

# The moral philosophy of a political refugee

Arash Abizadeh, *Hobbes and the Two Faces of Ethics*,  
Cambridge University Press, 2018

*By Luc Foisneau*

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**According to A. Abizadeh, Hobbes's moral philosophy is based on two complementary but distinct conceptions: one that classically makes the pursuit of happiness the end of human life, the other, resolutely modern, rests on what we owe to each other.**

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The technicality of contemporary ethical theories, whether phenomenologically or analytically inspired, could give the impression that it would be pointless to turn to the history of moral philosophy: in such a perspective our contemporary moral dilemmas would have found adequate instruments of analysis and there is nothing left to learn from Aristotle or Montaigne. The first virtue of Arash Abizadeh's book<sup>1</sup> is to contribute to dispel this illusion by showing that the most recent conceptual contributions of normative theory can allow an enlightening re-reading of the history of moral philosophy. Its second virtue is to apply this methodology to Hobbes and to help us understand how this author, whose moral philosophy has long been forgotten in favour of his political philosophy alone,<sup>2</sup> offers a moral theory well-adapted to some aspects of our contemporary world. The thesis of the book is, however, that *Leviathan's* morality has two dimensions, the search for individual happiness and the respect of

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<sup>1</sup> Arash Abizadeh is a Professor at McGill University, Montreal.

<sup>2</sup> For another approach to Hobbes's moral philosophy, also influenced by Tim Scanlon, see S. A. Lloyd, *Morality in the Philosophy of Thomas Hobbes : Cases in the Law of nature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009.

our obligations to others, and that these two dimensions are, despite an appearance to the contrary, perfectly compatible.

## Between the Romans and the Greeks

Talking about Hobbes' moral philosophy is both easy and complicated. It is easy because its ethical vocabulary is familiar to us: in use since Greek and Roman antiquity, it is the same, with few ready exceptions, as that of Aristotle, Cicero and their medieval exegetes. Doesn't Hobbes talk about the good life, which is not reduced to survival but presupposes a happy life? Does he not devote two chapters of his *Leviathan* (XIV and XV) to the importance of the laws of nature for his philosophical project? Virtue is no exception: it too is part of his philosophical lexicon. However, the impression of familiarity that the reader feels when opening the *Leviathan* quickly gives way to a feeling of strangeness. Forgetting, or pretending to forget, that for Aristotle and his Christian interpreters the individual's good also resides in the pursuit of a common good, the theory of the good according to Hobbes is now concerned only with the individual good; moral laws, which until then had the function of advising the individual with a view to the realization of the sovereign good, became under his pen theorems of reason responsible for indicating to everyone the ways of happiness in peace; the notion of justice, which until then had been part of the eudemonist project, acquired a specific normative status in *Leviathan* (p. 5).

Arash Abizadeh has chosen, in fact, to approach the moral transformation of modernity from the affirmation, alongside the ethics of happiness, of a moral philosophy of the voluntary obligation to others. Suarez, the Jesuit, is a precursor: isn't it the latter who insists on the importance of the notion of *jus* in moral philosophy? But it was Grotius, the Dutch philosopher exiled in the France of Louis XIII, who effected the real rupture, forcing us to think in two distinct ways about what it means to be obliged. Moral obligation is, on the one hand, the obligation to follow certain precepts if one wants to live a truly good life, but it is also, on the other, the obligation we find ourselves under to justify our actions to others. Whereas the first version of obligation is turned towards ourselves, since it tells us what we must do to live happily, the second is turned towards others, since it is what reason requires us to do as soon as we are engaged in relationships with others. This distinction is found in Hobbes, but with one major difference: since he considers that human beings are asocial by nature and only appreciate the company of their fellow human beings if it contributes to their

individual happiness, the basis of our obligation towards others can no longer be our penchant for sociability (p. 7). The first chapter of *De Cive* strongly illustrates this change in the register of moral philosophy: among other things, it teaches us that we only love the company of others out of love for ourselves.

