

Abizadeh, Arash *Hobbes and the Two Faces of Ethics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2018. xi + 288 pages. ISBN 9781108417297.

This is a difficult book to review, in part because it is such a good book. It demands a lot from the reader, and many will find it difficult both to keep up and to keep going. But for those who do, the rewards are worth it.

Abizadeh's central contention – yielding the book's title – is that Hobbes's ethics is constituted by two fundamental and contrasting features. On the one hand, Hobbes articulates a 'theory of the good': the normative reasons we as individuals have for acting in some ways rather than others. On the other, a 'theory of the right': an account of what we owe to others in terms of duties, and of how such duties come about. In pressing this reading, Abizadeh also offers a host of important further contentions, both historical and philosophical.

Historically, Abizadeh identifies Hobbes's intervention as epochal in terms of its intellectual power, situating it at the crossroads between modernity and the ancient world and assisting the transition from the past to the future. Whereas Ancient Greek moral philosophy was principally concerned with *reasons of the good*, typically cashed out in terms of *eudaimonia* for the individual, during the seventeenth century European moral theory developed an emphasis (rooted in Cicero and Aquinas, but developed in particular by Suarez and Grotius) on *reasons of the right*, in terms of natural law and a juridical understanding of obligations owed to others. On Abizadeh's reading, Hobbes must be read as both a continuation of the older tradition – but where *eudaimonia* is understood in terms of a weak psychological egoism and an imperative to preserve one's own life and constantly seek felicity – whilst simultaneously taking over and innovating within the new discourse of obligations grounded in a juridical framework, whose source is in the capacity for rational agents to enter into agreements with each other.

This reading is powerful, and convincing as an overall interpretation of what Hobbes was trying to do. Indications that Abizadeh is right lie not only in his meticulous sifting of the details, and painstaking philosophical analysis, but in the fact that his interpretation can make clear sense of (for example) Hobbes's infamous remark that the laws of nature bind always *in foro interno* but not always *in foro externo*, and his attendant claim that the laws of nature are not *really* laws, properly speaking, just theorems of reason. As Abizadeh enables us to see, the laws of nature – grounded in prudential reasons of the good – cannot properly speaking *be* laws on Hobbes's view, because what are properly laws relate to the obligations generated from reasons of the right, rooted in agreements between agents. Thus, they do not 'bind' us externally by definition, and insofar as they 'bind' us internally this is a claim not about obligations

to oneself (something Abizadeh reads Hobbes as denying the coherence of), but about calculations of personal prudence. Hobbes's text emerges as entirely coherent – and powerfully so.

This is but one example of the philosophical clarity that Abizadeh brings. Another is chapter 4, a veritable *tour de force*. Amongst other things, Abizadeh there overturns the common misperception (previously held by this reviewer) that Hobbes has no theory of the ultimate good, only a theory of the ultimate bad (wounds and death, which all seek to avoid). On the contrary, Abizadeh shows that in fact Hobbes did think there is a *summum bonum* for human beings: it lies in constant felicity and freedom from pain, and is thus an ongoing state of pleasant anticipation rather than a fixed goal, or final point of satisfaction. In turn, Abizadeh is able to make sense of those passages of Hobbes wherein he frequently makes room for motivations that are more powerful than avoiding wounds and death, and why we often see people *choosing* death over some other (worse) end, which otherwise look flatly contradictory in Hobbes's framework. Many such examples of illuminating and compelling interpretation might be cited.

Overall, then, the book must be judged a success, and an impressive one – saying something new about Hobbes is not easy, and saying it this convincingly is even more exceptional. Yet there are limitations inherent to the way Abizadeh has mounted his case, and these are worth considering.

The first relates to the mixed blessings of Abizadeh having produced probably the most rigorous and philosophically sophisticated treatment of Hobbes's work in existence. Brought to bear is the full toolkit of contemporary analytic philosophy – and it is assumed that readers are *au fait* with it all. A typical passage:

The question is whether the normative semantic force of Hobbes's reforming definition of 'good' is supposed to reflect his epistemically non-relativized theory of the good, or instead his epistemically relativized theory of affective and practical reasons. Of course even to be able to ask this question requires using 'good' (in the phrase 'theory of the good' in the previous sentence) in the former, epistemically non-relativized sense, but this use occurs within the metalanguage from within which one considers how to fix the scientific meaning of 'good'; it does not itself count as fixing the scientific meaning of 'good' (166).

To those not trained in analytic philosophy Abizadeh's dense and uncompromising treatments will be daunting in the extreme (the specialised language of 'reasons' and 'normativity' dominates, and will be perplexing to those from

more historical backgrounds, or not reared in Anglo-analytic stables). This in itself is not a failing, but it will limit the audience.

