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## Conversations on Ethics

A Critical Study of Alex Voorhoeve, *Conversations on Ethics*

In his book, *Conversations on Ethics*, Alex Voorhoeve interviews eleven prominent moral philosophers about central aspects of their views as well as about their intellectual development.<sup>1</sup> In their order of appearance, these are: Frances Kamm, Peter Singer, Daniel Kahneman, Philippa Foot, Alasdair MacIntyre, Ken Binmore, Allan Gibbard, Thomas Scanlon, Bernard Williams, Harry Frankfurt, and David Velleman. The book is both richly instructive and delightful to read. Voorhoeve has a sophisticated command of his interlocutors' philosophical views, and his questions often hit the nail on the head. He has the talent to ask difficult questions in a welcoming way, setting the stage for his interviewees to explain their positions as clearly as they can. For the reader interested in moral theory this is a true asset, since Voorhoeve managed to assemble quite a few of the figures that have shaped the face of moral philosophy in the past generation to discuss fundamentals of their moral views.

As a set of conversations with different philosophers, the book does not aim to advance any philosophical thesis of its own. Rather, the conversational method, with its unique ability to dwell on the more obscure or vulnerable junctions of a philosophical view, helps deepen our understanding of what is sometimes hidden between the lines of systematic texts. My own comments, accordingly, focus mainly on some of the virtues of the book's dialogical method. A review of the main ideas presented is first in order, however.

The book targets some of the eternal questions of moral philosophy. Voorhoeve declares his intention to pursue mainly three basic theoretical puzzles, which indeed recur in almost every interview. These are: (1) the

<sup>1</sup> Alex Voorhoeve, *Conversations on Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 259 pp. The interviews were conducted between the years 2000 and 2006.

question of the reliability of our everyday moral judgments and of their hidden determinants; (2) the question of the objectivity of ethics amid seas of disagreements between seemingly competent judges; and (3) the reasons we have to be moral and their less-than-clear claim to be all-important. The book is divided into five parts, each encompassing two or three interviews that refer to a basic theme or approach to moral philosophy. Through this juxtaposition and his targeted questions, Voorhoeve attempts to forge dialogues also between the different conversations.

Part I, “Ethics and Intuitions,” explores the normative role of everyday moral intuitions in moral judgment. Frances Kamm accords much weight to such moral sense in particular cases, and confesses: “I very rarely reach conclusions that differ radically from our everyday morality.” (20) This is justified by the view that “we might never have the confidence in the theory that we have in our intuitions.” (32) And yet, it is imperative not to accept intuitions as they come, even if our confidence in them is great. We ought to strive to understand the deeper rationale of our intuitive moral judgments because of the further inescapable question: “Why should we act as our moral judgment tells us we should?” (32) This calls for a “critical understanding of morality,” which “requires that we understand which values are expressed in the moral principles that explain our case judgments and [so] that we can judge whether these values are worth respecting or promoting.” (32)

Peter Singer takes a contrasting view, arguing that our intuitions are the product of contingent upbringing in specific social milieus with traditions that are not necessarily morally trustworthy. Among our unreliable moral intuitions that stem from prejudiced societies Singer mentions the views that we may cause needless pain to animals; the “essentially religious views of the sanctity of human life”; “the convention that it is okay to do with our money what we like”; and “our ideas about the importance of reciprocity.” (50) Instead of trusting our intuitions, we should start from “self-evident principles that any rational being would have to accept.” (50) Singer admits that finding such principles is very difficult, but nonetheless proposes the utilitarian principles. Their universalism is not something we would expect to evolve naturally, however, which shows why we cannot trust our intuitions. (51) At the same time, Singer can accept certain deference to our intuitions, as it is sensible to assume that the process of social development selected rules of conduct that have better consequences than other rules.