This exercise in shedding this naïveté, which is not without evoking the lesson of the *libertins érudits*<sup>3</sup>, is interpreted philosophically by A. Abizadeh. Hobbes' originality does not lie in the abandonment of the eudemonist tradition, since it persists in making happiness the ultimate end of human life; nor does it lie in the affirmation of the legal character of voluntary obligations towards others, since Grotius had already taken this path before him; it lies in a new way of thinking about the relationship between concern for the good life, which is expressed through the advice of reason, and concern for fulfilling the obligations that stem from our voluntary commitments towards others.

## A Meta-Ethics of *Leviathan*

*Hobbes and the two faces of ethics* submits the foundations of Hobbes' moral reflection to a scrupulous examination by means of the concepts of contemporary meta-ethics. In the famous passage from *Leviathan*, Chapter XV, if the fool wrongly wants to conclude from his desire for happiness that there is no obligation to respect his moral commitments, it is because he does not understand that the contractual obligation is based on reasons other than the ones that lead him to live as happily as possible. To put it in the lexical register of contemporary meta-ethics, the fool does not understand that the existence of "reasons of the good", those guiding his search for the good life, are not the basis of "reasons of the right", those obliging him towards others (chap. 6). However, these two sides of ethics do not look in the opposite direction.

The proof of this lies in the theory of resistance: if one is not obliged to endure the violence of the State, even when one has been convicted of a proven offence, if one has no obligation to denounce one's father and mother, it is because the obligation of happiness prevents us from doing so – a wretched life, in this case, that of patricide, is contrary to the obligation of the laws of nature, which, although not of a juridical

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<sup>3</sup> See Isabelle Moreau, *Guérir du sot. Les stratégies d'écritures des libertins à l'âge classique*, Genève, Honoré Champion, 2007.

nature, constitutes a principle limiting our obligations towards others.<sup>4</sup> In other words, we cannot commit an act that would make our lives miserable for the rest of our lives. This is a face of Hobbes' thought that is too often ignored, that of a philosopher of happiness that extends ancient eudemonism in times when a legally inspired morality, combining contractual responsibility and self-justification to others, is becoming the dominant norm.

## Happiness According to Hobbes: the Anticipation of Pleasure

What remains is to determine the nature of happiness according to Hobbes, since Arash Abizadeh proposes that we read him as a heterodox heir of Epicurus: Arash Abizadeh's thesis is that for Hobbes happiness lies, not in the pleasures of satisfaction, but in more distant pleasures, the pleasures of anticipation (Chap. 4: "A theory of the good: Felicity by anticipatory pleasure"). If we can quickly agree on the first point, since Hobbes' texts are formal on the unsatisfactory nature of the fulfilment of our desires, the solution chosen is subtle because it makes our ability to anticipate the fulfilment of our desires the basis of our ability to be happy, thus allowing us to understand that, although we are never totally satisfied, this continued lack of satisfaction is the sign of our happiness.<sup>5</sup> Our felicity would thus lie in the fact that we keep on desiring and that, if this activity is hardly restful – against Epicurus' thesis, for whom happiness lies in the tranquillity of the soul (*ataraxia*) – it is nonetheless an end in itself. Unlike most commentators,<sup>6</sup> Arash Abizadeh ascribes to Hobbes a theory of the supreme good and the ultimate end, which is none other than the happy life of the modern, the pleasure of a life spent anticipating the realization of our desires. The idea that Hobbes would have rejected the ideas of the *summum bonum* and *finis ultimus* is therefore nothing less than a misinterpretation: Hobbes does not reject this idea, since he considers that happiness is our supreme good. He only rejects the conception of the supreme good "as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers"<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> This example was used by A. Abizadeh during the Hobbes @ Paris seminar, organized at EHESS, on 5 March 2019.

<sup>5</sup> For an analysis of the constitutive anxiety of this conception of happiness: L. Foisneau, *Hobbes. La vie inquiète*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, chap. IX, « Le bonheur, l'inquiétude et l'ennui », p. 211-222.

