

Alex Voorhoeve, *Conversations on Ethics*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 259 pages. ISBN: 978-0199215379. Hardback: \$34.95.

Alex Voorhoeve's book *Conversations on Ethics* is an edited transcript of eleven interviews he conducted with prominent ethical theorists, and it also includes introductory comments describing each philosopher and the circumstances of each interview. While the book contains perhaps fewer revelations than one might hope, given its distinctive format, it provides a unique and informal perspective on how these thinkers view their work. In an effort to capture the book's spirit I interviewed the author, who was generous with his time. This review also mimics the book's presentation style.

Jon Garthoff: *Where did you get the idea for this book?*

Alex Voorhoeve: I started the project as a postgraduate student. I wanted to broaden my knowledge of philosophy, but to do so in a more productive manner than just by reading books. I thought I could interview philosophers for magazines. The first philosopher I contacted was [T.M.] Scanlon, and to my surprise he said "yes". It was a great challenge. It induced me to think about his work more deeply, and with a more critical eye, than I would have otherwise.

Jon Garthoff: *In your interview with Bernard Williams, he says he learned from Elisabeth Anscombe that philosophy isn't about being clever, that the subject's difficulty demands seriousness and imagination. Do you think philosophers sometimes outsmart themselves, and miss opportunities for wisdom and understanding, by treating philosophy as a competition of wits?*

Alex Voorhoeve: Efforts to be clever can be a distraction in philosophy. But cleverness can be used for a purpose, if you keep your eye on the deep questions.

Jon Garthoff: *What is the book's intended audience?*

Alex Voorhoeve: Me! [laughs]

Jon Garthoff: *Professional philosophers?*

Alex Voorhoeve: No, the book is intended for a general educated audience. I meant me as a student starting graduate school: someone interested in big questions and patient in pursuing them, but without much background or training.

Jon Garthoff: *How did you choose the interviewees?*

Alex Voorhoeve: I chose philosophers whose ideas I found inspiring or provocative, and to whom I thought I could put questions or objections that might lead to fruitful discussion. The idea was for the interviews to be *conversations* about ethics, not just people espousing their views in a less formal context.

Jon Garthoff: *One issue that constitutes a theme for your interviews is the status of our "everyday moral sense".*

Alex Voorhoeve: I think the basis for our so-called intuitions about moral cases is unclear, as is whether we should have confidence in them. Some, like Peter Singer, think our

intuitive case judgments are unreliable, because they've been shaped by factors like prejudice and religious superstition. Others, like Frances Kamm, take our intuitive judgments more seriously. She hypothesizes that an ordinary person's moral sensibility typically yields correct case judgments, which in turn reflect deeper (and sometimes hidden) moral principles and ideals. Interestingly, psychologists have begun to map the factors that determine our intuitive judgments in many areas, like the assessment of risk and the distance of objects. What emerges is a dappled picture: sometimes our judgments are surprisingly acute; other times they are biased and hard to correct. I interviewed [psychologist Daniel] Kahneman because he's done important work on this. I wanted to bring him into a three-way conversation with Kamm and Singer. And more generally, my view is that understanding where our intuitions come from illuminates whether and to what extent we should trust them. That's why I also did interviews with Ken Binmore and Allan Gibbard; they've both worked extensively on the evolutionary origins of moral judgments.

Jon Garthoff: *In your interview with David Velleman, he expresses skepticism about the usefulness of thought experiments involving lifeboats and trolleys, and you appear to resist.*

Alex Voorhoeve: Velleman thinks these cases are too far removed from everyday experience to reveal the values that structure our lives. He thinks that in our everyday relationships we rightly treat persons as *incomparably* valuable, “shunning all comparisons and all considerations of alternatives” (p.241). He believes tragic situations force us to “violate people's real value” (p.242) when and because they force us to compare the value of saving some people with the value of saving others. While I think Velleman's idea of incomparable value is interesting, I was not moved by his argument that these thought experiments don't illuminate the core values that should guide our practical decision-making. Real-life cases with similar tradeoffs aren't rare: think of a hospital manager's decisions about allocating resources.

Jon Garthoff: *They may not be rare, but they are emergencies, and one might think a moral theory should not be grounded in emergency cases.*

Alex Voorhoeve: Why would one think this?