A further potential limitation cuts more deeply. This is the question of the appropriateness of using the tools of contemporary analytic philosophy to interpret Hobbes's texts, when Hobbes himself had no access to those tools, and thus could not have been using them. This is less of an issue when Abizadeh is articulating his interpretation of Hobbes's juridical (and thus inevitably to some degree casuistical, hence more amenable to fine logic-chopping) theory of the right. But it sits less comfortably with regards the reconstruction of Hobbes's theory of the good. As Abizadeh puts it, he interprets Hobbes as "an ethical naturalist of a rather sophisticated kind: normative properties are all reducible to (normative) natural properties, but they are unreal and irreducibly normative and are the object of potentially veridical normative judgements and true normative propositions" (263). Abizadeh's striking – and polemical – claim is thus that Hobbes was not the metaethical sceptic that he is so often taken to be, but a peculiar and highly sophisticated species of cognitivist, affirming an irreducibly normative account of ethics.

The question, however, is whether Hobbes himself could possibly have set out to articulate a position so dependent on recent innovations in philosophical analysis. Abizadeh is alert to the risks of anachronism here. In his introduction he makes the fair points that, first, if the question is whether Hobbes could have found such an interpretation *intelligible*, then that's a fairly low bar to meet. (Hobbes was not only very smart, but helped inaugurate the tradition of analytic philosophy Abizadeh now makes full use of.) Second, that there is nothing wrong with using more advanced conceptual tools to retroactively outfit a theory which was hampered by not having such tools, but was struggling along in clear need of them. If we can use our modern techniques to bring out more sharply what Hobbes could only manage to bring out imperfectly – and if this was specifically due to his relatively impoverished tool box – then there is nothing to worry about.

These are fair points, but I am left unconvinced. Consider the following comparison. With modern innovations in cycling technology – carbon fibre bike frames; specialised pedal-locked shoes; modern gear shifting technology; applied aerodynamic and sports science research; tailored personal training programmes; improved diets, etc. – even the most average of *peloton* riders in the Tour de France now operate at speeds many times faster than even the greatest champions of the classic Tours of the early twentieth-century. Technological advances (even excluding dubious ones relating to doping and borderline permissible medical treatments) have had the effect of making less naturally gifted riders nonetheless better than naturally more gifted, but

technologically impoverished, predecessors. The same is true of the tools of philosophy: learning these via formal education from a young age allows intellects of much lesser natural ability than Hobbes to accelerate to a level of analysis that it once took world-historical geniuses to break through to. Such is the nature of technological progress, be it in sport or philosophy.

If we could put Hobbes in a time machine and bring him to the present (perhaps giving him a couple of years to get up to speed with the techniques of modern philosophy) I have no doubt that he would be able to comprehend Abizadeh. He might even say he agreed with the positions Abizadeh articulates, in terms of their philosophical rigour and truth. Something similar can be said for those great Tour riders of the past: on a modern bike, with a modern training plan, they would likely far out perform ordinary *peloton* riders, and perhaps even beat the Champions of today.

The problem, however, is that the substantive question isn't 'could Hobbes have understood this?,' but 'could Hobbes possibly have set out to do this?' Another cycling analogy: in order for a rider to set out to try and win the Tour de France, they have to have an idea of there being such a thing as *the Tour de France*. More generally, they need to have other ideas in play, most basically that of a bicycle, then also of a bicycle race, and more complexly of an organised sporting competition taking place over many weeks, with rules, prizes, and so forth. Imagine that the most genetically gifted bicycle rider in human history died in 1850, roughly fifty years before the first Tour. If we transported them to the present and gave them all our modern help, they would likely win the modern Tour. But they could not have conceived of what it would mean to win the Tour de France in 1850, because the idea of *that* was downstream of the invention not just of the bicycle, but a host of other social practices that hadn't yet come to pass.

I suspect something analogous to be true of Hobbes. Doubtless he was a forerunner of the modern analytic philosopher, and he used tools that are the ancestors of the ones that philosophers use today (just as modern, super-fast carbon bikes are descended from the heavy steel frames of the Victorian era). But it strikes me as impossible that Hobbes could have set out to solve the questions about 'normativity' and 'reasons' that Abizadeh claims in his dense metaethical reconstruction, because those questions only came properly into existence *after* at least some of the conceptual tools needed to interrogate them were invented. Whatever Hobbes was up to, he can't have been trying to do what Abizadeh claims, for roughly the same reasons that a cyclist in 1850 could not set out to try and win the Tour de France.

Abizadeh in his conclusion notes that "Much of this set of metaethical commitments is implicit rather than fully worked out in Hobbes. But this

implicit framework gives the lie to efforts to find in Hobbes's ethical naturalism a reductionist or noncognitivist metaethics" (276). At what point, though, does 'implicit' shade over into: what Hobbes should have said, even though he didn't, because he *couldn't*? Abizadeh offers us the most sophisticated and compelling interpretation of what Hobbes *could* have said, if he'd had our modern tools at his disposal. But this is not the same as what Hobbes himself thought he was doing, nor what he actually achieved. Hence, I suggest, Hobbes ultimately couldn't sort out the details of his own metaethics (in part precisely because he lacked the tools), leaving him ultimately inconsistent on these matters, which helps explain why so many generations have been baffled by what he says at various points, which seem so clearly in contradiction with each other, and why so many rival interpretations now litter the field.

Does this matter? Perhaps not, and the extent to which one thinks that it does matter will be affected by whether one thinks it is history or philosophy that should take priority. Hopefully, however, it will not only be philosophers who register the power, originality, and interest of this demanding yet rewarding book.

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