<sup>6</sup> « For there is no such *Finis ultimus*, (utmost ayme,) nor *Summum Bonum*, (greatest good,) as is spoken of in the Books of the old Morall Philosophers (Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. XI, § 1, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 150). For a different interpretation of this passage, see Jean Hampton, « Hobbes and ethical naturalism », *Philosophical Perspectives*, n° 6, p. 333.

<sup>7</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, chap. XI, § 1, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 150.

What Hobbes rejects is the Epicurean conception of the supreme end that makes happiness consist in the realization of our desires. Against Epicurus: “Nor can a man any more live, whose Desires are at an end, than he, whose Senses and Imaginations are at a stand.”<sup>8</sup>

## From Naturalism to Morality

The art of the detour through meta-ethics is the trademark of the book, the most remarkable illustration of which concerns the description of the relationship between naturalism and Hobbes’ moral theory. This analysis is found in the first chapter, which is both the most demanding of the book and the most enlightening—if one wants to take the time to read it carefully. Seeking to understand how ethical proposals can be articulated with radical materialism, A. Abizadeh emphasizes that Hobbes is a “projectivist”, since the sensitive qualities we perceive are projected by our psychological apparatus onto objects that are in reality only moving bodies. However, he adds, this projection should not be considered as a source of error: contrary to what Richard Tuck<sup>9</sup> thinks, Hobbes is not an error-theorist (J. Mackie), since he considers that ethical proposals are capable of truth, although they are not properties of moral beings. In a very thorough study of the lexical register of rationality, which attempts to show how the plural use of the word (“reasons”) is as important as its use to designate a faculty (“Reason”), the commentator shows us that, to read Hobbes today, it is better to have read Tim Scanlon<sup>10</sup>. If we cannot say with the “descriptivist reductivists” (p. 39-46) that Hobbesian normativity is reduced to representations or assertions concerning what agents believe, desire or do, it is because Hobbes acknowledged “the existence of reasons *in their irreducible normative sense*” (p. 61, our italics). And it is this discovery that makes the strength of Hobbes’ philosophy, capable of articulating a consistent materialism with a complex moral theory, since there is a specific normative dimension, the one we enter when we give each other reasons to believe, desire or act.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> See R. Tuck, *Hobbes. A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1989, p. 62-63.

<sup>10</sup> Tim Scanlon, one of the leading contemporary moral philosophers, proposed a meta-ethical theory based on the normative nature of reasons and a foundation of morality on the justifiability of our reasons to others. See T. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other*, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1998, chap. 1, and *Being Realistic about Reasons*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014.

## A Political Exile in Paris

Hobbes' moral thought is, in the strongest sense of the term, a thought of exile: we too often forget that *De Cive* and *Leviathan* were written in Paris, where Hobbes had fled the persecution of English parliamentarians as early as November 1640. It is also forgotten that the philosopher's exile did not cease upon his return to England, but that it continued, despite claims to the contrary<sup>11</sup>, with an internal exile in the Commonwealth of Cromwell, and then when the men of the Restoration accused his *Leviathan* of treason to the monarchist cause. If this is not enough to make him a French philosopher, taking into account what we might call the context of exile seems likely to shed light on certain aspects of Hobbes' moral theory, and to complete A. Abizadeh's approach. Is not exile, from a moral point of view, that existential situation in which we must continue to live as happily as possible even though the possibility of the common good has vanished with the political conditions for its realization? Taking into account Hobbes' condition of exile could thus give a historical context to the thesis of A. Abizadeh's book: to think of modern ethics as a bifurcated ethic is indeed to raise the question of the possibility of overcoming the disagreement between the ethics of self and the care of others, which is one of the facets of exile. This situation, A. Abizadeh, whose family had to flee Iran with the arrival of the mullahs, allows us to assess it, not historically, but conceptually. The question he raises will undoubtedly attract the attention of all those, wherever they live, who today consider themselves to be exiled from within.

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<sup>11</sup> See Jeffrey Collins, *The Allegiance of Thomas Hobbes*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2005.