Daniel Kahneman explores the ways in which the limits of our cognitive abilities shape our judgments, and how heuristics that economize our processes of thinking sometimes lead us to irrational judgments. He argues against Kamm that we typically don't have access to what *causes* our intuitions; worse yet, like people under hypnotic suggestion, we confabulate about those causes, and so believe the stories we tell ourselves about our judgments. And yet, although moral intuitions about specific cases cannot be trusted, they cannot be "altogether ignored," either. With regard to the trolley cases, Kahneman goes even further, acknowledging that rational judgment about what is not supposed to make for a morally relevant factor is not going to affect anyone's judgment: "So I find it hard to believe that the two cases [of pushing the fat man in front of the trolley and of diverting the trolley onto the man on the side track] differ in morally relevant ways. However, since the fat man scenario evokes an extraordinarily powerful intuition, you should not have a rule that ignores it." (80)

Part II, "Virtue and Flourishing," interviews two virtue ethicists: Philippa Foot and Alasdair MacIntyre. Foot detects a special kind of evaluations of living things, which involves assessing them as defective or sound members of their species. The boundaries of such categories seem fuzzy, but Foot insists that evaluations of the sort of "peacocks have colorful tails" form a distinct class of judgments of goodness that demonstrates distinct normativity. Moral goodness is a subclass of such natural goodness. Foot explains: "I make a general, grammatical point about the evaluation of living things and their parts and features in terms of what I call 'natural goodness and defect', and then suggest that moral judgment is just one case of this kind of evaluation." (107) There is no grammatical gap between saying that deer must be swift or that humans must show temperance. A successful member of the human species cannot be utterly egoistic and thus moral consideration is continuous with the analysis of natural attributes. Moral reasons stem from the objective parameters of flourishing of human beings. Natural goodness is the source of rationality both of ends and of means to those ends. Practical rationality is no different from wisdom in living a successful human life.

Alasdair MacIntyre finds in Aristotelianism an adequate response to two basic moral intuitions that are missed by utilitarianism and Kantianism, respectively: that there are things an ethical person would never do, whatever the consequences, and that our desires need not be opposed by morality, but transformed by it. The latter implies that moral judgment is always informed

by some conception of the good (instrumental and intrinsic); the moral philosopher's task is to explain how the intrinsic goods contribute to human flourishing. MacIntyre's explanation sounds surprisingly similar to Foot's: "I . . . take this to be a quasi-biological question, like the questions 'What it is to flourish as a wolf?' " (119) This refers us directly to the virtues, which are "dispositions of character to judge, feel, and act in ways that promote each of these goods." (122) Many basic goods are not individual but essentially communal—they cannot even be *identified* otherwise. MacIntyre emphasizes the importance of shared deliberation for thinking productively about the good. This in turn highlights the crucial importance of close relationships with people who know us well. Modern discussions of justice (such as Rawls') often ignore its communal infrastructure: the fundamental fact that human moral agents are inherently dependent and vulnerable, as well as the corresponding fact that our basic sense of justice develops in our families, where providing and giving care "does not have the character of a *quid pro quo*." (125) This training in generosity is essential if justice is ever to emerge. Anyone who genuinely needs an argument why she has duties to the disabled—being the vulnerable creature she is herself—"must be lacking in a kind of responsive sensibility that is crucial to human life." (128) The illusion of self-sufficiency puts moral theory on a wrongheaded path. "In sum, our lives are structured by asking, 'What do *we* want?' not 'What do *I* want?'" (122)

Part III, "Ethics and Evolution," discusses the origin and function of some of our moral sentiments and convictions. Ken Binmore conceives of morality as "a device which evolved along with the human species for the purpose of solving . . . coordination games." (140) So, for example, regarding mutual help, the relevant question to ask is " 'Why is it an equilibrium for people to help each other?' And the answer is: reciprocity." (142) "Mankind's notions of fairness share a deep structure that evolution has written into our genes . . . something akin to the original position is part of this deep structure." (144) Fairness as a coordination device evolved from the need of mutual insurance. When we were hunters, insurance was needed against uncertainty as to who will make a kill the next day, and this evolved into the more abstract "veil of ignorance." Binmore's view of the basic coordination device differs from Rawls' "original position" in some respects: it accepts a society's *status quo* as a starting point; people behind the veil are not ignorant about their probabilities of being anyone in particular, but expect equal probabilities;

they have an extra kind of knowledge: their “empathic preferences,” i.e., their ability to imaginatively place themselves in another person’s situation with her personal preferences; and the need to secure everyone’s cooperation when the veil is lifted leads to an agreement on *equal* division of gains.

Allan Gibbard too sees the origin of morality in the need for social coordination. This explains two basic features of our moral life: our search for agreement and the moral sentiments of anger and guilt. Settling the terms of the moral life necessitates normative discussion. Consistency in according the authority of moral judges to ourselves and others promotes acceptance of shared norms. In general, “to think something is rational is to accept a norm that permits you to do it.” (161) Acceptance of a norm is our psychic state when we have a tendency to be governed by a norm. Such tendency, in turn, is governed by our biology and psychology, and designed by evolution for living together in society. Accordingly, the logic of normative discussion implies some pressure towards consensus. Morality is characterized by norms for feeling guilt and anger: an action is morally wrong if and only if the norms one accepts hold that it is rational to feel guilty about doing it and rational to feel a form of anger (as resentment or indignation) if someone else does it.

