



Comptes rendus / Book Reviews

Alex VOORHOEVE: *Conversations on ethics*, Oxford, 2009, Oxford University Press, 259 pages.

Scholars interviewed: Frances Kamm, Peter Singer, Daniel Kahneman, Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, Ken Binmore, Allan Gibbard, T.M. Scanlon, Bernard Williams, Harry Frankfurt and David Velleman

Alex Voorhoeve sets the stage for his book by quoting Plato's *Phaedrus* in which the “the living, breathing discourse of the man who knows” (1) is deemed superior to the written discourse. Socrates's vindication of the dialogue as the blessed form of philosophical investigation is thus presented as the inspiration for these eleven conversations with prominent thinkers on ethics — most of them professional philosophers but also one psychologist and one game theorist. Voorhoeve is careful enough not to endorse the Socratic idea that discussion is superior to writing; he settles for the less contentious claim that conversing on ethics is a valuable complement to careful writing. His book certainly vindicates this claim.

For whom is this collection of *conversations on ethics* intended? It is certainly “for those of us gripped by ethical questions” (11). But how strong a grip is needed to find interest in this book? I would say that Alex Voorhoeve succeeds in making the conversations accessible to and even potentially thrilling for the non specialist. Indeed, what often seem like arcane debates to the external observer — one can think, for instance, of the multiple variations around the ‘trolley case’— appear here with a human face. Furthermore, Voorhoeve adds footnotes in order to explain key terms in moral philosophy with which a non-specialist reader may not be familiar.

The non-specialist reader will also find Voorhoeve's short introduction to the book useful. In this introduction, he presents the three main puzzles (3-5) which motivated him to engage in these conversations. I think that everyone will agree with Voorhoeve that these puzzles are familiar “since they arise in the course of reflection on our everyday experience of morality” (3). The three puzzles can be put as simple questions. First, can I trust my everyday moral sense? Second, are moral judgements objective? Third, what reasons do I have to be moral? Tentative answers to these three puzzles appear in most conversations; the puzzles can thus be seen as the objects of a broader conversation in which every chapter is a parcel.

A function that *Conversations on ethics* can well serve is thus to stimulate reflection on ethics in the general population. For example, a lecturer of an introductory course in ethics could use the conversations neither as a textbook nor as a replacement to canonical texts — the treatment is not systematic enough — but perhaps as complementary material to give students a feeling of how ethical theory stems from practical questions to which we all seek answers. This origin of ethical theory is made clear in the book since Voorhoeve spells out

these three main puzzles and he asks in each conversation a few questions about the personal trajectory of his interlocutor.

Enough for the newcomer to ethics. Since you are reading this review, you are not a random draw from the 'general population'. In other words, you are most probably not in need of being reminded what consequentialism means or why ethical theory could be of value to practical problems. What could *Conversation on ethics* offer you? I believe that approaching ethics through conversations holds two promises for the non-novice reader — from the student with an undergraduate training in ethics to the full-fledged ethicist.

First, a conversation makes it possible to ask the questions that one is burning to ask. To be sure, only Alex Voorhoeve had the opportunity to be like Phaedrus discussing with Socrates. The rest of us are still readers much like we are readers of Plato's dialogues — the only difference being that Voorhoeve's conversations really happened. An implication of our status as readers is that we are totally dependent on Phaedrus and Voorhoeve to ask the questions on our lips. Fortunately, Voorhoeve excels in *many* conversations at probing the ideas of his interlocutor. He may even have asked questions that most of us would have failed to formulate so neatly.

Second, conversations can connect to each other to form what I called above a broader conversation. Since Voorhoeve carries his discursive experiences from one encounter to the next, one might hope that the web of conversations reveals unforeseen tensions or complementarities between the contemporary approaches to ethics. Such a broader conversation is even more needed today that the field of ethics — like most academic fields — has grown to the point of being somewhat fragmented. This tendency to fragmentation can be partially countered if an agent engaged in a set of conversations — Voorhoeve in our case — requires conversationists to position themselves with respect to alternative approaches to ethics. Voorhoeve does take up this task on many occasions but I regret that it has not been more systematically pursued.

