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The beautiful thing about philosophical analysis is that it can be applied to just about everything, from the most crucial questions of our existence, to the lores, chores, pleasures and pains of everyday life. Historically, philosophers have occupied themselves with general and fundamental problems, and basically they still do. Possibly, it's the difficulties to obtain financial support for theoretical research, the utility of which sometimes escapes even the most insightful non-philosopher, that have led to what we might term as popularization of philosophizing, thus making it more accessible. This has been going on for a couple of decades, and even philosophers who are not themselves participating in this process seem to be overwhelmingly positive to it, and it is easy to see why. In these times of dumbing down, even popularized philosophy contributes to intellectual stimulation and intensification. Today there are a number of popular philosophy book series from English language publishers that dissects everything from wine and porn to cannabis and Christmas with philosophical tools (and Ockham's razor is not always one of them). Wiley Blackwell sent three such anthologies to idrottsforum.org; a **book on hunting** was reviewed in last fall, and in this update books on **climbing** and cycling are reviewed. The latter, *Cycling: A Philosophical Tour de Force* is compiled by Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza and Michael W. Austin. We asked our cycling and doping expert Ask Vest Christiansen of Aarhus University to read it, and his critical gaze finds and highlights the most cogent and convincing contributions.

”I pedal, therefore I am”

Ask Vest Christiansen

Department of Sport Science, Aarhus University

Jesús Ilundáin-Agurruza & Michael W. Austin (red)

Cycling: A Philosophical Tour De Force

273 pages, pb.

Oxford, Oxon.: [Wiley Blackwell](http://WileyBlackwell.com) 2010

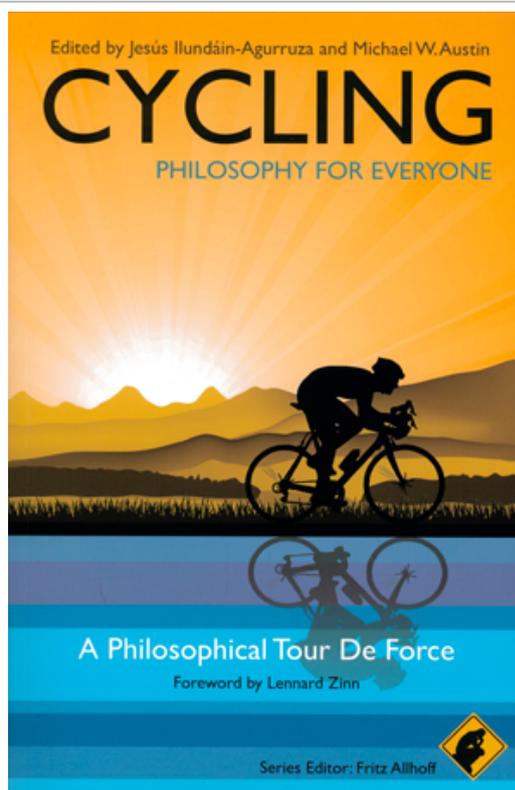
(Philosophy for Everyone)

ISBN 978-1-4443-3027-4

The idea of producing a book about cycling with a philosophical point of departure, or a philosophical book with cycling as a point of departure is not obvious. As the editors write in the first chapter, bicycles, cycling and racing are the sources of many metaphors, proverbs and clichés, so the question is whether asking a group of scholars, who all enjoy cycling, to philosophise over their practice isn't stretching the elastic too far. How can cycling lead to philosophy? It is a simple fact that time spent on the bike cannot be used reading books.

Furthermore, for cyclists it is a common experience that there exists an inverse relationship between the effort on the bike and the quality of the thoughts you have while riding. As Tim Krabbé wrote many years ago in the best evocation of a cycle race ever written; *The Rider*:

On a bike your consciousness is small. The harder you work, the smaller it gets. [...] During the race, what goes on in the rider's mind is a monolithic ball bearing, so smooth, so uniform that you can't even see it spin.



It's almost perfect lack of surface structure ensures that it strikes nothing that might end up in the white circulation of thought (Krabbé 2002).

One of cycling history's few intellectual riders, the Frenchman Laurent Fignon has put it like this: "This job brought me a lot, except on the intellectual level, where I felt I regressed, and that was my biggest sacrifice".

Against this backdrop one can be excused for receiving a book about cycling and philosophy (for everyone) with a slight bias, thinking that it probably is characterised by superficial generalities. Yet, my prejudice was proved wrong. This is an interesting and inspiring book that I have enjoyed reading.

The book is divided into six themes, not surprisingly called 'stages', consisting of 3-4 chapters. A few chapters, however, seem to have been forced into their theme. The themes are 1) *The varieties of cycling experience* – phenomenological analysis of cycling; 2) *Velo virtues* – discussion of the potential to develop special virtues through cycling; 3) *Re-cycling* – the bicycle as a means of transport and commuting; 4) *Spinning wisdom* – the life lessons one can acquire on the bike; 5) *Fair play on two wheels* – doping and the will to win; and 6) *Pedaling circles* – on why cycling is awesome.

