

**Book Reviews**

Ted H. Miller


How did an obscure country-house tutor—one whose only acknowledged publication was a translation of an ancient Greek historian—suddenly emerge in middle age as a major philosopher, a founding figure of the new discipline of political science? The usual answer is that, having begun his career working within the *studia humanitatis*—history, poetry, rhetoric, Hobbes experienced an intellectual conversion on encountering an open copy of Euclid in a continental library. He turned his back on humanism and embraced geometry, using its austere deductive method to dispel the confusions that had hitherto prevented a proper understanding of the laws of civil life. At this ‘phased’ version of Hobbes’s intellectual development Ted H. Miller takes aim in in his ambitious, wide-ranging, and beautifully produced book.

Miller’s Hobbes never abandoned humanism. In adopting a mathematical approach to philosophy he drew on a widespread and highly-prized culture of mathematics that had long been integral to humanism and which flourished in early-modern England. The opposition modern scholars have drawn between the mathematical reasoning of Hobbes’s mature philosophy and the procedures of humanism is a false one. In developing his philosophy in mathematical terms, Hobbes in fact takes the lead from and extends the arguments of earlier humanist mathematicians.

In Miller’s account, Hobbes’s mathematized philosophy, based as it was on his nominalism and distinctive epistemology, limited the philosopher’s field of operation but gave him enormous powers over it. Since true knowledge is causal and nature’s causes cannot certainly be known, humans may claim knowledge only of those areas wherein they create the objects of knowledge—geometry (by drawing figures) and civil philosophy (by creating political institutions). By such acts of creation man not only imitates but even rivals God.
This is because while God creates natural man, natural man himself can create something God has not made: an artificial man bigger and stronger than himself. Hobbes's promotion of man as mathematical creator was 'ontologically aggressive' to a degree not hitherto noticed, and it entailed an overturning of the traditional scholastic curriculum, subordinating physics to mathematics. It also, in consequence, involved discrediting the kind of mathematics then practiced within the universities by those who, like John Wallis, took issue with Hobbes's geometry and, in particular, with his supposed breakthroughs in that field.

It is not only with the supposition of a Hobbesian turn from humanism to geometry that Miller takes issue. He also objects to the dominant explanations for Hobbes's apparent reconciliation with the humanist discipline of rhetoric in *Leviathan*, having inveighed against and (it is widely held) rejected it in earlier works of civil science. The 'return to rhetoric' in *Leviathan* is to be explained not as the symptom of a rapprochement with a previously rejected approach, but by reference to the audience at which the new work was aimed. Where *The Elements of Law* had confronted Charles I's parliamentary opponents with an impregnable chain of logical deductions, and *De cive* had offered magisterial instruction to students, *Leviathan* addressed the sovereign directly, matching its style to the loftiness of its addressee.

Miller finds further evidence against the phased view of Hobbes's intellectual development in his longstanding preoccupation with history. From the early 'Discourse upon the Beginning of Tacitus' (the attribution of which to Hobbes Miller accepts without comment), through his translation of Thucydides, up to the late *Behemoth*, Hobbes was a practicing historian: a historian, moreover, who was consistently drawn to that dark, late-Renaissance strain of disillusioned history that concerned itself with the toxic interaction of demagogues and popular assemblies in bringing states to their knees.

Hobbes's humanism, his concern with mathematics, his sense of audience, and his quest for courtly patronage come together for Miller in *Leviathan*. That work, 'presented to a sovereign', is to be seen as the product of a high culture of practical mathematics, including architecture and stage-design, which flourished at the early Stuart courts and which found its apotheosis in the masque. In the masque, skilled practitioners deployed the mathematical arts in the creation of spectacles that expressed the court's ideal vision of itself. They were mirrors for princes. But Miller is not content to suggest that *Leviathan* is a product of this culture; he goes further: *Leviathan* is itself a masque-text, presenting to its sovereign an image of his own establishment, out of the chaos of nature, and by means of Hobbes's political philosophy, as 'that great Leviathan', 'that Mortal God'.