Let me now take a glimpse of each conversation. These short descriptions are meant to inform the potential reader with specific concerns where to better direct her attention. They will also enable me to be more precise about where I believe that Voorhoeve delivers on the two promises discussed above.

The book is separated into five parts in which conversations “that are most directly relevant to each other” are regrouped. The first part, entitled *Ethics and Intuitions*, is delightful. In the first conversation, Frances Kamm discusses her case-based method to moral philosophy with which she is trying to formulate moral principles rationalizing our intuitive judgements. In sharp contrast, Peter Singer rejects intuitive judgements “because it seems possible that they derive from untrustworthy sources” (50). In chapter 2, Singer argues for an alternative to case-based ethics starting “from certain basic and immediately appealing moral ideas.” (50) He hopes that the two ideas leading him to utilitarianism qualify as such. In chapter 3, the psychologist Daniel Kahneman gets into the conversation. He maintains against Kamm that the reasons that we formulate to make sense of our intuitions may not be the real reasons for us having these intuitions (74-5): “To me, her confidence is very much like the confidence of the hypnotic subject who claims he knows why he opened the window.” (75) He argues in turn against scholars like Singer that our endorsement of consequentialist principles are just too weak to trump some of our strong intuitive

judgements (81). He ends up with a view of moral systems as attempting to silence some intuitions in our set of “powerful but profoundly inconsistent intuitions” (82).

I found this first part particularly successful at delivering on the two promises discussed above. First, Voorhoeve raises strong objections to each scholar leading them to recognize the limitations of their approach: Kamm tells us that she's worried that “*everyone could be wrong*” about their intuitive judgements (28), Singer acknowledges that his emotional response in extreme thought experiments may be too strong for him to get along with what utilitarianism seems to prescribe (57) and Kahneman admits that his “position is not internally coherent” while justifying this outcome by the fact that “coherence is impossible” (82-3). Second, the reader of this part feels that each chapter is not an isolated conversation but instead participates in a broader conversation on ethics. Indeed Voorhoeve presses each scholar to give her/his opinion on the position of the other two scholars.

The second part, *Virtue and Flourishing*, is made of two conversations with virtue ethicists. In chapter 4, Philippa Foot discusses her view of moral goodness as a subclass of judgements about whether “particular members of a species [are] either defective or as they should be.” (96) Alasdair MacIntyre offers, in chapter 5, another perspective on virtues with his stress on our dependence to other human beings. Given the delight that I had in reading the first part, this part did not meet my expectations. First, Voorhoeve is far more passive here, more often than not limiting himself to journalist-like questions of the type ‘can you explain this or that?’ One would have liked, for instance, more insistent questioning on the notion of ‘successful humans’. Second, elements for the broader conversation are limited here: Foot and MacIntyre are not asked to comment on the view of the other; Foot is absolved based on a vague statement from explaining why other approaches to ethics had to be dismissed— “I couldn't get my feet on the ground with concepts ...” (95); and the evolutionary insights to come in the next part are not brought to bear on these conversations. In any case, this part is worth reading if it is only for the passage (102-4) where the roles are inverted and Voorhoeve finds himself pressed by Foot to justify his position. Voorhoeve demonstrates here his sincerity to the ideal of a two-way conversation.

The third part, *Ethics and Evolution*, turns to the potential implications for ethics of the fact that we are an evolved species. Ken Binmore, a mathematician turned game theorist and ethicist, converses in chapter 6 about his idea that our sense of fairness is a product of evolution. In chapter 7, Allan Gibbard also looks at our evolutionary past but focuses on our capacity to reach agreement and on the role of anger and guilt in moral behaviour. The exchanges are lively in this part which makes for a stimulating read. Voorhoeve fails however to bridge the two conversations even though his two interlocutors reach contrasting views regarding ethics based on evolutionary insights. More precisely, Ken Binmore claims that the “actual motivation” (152) of individuals are usually self-interested: “People talk about noble principles all the time, but look at their behaviour!” (153) Binmore is not given a voice in the next conversation however when Gibbard explains his far more optimistic view of the evolutionary pressure pushing us toward behaving in line with our ideals of morality. A positive aspect of this part with respect to the bookwide conversation is that both interlocutors are asked to spell out some implications of their evolutionary insights for ethical inquiries (150-2 & 175-6). These elements being noted, it

would have been appreciated if they had been brought to the discussion in other chapters outside this part.

