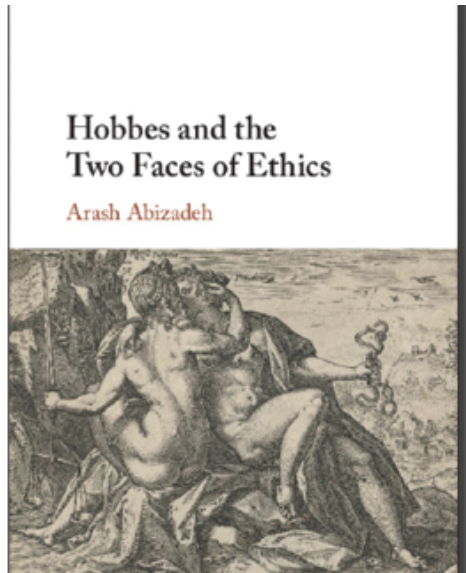




[Home](#) / [Discussion](#) / Online Colloquium (2): Field on Hobbes and the Two Faces of Ethics



## Online Colloquium (2): Field on Hobbes and the Two Faces of Ethics

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*This online colloquium has been established to discuss Arash Abizadeh's recent book, [Hobbes and Two Faces of Ethics](https://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/philosophy/early-modern-philosophy/hobbes-and-two-faces-ethics?format=HB) [<https://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/subjects/philosophy/early-modern-philosophy/hobbes-and-two-faces-ethics?format=HB>]. We began with an [introduction](http://www.europeanhobbesociety.org/general/online-colloquium-1-introduction-to-hobbes-and-the-two-faces-of-ethics/) [<http://www.europeanhobbesociety.org/general/online-colloquium-1-introduction-to-hobbes-and-the-two-faces-of-ethics/>] to the text by Professor Abizadeh. We now have a response from [Sandra Field](https://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/about/faculty/sandra-field/) [<https://www.yale-nus.edu.sg/about/faculty/sandra-field/>] (Yale-NUS), which will be followed by responses from [Michael LeBuffe](http://www.europeanhobbesociety.org/general/online-colloquium-3-lebuffe-on-hobbes-and-the-two-faces-of-ethics/) [<http://www.europeanhobbesociety.org/general/online-colloquium-3-lebuffe-on-hobbes-and-the-two-faces-of-ethics/>] (Otago) and Daniel Eggers (Köln), and finally a reply by Arash Abizadeh. Many thanks to Cambridge University Press for supporting this colloquium.*

Abizadeh's *Hobbes and the Two Faces of Ethics* is an ambitious book. It seeks to provide a comprehensive interpretation of Hobbes's ethics, and to make that interpretation speak equally to historians of ideas as to contemporary metaethics and normative ethics. There is much to admire in the execution of this project. Abizadeh is relentless in parsing fine distinctions amongst contemporary readings of Hobbes, and in deploying textual evidence from across Hobbes's oeuvre to support his favoured view. And the ends to which this rigour and precision are deployed are intellectually significant. Abizadeh identifies a bifurcation between the good and the right in Hobbes's normative ethics—on the one hand, a natural law representing an ethics of individual prudence; on the other hand, a model of justice representing a juridical morality of interpersonal obligation—claiming that both are genuinely, but independently, normative. This interpretation is controversial but ultimately compelling, and historically illuminating. I found his analysis of the genuine normativity of the ethics of individual self-interested prudence particularly useful; Abizadeh diagnoses a certain narrowness of current philosophical conceptions of morality as the obstacle to appreciating this normativity (10, 219–23).

My critical comments focus on Abizadeh's central metaethical claim: that Hobbes offers a sophisticated ethical naturalism, one which is neither reductionist or noncognitivist (17–19, 61). While the bulk of Abizadeh's discussion is devoted to exegesis, at no point in the book does Abizadeh indicate finding the position to be problematic or incoherent. Thus, I take it that Abizadeh's goal is not merely to establish that Hobbes held this view, but also to commend such a view as being sufficiently philosophically compelling and appealing to merit our present attention. I will try to articulate the enduring difficulties facing such a view, both on Hobbes's own terms and for us.

Abizadeh's starting point is the puzzle of the apparent incompatibility between Hobbes's materialist mechanistic metaphysics and his normative philosophy (7–8). One might think that in a materialist metaphysics, lacking free will, there can only be causal responsibility and instrumental sanctions (like rewards and punishments for animals), not genuine

moral responsibility. But to the contrary, Abizadeh argues that this is a medieval scholastic prejudice: aligning Hobbes with the earlier Aristotelian view, we see that the possibility of attributing genuine moral responsibility relies not on the possession of free will, but on the capacity for reason (183–87, 213). Might one then object that that in a materialist metaphysics, reason itself is deflated, becoming a merely passive mental process? Again, to the contrary, Abizadeh argues that it is possible for one's reasoning to be active, by which he means capable of reflecting on and being guided by reasons (62–65, 93).

Abizadeh's response to worries about Hobbes's naturalism ultimately relies on identifying a capacity for active reasoning. Hobbes and Abizadeh distinguish *having* a capacity for reason from *exercising* that capacity: there are people with weak understanding, unclear thoughts, countervailing motivations, and so on, and correspondingly people often fail to fulfil their moral responsibilities. But how is the distinction between possessing an unexercised capacity versus simply lacking the capacity to be specified? And given Hobbes's determinist view of causation, how can the salience of such a distinction be upheld?

