *De Cive* was supposed to be the third book of a trilogy; the first book was to be *De Corpore* (1655), which was devoted to an examination of language, scientific concepts, physics, and geometry. The second was *De Homine* (1658), most of the first nine chapters of which were devoted to optics, but the last six chapters, X–XV, provide an account of human nature that can serve as an introduction to the moral and political philosophy put forward in *De Cive*.

The combination of the translation by myself and colleagues of these chapters from *De Homine* and of the English translation of *De Cive* was published in a volume entitled *Man and Citizen* (1991

[1972]). These chapters from *De Homine* serve as a foundation for *De Cive* in the same way as Part I: "Of Man" of *Leviathan* serves as a foundation for Part II: "Of Commonwealth," so that *Man and Citizen* provides another complete account of Hobbes's moral and political theories, including his account of human nature. When both of these accounts put forward the same views, we can be confident that these are indeed Hobbes's considered views. This book uses *Leviathan* and *Man and Citizen* as the primary sources for Hobbes's account of human nature and for his moral and political theories.[1]

Hobbes published *De Cive* before he finished the two books of his trilogy that were supposed to precede it because of his concern about the impending civil war in England. Although Hobbes was aware that most people acted on their emotions rather than their reason, he exhibited the standard naïveté of philosophers, acting as if philosophical arguments would affect people's behavior. He not only wanted to discover the truth, he wanted to persuade others that he had discovered it. He believed that if his discoveries were universally accepted, there would be no more civil wars and people would live together in peace and harmony. After praising the work of the geometricians, he says:

> If the moral philosophers had as happily discharged their duty, I know not what could have been added by human industry to the completion of that happiness, which is consistent with human life. For were the nature of human actions as distinctly known as the nature of *quantity* in geometrical figures, the strength of *avarice* and *ambition*, which is sustained by the erroneous opinions of the vulgar as touching the nature of *right* and *wrong*, would presently faint and languish; and mankind should enjoy such an immortal peace, that unless it were for habitation, on supposition that the earth should grow too narrow for her inhabitants, there would hardly be left any pretence for war. (*D.C.* Ded., p. 91)

[1] In order to make it possible to check the reference no matter what edition of *Leviathan* or *De Cive* is being used, references to *Leviathan* are by chapter and paragraph number and to *De Cive* and *De Homine* are by chapter and section number, except for the Preface where paragraph numbers are given, but, because some paragraphs are three pages long, pages numbers to *Man and Citizen* are also given. The Dedication is one long paragraph, so only page numbers to *Man and Citizen* are given. References to other works of Hobbes, e.g., *De Corpore* and *The Elements of Law Natural and Politic*, are also by chapter and section number. I will use *D.C.* for *De Cive*, *L.* for *Leviathan*, and *D.H.* for *De Homine*.

It is true that great philosophers such as Hobbes do have an effect on society, but usually this effect takes place many decades, even centuries, after they have written. For example, Hobbes's view that morality is independent of religion is now the standard view of many educated people in English-speaking countries; however, almost no one in Hobbes's time accepted such a view. That is why Hobbes devotes more than a third of *Leviathan* trying to show that his moral and political theories are not only compatible with Christian Scripture but are also actually supported by Scripture. Although his works are now studied in colleges and universities, Hobbes did not write them as academic works. Despite its size, about 500 pages, *Leviathan* is a political tract, which is why Hobbes published it first in English rather than in Latin, in contrast with all the books of the trilogy, *De Corpore*, *De Homine*, and *De Cive*.

Many of Hobbes's views about human nature and the emotions were taken from Aristotle, especially his *Rhetoric*. Individual elements of his accounts of morality and politics are also not original, but were put forward by others who participated in the political and religious controversies that were current in his time. Hobbes's originality is in how he unites all of these elements into a powerful philosophical system. He wrote with the intention of influencing current events; however, philosophers do not now read Hobbes because of the role he played in the political and religious controversies of his time.

Like all great philosophers, Hobbes transcended his times. He constructs a philosophical system in which all of his moral and political views are derived from what he considers to be clear truths about human nature, language, morality, and rationality. He takes this system so seriously that he abandons positions that were held by most of his political allies; e.g., he denies the divine right of kings. Once he discovers what he takes to be obviously true premises, he follows out their implications regardless of where they lead. Of course, like most philosophers, he knows what results he wants, and this influences his choice of premises. However, unlike many philosophers, he never adopts a premise solely because he needs it to reach conclusions he wants. For example, John Rawls, in *A Theory of Justice*, rules out envy from the characteristics people have in the original position because only by doing so can he reach the conclusion that all rational persons will choose the two principles of justice that he wants as his conclusion.

Hobbes on Religion

Hobbes is so contemporary in so many of his philosophical views that it is easy to think of him as holding contemporary views in all matters. That would be a mistake. At the present time, most philosophers who are not officially associated with some religion usually do not believe in any traditional concept of God. Hume, in his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (1779), presents arguments against theism that have never been refuted, but he provides no positive alternative to explain all those features of world, especially the biological world, that seem to need an explanation. It is not until Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859) and *Descent of Man* (1871) that a non-theistic explanation for these matters becomes more plausible than a theistic explanation, not only to philosophers but also to others. Hobbes wrote *De Cive* and *Leviathan* two centuries before Darwin and a century before Hume. He almost certainly believed that there was a being that created the world, but it was crucial to him that the miraculous stories in the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures be interpreted so that they were compatible with his philosophical views, especially his moral and political theory.

Just as almost all philosophers who wrote after Darwin accepted Darwin's natural selection account of the evolution of human beings, so almost all philosophers who wrote after Galileo's *Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems* (1632) accepted the Copernican system. Just as acceptance of Darwinian evolution is often taken as incompatible with orthodox Christian belief, so too was acceptance of the Copernican system. However, just as many contemporary Christians accept the Darwinian account of the origin of human beings, so many believing Christians during the seventeenth century accepted Galileo's views. It is tempting for contemporary philosophers to underestimate the importance of religious beliefs, for many of the most distinguished contemporary scientists do not believe in a theistic God. However, even the greatest scientists during the time of Hobbes, e.g., Galileo and Newton, believed in such a God. It is important not to forget the extraordinary impact that the Darwinian account has had on belief in any kind of theistic God. Even if Hobbes was a deist, it is crucial for understanding him to appreciate the importance that he attributes to Christian religious belief.

These common-sense observations about the influences on Hobbes simply acknowledge that Hobbes was a person of his time.