



PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

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Special Issue on Socratic Dialogue

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Nemo Veritatem Regit

Nobody Governs Truth

Book Review

Alex Voorhoeve, *Conversations on Ethics*, with photographs by Steve Pyke, Oxford University Press, 2010, ISBN 978-0-19-921537-9

REVIEWED BY LAUREN TILLINGHAST
NEW YORK, NY

Alex Voorhoeve's *Conversations on Ethics* is a delight, both in conception and in execution. The idea of the book is to bring together a number of dialogues, each between Voorhoeve and an eminent contemporary moral theorist. The point of the exercise as a whole is to capture some of the virtues of talking about issues of moral philosophy with a person who has given the matter serious thought. The experience of conversing is rightly understood by Voorhoeve to be interestingly distinct from the experience of reading prose. Among the benefits of a conversation, which are less happily attempted in typical essayist writing, is responsiveness to questions, a spontaneity and flexibility of phrasing, and the spriteliness of a lively back-and-forth dialogue. But more, the conversational mode itself is special (though Voorhoeve does not make this claim explicitly); the relative casualness of the speakers' choices of phrase and the tempo of thought, as compared with standard academic prose, serves to remind one that these proponents of well-known ethical theories are breathing, flesh and blood human beings who are emotionally connected to, not merely intellectually invested in, the questions they are asking, the methods they are using, and the answers to which their theorizing has led.

The book brings together eleven conversations in all, ten of which are with professional academic philosophers. The eleventh is with the psychologist Daniel Kahneman and focuses on Kahneman's work on moral intuitions. Each interview is presented with a short introductory account of the interviewee's work as well as a portrait by Steve Pyke (from his *Philosophers* series, see www.pyke-eye.com). The conversations are organized together into five sections, four pairs and one set of three. The organizing principle is to bring together interviews that are "most directly relevant to each other." (p.6) The literary effect of his arrangement, however (and I'd happily bet that this is no mere accident), is that the conversations themselves stand in small conversational groups. We are invited to see the conversations within the groups as reflecting back points, illuminating inferences and raising difficulties for the others.

The order of ceremonies is as follows: We begin with Voorhoeve's engagements with Frances Kamm, Peter Singer and Daniel Kahneman, on the themes of what to make of our moral judgments about particular cases. How seriously ought we take our judgments about trolley cases of various sorts, and why? Next come interviews with Philippa Foot and Alasdair Macintyre, where the topics revolve around virtue theory, most particularly, each thinker's work on the concept of human flourishing. The third conversational group consists of interviews with Ken Binmore and Allan Gibbard, with a focus on how each thinker understands the role of evolutionary theory in ethical theorizing; for example, whether there is some tension between the idea that, say, a conception of fairness is adaptively fit for human beings and the idea that fairness is a genuine moral virtue. The penultimate section brings together Voorhoeve's conversations with T. M. Scanlon and Bernard Williams, where discussion revolves around the question whether the goal of producing a systematic ethical theory is well conceived. Scanlon defends his own version of systematic ethical theory while Williams discusses his reasons for thinking the enterprise itself is misguided. In the final section, the series of conversations closes most fittingly with a pair of interviews, one with Harry Frankfurt and the other with David Velleman, on the nature of love and its role in morality, moral thinking, and theorizing about morals.

As is to be expected in a piece of work of this nature, not all of the arguments drawn out in the different interviews are of the same calibre. Voorhoeve's performance as interlocutor, however, is consistently excellent throughout all eleven conversations. His engagement with each thinker is informed, precise, clear and insightful. Whether or not one is a fan of the person's work, each interview is a pleasure to read. For these reasons, I can highly recommend *Conversations on Ethics* as worthwhile for anyone interested in ethics. To the seasoned academic philosopher, it offers a welcome reminder that academic philosophy is not "merely academic" to many of those at the top of the field; to philosophical practitioners it provides a rich resource for thought about the connections between theory and practice; and to the student, it extends a gracious invitation to partake of the pleasures of ethical theory, as well as an excellent introduction to the views of eleven prominent thinkers.

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Aims and Scope

Philosophical Practice is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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APPA Mission

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

APPA Membership

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

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