Part IV, “Unity and Dissent,” deals with the prospects of a unified account of morality. For Thomas Scanlon “an action is permissible if and only if it conforms to a set of principles for the general regulation of behavior that no one motivated to achieve agreement could reasonably reject, and wrong if and only if someone could reasonably reject every principle that allowed it.” (180) Scanlon explains that “behaving towards people in a way that would be allowed by principles that they could not reasonably reject is the way of relating to them that is most appropriate to their status as rational creatures. It is a way of respecting the value of their humanity.” (188) The precedence of justification in ethics over intrinsic goodness and badness of states of affairs is essential for explaining the “distinctive force with which wrongness motivates us.” (185) Justification is at the root of moral motivation: the reason for acting morally is not just the good our specific action will bring, but that performing wrong actions estranges us from others in front of whom we cannot reasonably justify ourselves. Seeking reasonable justification thus refers also to the justification of morality itself: it places us in a non-alienated relationship with others and makes us a community. This immediately evokes Kant’s idea of the “kingdom of ends.” Scanlon,

however, sees the idea of a moral community as primary, not secondary to the Kantian idea of autonomy, which he cannot accept. Scanlon's "could not possibly reject" test is an attempt to provide an alternative to Kant's problematic tests of contradiction in conception or in the will.

Scanlon's rejection of the more metaphysical aspects of Kant's ethics raises a question about the level of historical and sociological contingency that his notion of rejection might tolerate. This leads directly to Bernard Williams' historicist view of ethics. Ethics cannot be vindicated from a meta-historical perspective; we should rather seek "genealogical vindication" of moral values. For example, to understand the political concept of liberty, we must ask what impositions of coercion on spontaneous freedom a person in our society "could reasonably resent as a loss" (200)—a formulation surprisingly reminiscent of Scanlon's test. Williams believes, however, that contractualism is likely to lead to what he famously called the "one thought too many" problem, which he clarifies as basically a problem of alienation between motivation and justification. Since these two cannot drift apart too much, justification is not likely to be universalistic. Accordingly, we cannot have a comprehensive philosophical justification of the objectivity of ethics; the ethicist's task is "to make *some* sense of the ethical." (203)

Part V, "Love and Morality," discusses some connections between these two notions. Harry Frankfurt doesn't think practical normativity can be based on universal morality. Like Williams, he believes such morality is far from the actual motives—even the laudable, benevolent ones—of the normal person. Moreover, he finds no support for the idea that moral considerations, i.e., those pertaining to the way we treat other people, are of necessity overriding. The basis of ethical deliberation is the individual will—specifically, second-order volitions, which reflect one's ideas of which of her first-order desires she would want to be dominant. (This is also the closest we get to accounting for moral responsibility. When one's will expresses her second-order desires, she enjoys freedom of the will. More metaphysical interpretations of freedom are confused. This modest notion shows, in turn, that not every important value can be crammed into our notion of freedom.) The things we truly will, those we are most committed to, are the things we "love"; we experience them as necessities. They provide the basis for the question of how one should live. Loving something "unwisely" can only make sense against the background of something else that we, as a matter of fact, love.

David Velleman has a very different view of the relationship between moral reasons and the reasons of love. He asks how it is possible to love someone truly, with the total commitment this requires, and yet not to indulge in favoritism that is incompatible with the moral treatment of others. His view is that the person *qua* person is good at its core, and that *that* is the object of real love. Velleman thus reaffirms the link between morality and personhood, which Frankfurt severed. He accordingly understands love on the model of Kant's attitude of respect for persons: seeing each person as an end in itself. This attitude is not predicated on comparative evaluation, but on the incommensurable value of each person. The difference between love and respect is that while in the latter we recognize the humanity in the other, in the former we strip ourselves of our emotional defenses and make an effort to "really see" the other person. So we learn to love the real person *through* his idiosyncratic characteristics. The experience of love develops the moral sensibility; love is a moral education.