The chapters are generally well written and although there are 19 of them there are few repetitions of content. For this the editors deserve credit. What perhaps could have been distributed a bit more judiciously are the cycling metaphors. When a challenging idea is described as a "breakaway from the peloton of conformity" or a chance to "draft from the Socratic Team members' insights" it initially comes across as originality, but when confronted with similar 'pedal strokes' throughout most of the 'stages' these metaphors have turned into irritating clichés by the time the reader has reached the book's 'finish line'.

” *The fact that Haraldsson's home climate isn't a temperate, flat and fully bike lane equipped city like Copenhagen, but the windy, rainy, snowy and hilly Reykjavik just makes his argument even more convincing.*

Although there are no really bad chapters, some are definitely better than others. So let's take a short look at a few of the inspiring and well-informed chapters, and not dwell too much on the ones by authors that have been blinded by Lance Armstrong's shining stardom; resorted to 'feminist ethics' in order to make the case for sport for all; employed a tiring American left wing rhetoric; or simply decided to bore the readers by adding a few general philosophical observations to their descriptions of rides up Mt. Ventoux.

I especially like Steen Nepper Larsen's phenomenological analysis of his experiences on his bike. This is well written and packed with insights about the 'feeling of being at one with the world' that can be experienced as that man-machine unit that is cycling. The chapter has an abundance of the kind of quotes you'd like to put at the end of an email asking your friends to go for a weekend ride. How about this one:

To be human is to experience a lifelong second birth of such subtlety that it echoes can be extended to our experiences of riding and racing bikes. Almost daily, definitely in the summer time, my bike lives through its second becoming. The 'delivery' – design, production, and assembly of the bicycle – is long gone, but it gets reborn under me whenever I ride it. The bike is an attractive dream on standby with an inherent ability to tempt me to leave books and computer behind, and to escape the lazy bodily standstill.

Also on my list of favourites is Bryce Dyer's argument with the UCI's restrictions against innovative bike technology. In 2000 the UCI decided to bring the hour record back to Merckx' record from 1972 (49 km). The argument was that while during the 1990s the record had risen from 50 to 56 km, these results were demonstrations of advances in technology rather than "man's ability against the watch". Dyer's argument is that the UCI's definition is unclear as "riders are not assessed on their individual power output in the laboratory". And he further argues that while the UCI's philosophy of minimising the impact of technology may be noble it is "fundamentally misguided".

In his chapter about commuting by bike Robert H. Haraldsson persuasively rejects all the traditional arguments about biking being too time consuming, too dangerous and exposing the individual to too many of the elements. The fact that Haraldsson's home climate isn't a temperate, flat and fully bike lane equipped city like Copenhagen, but the windy, rainy, snowy and hilly Reykjavik just makes his argument even more convincing.

John Richard Harris is also convincing in his chapter on the moral necessity for people to bike rather than use a car in an age of climate change. In terms of philosophical argumentation this is one of the best chapters in the book, as well as one of the most factual. The reader, for instance, is confronted with data showing that, while there are many sources of the CO₂ in the atmosphere, 10-14 percent of it comes from automobiles. Also, although US citizens only make up 5 percent of the world's population they are responsible for 45 percent of the CO₂ from automobiles. Harris points out that even the fuel efficient Toyota Prius' 21 km per litre fuel consumption seems like an energy consuming monster when compared to a cyclist who, if the energy he consumes by riding 20 km per hour is converted to fuel, has an energy balance of 425 km per litre! No other vehicle or living being on earth travels with such efficiency as a human being on a bike.

Food for thought is also Michael W. Austin's piece about his involuntary transformation from runner to cyclist.

Austin analyses the concept of identity in relation to the work of contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor. Austin may at first have felt that it was a tragedy to leave behind his identity as a runner, but in the process of becoming a cyclist he learned how to appreciate this new part of his identity, and also the significance of others. Not only did he come to value teammates, but also learned that as a cyclist you are dependent on cooperation with your competitors if you want to be successful.

Andreas de Block and Yannik Joye's analysis of whether or not Eddy Merckx was a good sportsman in moral terms is also an enjoyable read. His appetite for victories was of such magnitude that he even beat friends and teammates in situations where it was unnecessary. Could such behaviour be considered morally problematic? The question is not straightforward. "Although everyone agrees that there is a difference between winning in the right way and winning at all costs", de Block and Joye argues, "it is often surprisingly difficult to determine whether and why an athlete finds himself on the wrong side of the divide".

The book may not be a philosophical Tour de Force as it claims (how can it, when it also wants to be for everyone?), but it is generally a pleasure to read and good company for everyone interested in the various aspects of cycling. The book's good chapters are all characterised by the fact that the author, in the process of cycling and becoming a cyclist have discovered several things about him or herself and the world s/he inhabits, and have been able to transform those discoveries into insightful ideas and recognitions. Thereby rejecting the idea that spending hours on the bike leads to intellectual regression.

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