Book Reviews

Evrigenis, Ioannis
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On Cicero’s telling, we do not escape our brutish, natural condition by rationally covenanting each with each. Rather, we need a “great man” to transform us “from wild savages into a kind and gentle folk.”¹ Such an individual must be great not only in wisdom, but also in eloquence, so that he may harness and redirect our natural passions, and thereby render us fit for social life. But if our natural condition is always with us — if our transformation is never truly complete — then we may have an ongoing need for Ciceronian great men, who would, by their wisdom-guided eloquence, continually redirect our passions toward safer and more sociable ends. At the heart of Evrigenis’ new book is the idea that Hobbes recognized this as a need, and aspired to meet it himself.

Beyond that, it is difficult to reduce the upshot of Images of Anarchy to a pithy slogan. One of the book’s most refreshing features is Evrigenis’ persistent effort to resist the temptation to distill Hobbes’s thought “down to a single method...a single force...or a single passion” (17). Evrigenis explores the complex interaction between science and rhetoric in Hobbes’s political philosophy, using the state of nature as a “prism” (3) through which to examine the issue, and striving throughout for a sensitivity to Hobbes’s diverse (and not always congruous) argumentative strategies. He asks how we can square Hobbes’s proclaimed scientific aspirations with his clear hope to actually persuade a wide readership of its political duties — a readership not comprised entirely of philosophers, of course, and moved as often by passion and partiality as by anything like reason.

Though he may seek to avoid the kinds of reductionism into which other interpreters have fallen, it is clear where Evrigenis stands on the general issue: He is

¹ De Inventione, I.i.2. Evrigenis discusses this passage on pp. 252–253.
skeptical about Hobbes’s purported aspiration to articulate a demonstrative science of politics — a science which would do for moral and civil philosophy what Euclid had done for geometry, or what, more recently, the likes of Galileo, Kepler, Copernicus, and Harvey did for natural philosophy. Hobbes's appeals to civil science are better seen, on this account, as part of his variegated rhetorical strategy than as a meaningful philosophical commitment.

The first two chapters treat Hobbes’s translation of Thucydides and his “Briefe” of Aristotle’s Rhetoric, respectively. Together comprising Part 1 of the book, they lay out Hobbes's early thinking on rhetoric, its role in politics and its relationship to philosophy. In bringing out how Hobbes's humanist work foreshadows his mature ethical and political theory, Evrigenis has a negative scholarly goal. He wants to undermine a certain account of Hobbes’s intellectual development, one which sees it as a series of discrete stages: A humanist stage in which he takes rhetoric seriously; a scientific phase, occasioned by his discovery of Euclid, in which he rejects rhetoric completely; and finally a begrudging acceptance that perhaps rhetoric shouldn’t be ignored after all, since, in the “Morall sciences,” “Reason and Eloquence…may stand very well together.”

Even if few scholars would openly endorse this conveniently tidy intellectual biography in such a crude form, Evrigenis may well be right to suspect that it continues to exert a certain influence on Hobbes’s interpreters.

Evrigenis argues that careful attention to Hobbes’s translation of Thucydides (the culmination of his supposed humanist phase) can trouble this story in many ways. First, we can discern a relative constancy in the content of some of Hobbes’s views: In the preface to Thucydides, we see a sensitivity to the political dangers inherent in moral language that would persist through Hobbes’s work, and a recognition of the psychological mechanisms that distort men’s judgment — a recognition which “prefigure[s] [Hobbes’s] epistemology and political theory” (30). More significantly for his purposes, Evrigenis also identifies a methodological continuity: Far from representing a fundamental opposition, both Thucydides and Euclid provided Hobbes with models for how to “secretly instruct the reader” in such a way as to bypass the distorting mechanisms of pride and partiality. On this telling, what Hobbes gained from the “Euclidian moment” of Aubrey’s famous (if suspiciously serendipitous) account, was not a novel conception of the possibility and grounds of civil science, but the reinforcement of a rhetorical strategy Hobbes had already begun to learn from Thucydides.

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