The first virtue of the conversational approach is its capacity to reveal in a philosophical view a force we did not acknowledge previously or, alternatively, expose well-hidden weaknesses. *Conversations on Ethics* provides many opportunities for such assessments (see below). A more special contribution of conversation, however, is its capacity to promote deeper philosophical understanding by illuminating the sources of ideas in the philosophers themselves. Nietzsche declared that every great philosophy is the confession of its originator. Hyperbole granted, thoughts do carry the thinker's personal stamp, which depth-interviews can clarify. Nowhere is this truer than in ethics. The book's front flap claims that the conversations with the philosophers "provide unique insights into their intellectual development—how they became interested in ethics, and how they conceived the ideas for which they became famous." The more interesting cases in this regard are when the knowledge we gain about the thinker is not just a discrete addendum to her philosophy but rather teaches us something substantive about her views. Although Voorhoeve does not explicitly focus on this kind of analysis, I would like to illustrate a couple of instances of such connection between thinkers and their experiences, on the one hand, and their thought, on the other, which we can gather from the conversations.

One need not be a moral relativist to recognize some contextual contingency in the deepest level of ethics, nor need one be a radical subjectivist, like

Nietzsche, to allow a legitimate degree of personal determination of moral rightness. Devout metaphysicians of morality—be they rigid moral realists or hardcore Kantians—may deny this, but (and this is not the place for metaethical debate) an interesting fact is that *all* the philosophers in the book acknowledge some inescapable moral contextualism.<sup>2</sup> The specific contribution that the philosopher as a person makes to moral thinking can come from her personality, cognitive *modus operandi*, or life experiences. The first of those three is not addressed in the book (indeed, that would take lengthy analyses), but we do get some insights into the last two.

Individuals have their own internal pace or rhythm. One's internal rhythm has far-reaching influence on major life choices (think of profession, spouse, or dwelling place). It also influences the way one thinks. The impact of this factor is hugely under-recognized, however—in life in general, and in philosophy, in particular. Frances Kamm recalls the delight of an introductory course in philosophy she attended as a young student: “What was wonderful about it was that you could read just a page or two and think about it for weeks.” (17) This internal intellectual pace is bound to influence one's philosophical methodology. Indeed, we soon come across this self-testimony: “I don't really have a considered judgment about a case until I have a visual experience of it. I have to deeply imagine myself in a situation, with an open mind. It is almost as if you are looking at something with no preconceptions. You have to attend to it and then things will pop out at you.” (22) “What I am saying is that, in order to have a judgment about a case, you really have to

<sup>2</sup> The influence of the specifically human generation of thought on theory content may be inevitable throughout philosophy, but it is singularly important in ethics. This may not come as a surprise for the following reason. While theoretical pursuits can legitimately aspire to annihilate the effect of the human mind on the content of investigation (even if that be an unachievable regulative ideal); such a goal would derail practical philosophy to meaninglessness. For the ultimate practical question, “How should I/we live?” or “What should I/we do?” emphatically positions the first-person as *agent* in the center of the intellectual pursuit. The question of whether *everyone* could be consistently mistaken in moral intuition is pertinent. This possibility is arguably nonsensical to the extent that in ethics there is no gold standard of correctness distinct from *us*, that is, our refined, considered sensitivities are part of the gold standard of moral judgment. This is of course a *prima facie* argument, not a proof. (Consequentialists immediately suggest themselves as an opposition, but see below how even Peter Singer balks at Voorhoeve's attempt to make him reject a moral intuition that is incompatible with moral principles in one extreme case.)



situate yourself in the case.” (23) Kamm is describing a strong observational-perceptual temperament, friendly to phenomenology, which requires slow attentive immersion in imagined scenarios. Accordingly, she warns against too fast an attachment to moral principles. In short, a temperament anchored in slow internal pace generates her case-based method in ethics. This, in turn, determines her use of reflective equilibrium: There is no a priori algorithm as to what weight to give to judgments of particular cases versus to general principles in the practice of reflective equilibrium, and this is precisely one place where a thinker’s internal pace can step in to shape philosophical methodology. Personal parameters, such as internal rhythm, can—and inevitably do—fill in the gaps left by indeterminacies of method.