The theme common to the two chapters of part IV, *Unity and Dissent*, is the possibility of arriving at a unified account of morality. Thomas Scanlon first argues that such unity can be found by starting from our need to justify ourselves to others which leads him toward the Kantian ideal of the moral community. While Scanlon is clearly “suspicious of [the] pressure towards a more relativistic stance” (188), Bernard Williams, in chapter 9, pleads for the necessity “to make *some* sense of the ethical” (203) while recognizing our historical specificity. Williams's goal is not to have an atemporal moral theory but one that makes sense to us given our contextual attachment to certain beliefs such as liberty (200). The conversations in this part are of a high quality. Furthermore, the broader conversation bears fruits when Scanlon's views are brought in the dialogue with Williams. Williams attempts there to articulate his position with respect to Scanlon's work (203-7) which results in a picture with far more nuances than one would expect. This portion of the dialogue exemplifies how a collection of conversations like the one offered by Voorhoeve can lead us to refine our view on how the different approaches to ethics relate to one another.

The last part of the book, *Love and Morality*, deals with the theme of impartiality and its connection to love. In chapter 10, Harry Frankfurt argues that looking in the direction of impartial moral principles to answer the question ‘how should one live?’ is misguided (217). He finds the answer in love; we love when we cannot help but care for someone or something (228). In sharp contrast to Frankfurt, David Velleman maintains, in chapter 11, that love is not in tension with moral impartiality and that love is indeed a stepping-stone in moral education. For him, love “consists in awe or wonder at really seeing another person for what he or she is” (252), that is a Kantian rational creature aspiring to the ideal of the moral law (238). I felt in this part that Voorhoeve was sharper at commenting and questioning in conversation with Frankfurt than Velleman. For instance, Velleman escapes too easily Voorhoeve's objection based on thought experiments by claiming that “the moral law is for dealing with the problems we face” (243) not hypothetical problems. Regarding the broader conversation, a nice bridge is built between Frankfurt and Scanlon (219-20) but the reader is left wondering why the evident tension between Frankfurt's thesis and Velleman's was not brought on the table in the last conversation.

Before concluding this review, let me say a few words about what Voorhoeve's book can offer to a third type of audience: the historians of philosophy. Now that scholarly interview is an established genre — note for instance the number of published interviews of economists by economists (e.g., Klamer 1984; Snowden and Vane 1999; Colander, Holt, and Rosser 2004; Samuelson and Barnett 2007) — historians turn to such material to add to their understanding. In the present case, historians of late twentieth century ethics may find useful material in Voorhoeve's conversations even though they were clearly not the intended public. To begin with, Voorhoeve always asks a few questions to his interlocutors about what drew them to ethics and what were the strongest intellectual influences on them. Bearing in mind that such autobiographical information is often of doubtful reliability, historians could at least use these parts of the conversations to cross-check evidence coming from other sources. The conversations may also reveal aspects of the interlocutors that would otherwise remain hidden. To give an example, it struck me how all the scholars *except two* display a high level of self-confidence. The two interlocutors who

happen to be self-deprecating are the only two women featured in the book. Frances Kamm says: “You must realize that I wasn't the person voted most likely to succeed in philosophy by a long shot.” (19) Similarly, Foot declares: “I'm not clever at all ... I'm a dreadfully slow thinker, really.” (87) Why do we get this relationship between gender and (expressed) self-confidence? Many hypotheses come to mind and I let the reader formulate her/his owns.

In sum, when we look at *conversations on ethics* from the standpoint of the student of ethics, we find a lot to enjoy and think about. It is nevertheless the case that I would have appreciated in some occasions sharper questions and comments by Voorhoeve to make the conversations richer. It would also have been highly valuable if Voorhoeve had *consistently* pursued the goal of connecting the conversations such that we better see how the different scholars complement or oppose each other. When Voorhoeve works in this direction — as is especially the case in part I on the status of intuitions and in conversation with Williams (chapter 9) — the result is insightful. This punctual success makes one deplore that connecting the threads of the broader conversation has not been a core objective of Voorhoeve. All in all, this book is a great contribution to the field, which will not only prove of interest to the student of ethics but also to the novice and the historian.

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