



Interrogating ethics

KRISTER BYKVIST EAVESDROPS ON SOME ILLUMINATING CONVERSATIONS

Conversations on Ethics
by Alex Voorhoeve
(Oxford University Press)
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Alex Voorhoeve's intellectually stimulating and highly entertaining collection of interviews serves as a perfect introduction to the thoughts of several important contemporary moral philosophers.

With beginners in mind, Voorhoeve helpfully summarises theories and clarifies concepts and distinctions characteristic for the philosophers in question. Professional philosophers will also find the interviews rewarding, since Voorhoeve has a knack of teasing out revealing answers. His probing questions often bring out the weakest or most controversial parts of the interviewed philosopher's views.

Unusually for an interview book, Voorhoeve often prompts one philosopher to react to an

idea brought forward by another philosopher in an earlier interview. Thus we often get an illuminating indirect dialogue, mediated by Voorhoeve.

Since Voorhoeve asks the subjects how they arrived at philosophy and how they came to formulate their trademark ideas and theories, we learn to see the living, breathing philosopher behind the abstract philosophical ideas. To put it in less fancy terms, Voorhoeve simply gives us some entertaining philosophy gossip.

His interviewing style is more chat-show Parkinson than *Newsnight* Paxman. Voorhoeve comes across as a relaxed, open-minded, and attentive listener, who gently prompts his subjects to explain their moral views. Unlike Parkinson, however, he never gets too cosy or flirtatious with his subjects.

Indeed, when necessary Voorhoeve can be quite forthright and sharp, but never in a brusque

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or abrasive way. You don't hear a drawn out, sceptical "yeees" after the subjects' answers. Nor do you find the equivalent of the infamous Paxmanian grilling, "Michael Howard, did you or did you not threaten to overrule him?" repeated 12 times. In short, you never think the philosopher left the interview feeling Paxoed, or even Voorhoeved.

The interviews deal with a host of different issues, but, as Voorhoeve points out in the introduction, they can be organised around the following three main philosophical questions: Can we trust our moral intuitions? Are moral judgements objective? Do we have reason to do what is morally right?

The interviewees often have radically different views about how to answer these questions. This is part of what makes the book so exciting. For instance, when Frances Kamm is asked about the conception of a person that she thinks would explain and systematise her moral judgements about particular cases, her answer is simply, "I don't know what it is yet. I have it. I have it. There is no doubt about that, because I must have it, since I have the intuitions that express it."

Daniel Kahneman's brusque response to this is "To me, her confidence is very much like the confidence of the hypnotic subject who claims he knows why he opened the window."

Even though the interviewed philosophers often have radically different views about how to answer the three questions, Voorhoeve hopes that we can give satisfactory affirmative answers, but remains uncertain whether his hopes will be realised.

I share his mix of optimism and pessimism. I feel optimistic when I consider the fact that there

are still so many new, interesting ideas coming up in moral philosophy, ideas that give new and insightful answers of the kind Voorhoeve is hoping for.

But I also feel pessimistic when I consider the fact that new and exciting ideas in moral philosophy are not always worked out in

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sufficient detail. To echo my colleague Tim Williamson's bitter complaint about recent philosophising about realism, all too often crucial claims are stated in vague or ambiguous terms, significantly different formulations of moral principles are treated as equivalent, examples are underdescribed, and arguments are sketched rather than clearly articulated into premises and conclusion.

This is of course excusable in the initial stages of inquiry when the new ideas have just been conceived. Interesting new ideas rarely come into the world in a precise and clearly worked-out shape. But it is not acceptable to leave the ideas in that rough form. Only by making them precise will we be able to see whether they should be refined, qualified, or simply rejected.

I grant Voorhoeve's last point that "it matters little whether the answers will prove heartening; we must simply follow the arguments where they lead," but only clearly articulated arguments will lead us anywhere.