One subsequent point regarding the use of the case-based method of moral reasoning is its intimate connection to the use of *imagination*. This mental capacity, unlike formal reasoning, is strongly influenced by personal character as well as other contextual factors. Kamm indeed describes the importance of deeply imagining oneself in a certain situation, but of special interest is that the importance of imagination—which analyses of moral judgment very rarely mention at all—is brought up by many of the interviewees. Thus Singer speaks of imagining oneself in another’s position (54); Binmore similarly speaks of the need to imagine another’s preferences (146); and Williams makes the general claim that a good philosopher needs the wisdom to appreciate “what is not there in the argument or on the page, and also some imagination.” (197) An important role for imagination in moral judgment highlights the effects of contextualism and emphasizes the effect of the thinker’s idiosyncrasies on his thought.

In moral and political discussions serious debaters adduce precise reasons for their views, advance elaborate arguments, and construct well-formed theories. All too frequently, however, the keen (or even not-so-keen) observer cannot help noticing that convictions not so much follow the arguments but rather *precede* them. Good arguments surely have their impact. Often, however, the issues are sufficiently multifaceted and complex so that no one need capitulate; rather, with sufficient ingenuity, each party can come up with new or better arguments so as to retain their initial conviction. To the naïve (yet perceptive) observer, this dynamic may seem deeply bewildering: philosophers forcefully brandish their arguments, while quite obviously the real collision takes place on the totally different plane of primal conviction—a level that, as if through some odd collusion, everybody passes over in

silence. Except for pretension and concealment, things could not in fact be otherwise: “At the end of reasons comes *persuasion*,” writes Wittgenstein.<sup>3</sup> This “reverse” relation between persuasion and argument, so often masked in philosophical texts, comes up more easily in conversation, especially when it deals with the philosopher’s intellectual development.

Persuasions stem from life experiences. As Ben-Ami Scharfstein writes, “any powerful experience can lead to or, in effect, constitute the conviction on which a whole philosophy is based.”<sup>4</sup> The interview with Philippa Foot illustrates this dynamic of formation of ethical view. Foot recalls, “in the face of the news of the concentration camps, I thought, ‘It just can’t be the way Stevenson, Ayer, and Hare say it is, that morality is just the expression of an attitude’, and the subject haunted me.” (91) The war experience created in her a conviction in search of philosophical articulation: “I had simply thought, ‘there *must* be objective grounds for moral judgment’, without being able to say much . . . all I could do at first was to reject subjectivism and insist that *somehow* there was objectivity in moral judgment, and that it had *something* to do with human welfare.” (94–95; my emphases) Only when Foot realized that the question “why is X a virtue?” demands an answer in objective descriptive terms (unlike questions of “good” and “right”) was she able to consolidate her pre-theoretical convictions in a philosophical theory on virtues and vices as the grounds of moral objectivity.

Reading Foot’s self-testimony, one can duly conclude that any argument against this or that feature of virtue ethics is likely to have very little impact on the philosopher’s basic conviction. One can surmise that historical or psychological arguments might be at least as effective. That such dynamic is not an attestation of a lack of philosophical seriousness can be gained by an interesting finding that emerges from the book: in one way or another, *all* the thinkers acknowledge the inevitability of social context for the determination of moral judgment. (In this, the theme of the first part of the book extends throughout it, for the social context is the source of everyday moral intuitions.) The direction from persuasion to argument that the interview with Foot shows on a personal level, then, is largely taken to be normative in general, as I will now show.

<sup>3</sup> *On Certainty*, trans. Dennis Paul & G. E. M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), sec. 612.

<sup>4</sup> *The Philosophers: Their Lives and the Nature of Their Thought* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), p. 10.

Kamm's inclination to preserve common moral judgments trivially takes common morality seriously. Interestingly, however, Singer and Kahneman, who express the opposite conviction regarding everyday moral sense, also pay homage to the force of common prevailing intuitions and attitudes. Singer believes a being's moral status is determined by the actual capacities it possesses, and this entails that a newborn that is killed painlessly is not harmed. But when Voorhoeve presents him with a dilemma of saving either a human newborn or two dogs, Singer stops short of endorsing the logical conclusion of his principles, saying that "we would find it emotionally difficult to abandon the infant." "So a general recommendation that we should do something that cuts against these feelings . . . I do not want to give that." (57) Even for Singer, common attitudes (expressed in common feelings) participate in determining moral judgment. Kahneman, who arguably did more than anyone to discredit people's intuitive judgments, also opines that when prevailing attitudes express extraordinarily powerful intuitions, they should be simply accepted. "My intuitions about abstract theories," he adds, "are just weaker than my intuitive judgment about cases" (81)—a bit surprising when coming from a person who exposed so many irrationalities in the heuristics that determine our everyday judgments.