Jon Garthoff: *Well there's the old saw that hard cases make bad law. One might think that, to the extent we can, we should justify a theory by reference to easy cases, and then use the theory thus justified to illuminate hard cases.*

Alex Voorhoeve: I think imaginary cases can be useful because they allow us to isolate factors towards which we want to direct our attention. I also think we should be able to account for our judgments about hard cases even when these are held inconstantly or with only a modest degree of belief. We should be able to explain why these judgments seem plausible, and we should aim to resolve our uncertainty about them.

Jon Garthoff: *Our experiences and judgments are also shaped by our social and political situations, and in your interviews Alasdair MacIntyre and Bernard Williams both claim professional philosophy is marginalized within the broader culture of the West. They offer opposing diagnoses, however, of this phenomenon. MacIntyre claims “philosophy has become such that it can have little effect on the dominant modes of practical thinking” (p.117), implying that professional*

philosophy is to blame for its own marginalization, whereas Williams claims “the idea of a space in which philosophy and related kinds of critical and questioning activity can go on may itself be under threat” (p.209), implying that the background culture is the culprit.

Alex Voorhoeve: I disagree with their pessimistic conclusions. In my experience philosophy has an impact on government and public policy. In Britain, for example, a degree like “Philosophy and Economics” is a standard route into think tanks, the civil service, and government. There’s no denying that in some cases philosophers make a real difference. Williams chaired the Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship, for example, which helped liberalize regulation of pornography in the U.K. And Singer’s writing has of course been central in the animal rights movement.

Jon Garthoff: *A second theme of your interviews is the objectivity of moral judgments. I worry sometimes that those who claim moral philosophy lacks objectivity are guilty of false modesty. They make the apparently modest claim that philosophers shouldn’t be overconfident in their ability to make objective judgments about morality, but in so doing they appear to infer the immodest claim that philosophers can’t make objective moral judgments.*

Alex Voorhoeve: Where in the book did this worry arise?

Jon Garthoff: *One place was in your interview with Harry Frankfurt, who seems to me to recommend too much passivity before our own desires. He claims wisdom, for example, in saying to one’s children “that it is not a good idea to marry for money, but that it is a good idea to go where money is, since this increases the chances that they will spontaneously fall in love with someone rich (p.229)”. This appears insufficiently critical of the desire to marry someone rich.*

Alex Voorhoeve: You are right that Frankfurt seems to think one has reason to do something only if one already desires it, or desires to desire it. For him criticizing a person’s desires is mere browbeating unless it starts from something the person already values. He also thinks intensive scrutiny of one’s desires can weaken confidence in one’s commitments and thereby undermine the wholehearted commitment he argues is central to a good life. Now I am not sure whether Frankfurt is right that a person has reason to do or want something only if she already has a desire that would be served by doing or wanting that thing. I do think he’s right that philosophical scrutiny of one’s desires can be disorienting – but I don’t think that necessarily counts against it.

Jon Garthoff: *My worry also arose in your interview with Philippa Foot. Her view that morality arises from our biological nature as members of the human species – that it arises from the “grammar of natural normativity” – claims much greater objectivity than Frankfurt’s view, but I wonder if it is enough. Certain questions that seem sensible are difficult to address on her position, like: is it good or bad for me that I am human? And: in what ways should we try to change the nature of the human species?*

Alex Voorhoeve: I wish I had asked her those questions! But I wouldn’t attribute a false modesty to any of the interviewees. I was inspired by their confidence in the ability of philosophy to illuminate things. At the same time I was struck by their modesty about what any particular individual, themselves included, could expect to accomplish in philosophy. This modesty was apparent in the discussions with Kamm and Foot ...

Jon Garthoff: ... *who were the only women you interviewed.*

Alex Voorhoeve: Ha! I don't know if that's a coincidence; the sample is too limited to draw conclusions. I did ask more women philosophers to participate, but they declined. Could I add something, about what I learned from putting this book together?

Jon Garthoff: *Of course.*

Alex Voorhoeve: I learned from these philosophers the attitudes and traits that are required to do philosophy well: imagination, seriousness, tenacity, love of the subject. I saw how much of it is *not* cleverness, and that changed my own approach to philosophy. I guess you could say the project did for me what Anscombe did for Williams.

Jon Garthoff: *So you were pleasantly surprised by the interviews?*

Alex Voorhoeve: I was surprised by how exciting it was, and by how generous the interviewees were with their time. Philosophers are happy to discuss ideas – they seem to enjoy it.

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