Abizadeh does not provide an explicit account, so let us turn to Hobbes's general metaphysics of bodies. Hobbes makes clear that at a fundamental level, nothing is truly contingent: an act is either determined to occur, or it is not. The possibility of an act does not mean its contingency, but rather that the act is not impossible: at some point of time a full set of determinate causes will converge such that it will in fact occur (AW 37.5). This view of possibility generates a fundamentally un-Aristotelian understanding of capacity. As Hobbes explains in the course of criticising his Aristotelian opponent's view: 'We may say ... that an axe can cut because there is nothing in the axe that stops it from cutting. Yet there may well be, in the nature of things, causes that make it impossible for the axe—or anything else—ever to be picked up, and as a result the axe cannot cut' (AW 37.11). Thus, it is not the inner properties of a thing which specify its capacities, but its place in an actual web of deterministic causes: if determinate causes mean a putative capacity is never exercised, it turns out that it is no capacity at all. In our ignorance of the future, more loosely and derivatively we might call an act possible when it may (for all we know)

occur; correspondingly we might attribute a capacity or power to produce that act. (DCo 10.5; AW 35.6–10). This is harmless enough, so long as we bear in mind the strict meaning of possibility: if there are reasons to think that the act will not occur, then it is not permissible to attribute capacity or power for that act.

Is Hobbes's discussion of the human capacity for reason, and correspondingly of the human capacity to feel the rational force of obligations, compatible with this anti-Aristotelianism? At face value, it is compatible. After all, Hobbes and Abizadeh are careful not to attribute a capacity for reason in certain cases where it predictably will not be put into practice (19, 122, 136). Children and the mad are ruled out; and even amongst sane adults, the attribution of normative obligations requires that the relevant reasons are epistemically and motivationally accessible (in particular, ruling out normative obligations to act in extreme contravention to one's own wellbeing, for instance any purported obligation to obey a command to kill oneself or one's parent). And outside of these cases, individuals (for all we know) may reason and act well, so we may permissibly attribute full capacity for reason and full moral responsibility, which is exactly what Abizadeh proposes doing.

However, against appearances, I would suggest that Hobbes's ethics' extensive reliance on the human capacity for reason and corresponding rational action is deeply problematic on his own terms. The problem comes into view once we shift the analytical lens from humans considered individually to the domain of sociological reflection. At the scale of society, we can see poor reasoning and poor behaviour arising predictably from certain aspects of the social domain, even when subjects are not facing the kind of extreme threat to their wellbeing outlined above. Under certain social conditions, it is predictable that a proportion of the population will steal (for instance, when law enforcement is imperfect and there is a stark gap between rich and poor). Under certain social conditions, it is predictable that a proportion of the population will rationalise unjust conduct (for instance, when gratifying rhetoric connects with feelings of grievance or dissatisfaction). (See DC Chapter 12; L Chapter 29). In this light, while it may be fair to say that for all we know, a *particular individual* will behave rationally and fulfil their obligations, it is not fair to say that for all we

know, *everyone* will do so. Thus, to say that all sane adult members of a population have the Hobbesian ‘capacity’ to reason aright and to fulfil their obligations seems untenable.

The tension is brought to the fore in the discussion of punishment. Abizadeh wants to reject the view by which materialist metaphysics requires a merely strategic attitude to practices of blame and punishment (in terms of salutary sociological and political effects, not in terms of genuine moral responsibility). On Abizadeh’s reading, certainly, for Hobbes it is necessary that such practices do have salutary effects (this explains his opposition to vengeful punishment). But strategic usefulness alone is not sufficient: those breaking the law are truly morally responsible for their action, in light of their rational capacity. Therefore punishment is also morally important mode of expressing this second-person holding responsible (21, 203–9). Perhaps this is textually accurate (although it seems to me that Hobbes’s own defence of blame and punishment rests rather more heavily on its salutary strategic effects than Abizadeh’s reconstruction would suggest, see LN 248–55). But I want to underscore the unappealing, and perhaps incoherent, commitment this kind of naturalism involves. It seeks still to blame people for bad behaviour, even if it is the sociologically predictable result of certain social conditions. It lays deep moral responsibility on the individual and obscures the larger web of causes in which individual action occurs. The political consequence is holding communities responsible for sociologically predictable dysfunction.

Perhaps Abizadeh’s moralised naturalism, with its concomitant individualisation of responsibility and refusal of the ambiguities of agency, is the genuine legacy of Hobbes’s political philosophy, and the correct all-things-considered interpretation of his texts. But first, I wonder about its coherence: it is not clear to me that it fully addresses the challenge of a materialist metaphysics. Abizadeh comprehensively addresses one possible tension (how naturalism fits with the possibility of moral truths and the possibility of active reasoning) without addressing adequately another tension (how complex causal determinism fits with the attribution of moral blame). And second, it is far from clear why Hobbes’s moralised naturalism merits being promoted over the thoroughgoing materialist undercurrent of Hobbes that Abizadeh rejects. According to this more

subversive undercurrent, political and sociological reflection on the determinate causes of human conduct should complicate the easy attribution of a capacity for moral and just action, and give us pause to reflect on the broader determinate causes helping or inhibiting the development of such capacity.

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#### Abbreviations

AW: Thomas Hobbes, *Thomas White's De Mundo Examined*, trans. Harold Whitmore Jones (London: Bradford University Press, 1976).

DC: Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. and trans. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

DCo: 'De Corpore', in Thomas Hobbes, *Thomæ Hobbes Malmesburiensis Opera philosophica quæ latine scripsit omnia*, Vol. 1, ed. William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1839).

L: Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan: with selected variants from the Latin edition of 1668*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994).

LN: 'Liberty and Necessity', in Thomas Hobbes, *The English Works of Thomas Hobbes of Malmesbury*, Vol. 4, ed. William Molesworth (London: John Bohn, 1839).