Foot and MacIntyre speak of the role of "ways of life" in determining morality. Foot asserts that "a change in what counts as a virtue is only natural when people's way of life changes. It is a good thing to be relativistic on this point." (101) MacIntyre's view is explicitly that moral philosophies are "articulations of concepts and presuppositions embodied in forms of social life." So that it is natural to begin ethical inquiry by "ask[ing] ourselves what it is to which we are already committed by our everyday life and everyday judgments." (117) "When Aristotle discussed human flourishing, he was talking . . . in the context of the relationships of a *polis* . . . When *we* are thinking about virtues, norms and ends, we always have to begin where *we* are." (121) Binmore similarly argues that the question "How ought we to live?" is nonsensical without reference to "our actual preferences and plans." (138–39) He therefore claims that an "original position" (referring to Rawls' idea) must accept a society's *status quo* as a starting point, as we cannot renegotiate the entire social contract *de novo*. Gibbard adds that "to think something is rational is to accept a norm that permits you to do it" (161); such acceptance of norms follows actual public discourse, and to that extent has a social genesis.

Williams claims that any ideas that matter in human affairs almost certainly won't be resolved by philosophical analysis only, without historical analysis that "brings home to us the historical contingency of our ideas and outlook." For, although our moral ideas "won" against certain historical ideas of morality, "they didn't win *an argument*." (199) According to Scanlon, justifiability vis-à-vis individuals requires "an act of judgment about what it would and would not be reasonable for [people] to reject." (184) And this cannot be determined meta-contextually. Thus understood, Williams feels an affinity to Scanlon's project. (204)

For Frankfurt, the overarching ethical question of how to live is ultimately anchored in the brute facts of our "loves." Any possible criticism regarding the adequacy of what we love must itself be based on other loves we or others already have. The givenness of our notions of value is therefore inescapable and precedes any philosophical argument. And while Kant taught that moral laws apply to all rational beings, independently of their empirical circumstances, Velleman, despite his Kantian leanings, acknowledges that "if history placed us in radically different circumstances . . . then the way of life that we have developed . . . might not give us any intelligible way to proceed. It is a mistake to think that ethics can give you answers for all possible creatures in all possible worlds." (242) Ethics cannot escape the contingent effects of socio-cultural contexts. All thinkers in the book—enthusiastically or grudgingly—acknowledge this.

Foot's newfound moral conviction in reaction to one of the greatest cataclysms of human history, which reshaped human sociological, historical, psychological, and ideological sensibilities (elements of "way of life"), is thus anything but surprising. A last comment is due regarding the wide recognition of the indispensability of "ways of life" for moral judgment. If indeed they are necessary, then they are a transcendental condition for morality in some sense that needs to be more comprehensively explored, conceptualized, and classified. In addition, the ethical status of those circumstances themselves needs to be charted; one may anticipate that some puzzles regarding the intricate web of facts that are "not supposed" to make moral difference but nonetheless do (for example, in the trolley cases, see, e.g., pp. 47, 79) may thereby get a systematic treatment. The field of ethics is in want of a systematic analysis of that largely uncharted "threshold of ethics," where our most profound existential intuitions ceaselessly lay the foundations for our more thematic investigations in moral theory.

In their writings, philosophers attempt to present coherent expositions of their views. An achievement of Voorhoeve's interviews is that they repeatedly lead the thinkers to touch upon the points of conflict and indeterminacy in their views, or at least the indeterminacies they see as non-eliminable in moral philosophy. The former is indispensable for the deep understanding of a thinker's position, the latter—since it provides the most valuable insights on the nature of ethics. I will briefly review the major instances of these valuable lessons the book provides.

Singer admits the great difficulty in identifying the basic self-evident principles of morality. He realizes that “more than one way of acting may be rational,” (60) which in itself spells indeterminacy. He adds: “though the moral life is one way of achieving fulfillment, it is certainly not the only way . . . So I don't think the argument for the idea that it is in our interest to lead a moral life is as solid as I would like it to be.” (61) In addition, Singer acknowledges the obvious “conflict” between the demands of impartiality and the fact that particular relationships are a mainstay of people's happiness.

Kahneman acknowledges the rational indeterminacy in that “moral intuition about a specific case can neither be trusted nor altogether ignored.” (78) In the trolley cases he goes even further and acknowledges that our rational judgment about what is not supposed to make for a morally relevant factor is not going to affect anyone's judgment! (79) We thus seem forced into the strange position of accepting some differences as morally relevant against our better judgment. Kahneman concludes: “our basic intuitions are likely to contain contradictions that cannot be resolved. I believe that the search for coherence is admirable, and that it should be diligently pursued. But I also believe it is important to remember that it will inevitably fail.” (83)

Foot's core observation is this: “One shouldn't think that morality must pass the test of rationality, but rather that rationality must pass the test of morality.” (102) But since “morality” here refers to natural goodness, and since that, in turn, refers to natural categories with “no strict boundaries,” (98) the natural vagueness is perforce carried over to practical rationality.

Gibbard argues that “to think something is rational is to accept a norm that permits you to do it.” (161) Acceptance of norms, however, follows tendencies that are designed by evolutionary pressures. It follows that the rational is ultimately determined by the non-rational. Acceptance of norms has a more sophisticated dimension too, which happens through public discourse. We are persuadable beings (again, the upshot of biological

forces), who tend to take seriously the opinions of other competent judges. We decide who those are by “content-neutral” criteria. Yet, Gibbard admits, some views are so abhorrent that they constitute “content-fixed” criteria for determining who is an authoritative judge. This mix of formal and substantive criteria invites rational indeterminacy in morality. Binmore too sees morality as the result of evolutionary pressures, but goes a step further in the non-rational account of norms when he claims: “I think we use fairness norms in everyday coordination problems without consciously attending to the fact that we are doing so.” (140) Thoughtless behavior surely cannot have a claim to rationality. Moreover, “the key thing to realize is that we become aware of our moral norms when they are not working so effortlessly.” (141) This (obvious differences notwithstanding) resembles a quintessential Heideggerian position: only when our pre-thematic dealing with things reaches a breakdown point does the need for deliberate cognition arise. Only when the *praxis* of morality reaches an impasse is there an incentive to articulate norms and practical reasoning is initiated. Practical reasoning, then, presupposes conflict and is always piecemeal—it cannot harmonize life under its sovereignty.

Scanlon faces the inevitable problem for constructivists: that the contractualist framework cannot absolve us of making substantive judgments as to what it would and would not be reasonable for people to reject and also as to which claim in a disagreement is in effect more important. Such judgments, though indispensable, cannot rely on the supreme contractualist principle and are amenable to much indeterminacy. Williams explains that one problem with contractualism is that “it requires too much harmonization of people’s moral sentiments.” Yet in many cases of moral dilemmas, where someone would necessarily be hurt, such expectation is artificial. This is the intersubjective parallel of the problem of agent-regret that Williams presented in his “Ethical Consistency.”<sup>5</sup> This lack of full harmonization hands the determination of judgment to sentiments in their brute givenness and irrationality.

Frankfurt believes that no command of reason but only the individual will in the form of “second-order desires” can be the basis for practical normativity. Those desires are a core element of one’s identity and they

<sup>5</sup> “Ethical Consistency,” *Problems of the Self* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), pp. 166–86.

undergird moral responsibility. The irresolvable complexities in accounting for one's true will, however, make it the case that "the whole notion of identity is a very loose one," (222) and that "the question of moral responsibility is very murky." (223) Practical normativity is thus necessarily riddled with profound indeterminacies. Moreover, since freedom of the will based on second-order desires is not bound by prior ethical constraints on the will, Frankfurt admits that "this simply shows that there are other values besides freedom." (235) Frankfurt's solution to the problem of agency is therefore bound to leave us prey to irresolvable moral dilemmas on the deepest level of ethics. This deep indeterminacy may be, of course, an eternal affliction of the human condition, not any fault of Frankfurt's.

Velleman claims that love of others is a function of recognizing them as ends-in-themselves. The value of the person as end-in-itself is not to be compared with the value of any other such end. What then of "lifeboat scenarios," where we are forced to make comparisons between people? Velleman believes those are exceedingly rare and are not the pathway for exploring the core of ethics. And yet, the possibility of such scenarios attests to the tragic absurdity that bedevils morality. Morality cannot in principle escape absurdity.

In philosophical writing, the non-rational elements in ethics are dealt with much less intensively than the rational ones. Surely there are serious discussions on issues like moral luck or moral dilemmas, but this does not change the overall prominence of accessing moral philosophy through the analysis of practical rationality. One important lesson we should draw from the accounts of the eleven moral philosophers in *Conversations on Ethics* is the greater scrutiny we need to apply to the limits of rationality in ethics.

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