

REVIEWS

Alex Voorhoeve, *Conversations on Ethics* (Oxford University Press, 2009).
x + 259, price £18.99hb.

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It is a familiar idea that in learning to do philosophy we have to acquire new habits of thought, a supposition that may help explain why it does not happen quickly and why, especially in retrospect, the process has something of the feeling of an upbringing, of being gradually drawn into a distinctive way of life. Familiar also, to many, will be the instruction to concentrate purely on the arguments of those philosophers we study, ignoring the irrelevancies of character and biography, advice seemingly aimed at a happy coincidence of moral and intellectual virtue, ruling out, as it does, the recourse to personal criticism in philosophical discussion. Yet if philosophy is correctly to be approached as a structure of ideas, detached from the life of its creators, why was it so intriguing, as students, to find, occasionally, a picture of the author on the dust jacket of our set text, and why were we so curious about the characters of the speakers invited to philosophy society? Partly, no doubt, this interest was, and is, no more than a natural curiosity about people from whom we might expect to learn, an entirely understandable attitude, and not necessarily trivial, but one with no essential connection to the subject. Yet reading Alex Voorhoeve's beautifully produced collection of his conversations with 11 thinkers on ethics does make one wonder whether the personal has some further bearing on philosophy, and if so how this might be and with what significance. Perhaps even the dust jacket reflects this query, with 10 of the interviewees caught by Steve Pyke's striking photographs, their faces sharply lit, yet not as we would ever meet them, emerging somewhat eerily from an impenetrably black background. All are reproduced in a larger format inside, together with an uncredited photograph of the 11th in an instructively contrasting style.

Taking his cue from Socrates in the *Phaedrus*, Voorhoeve introduces his project by noting some of the philosophical advantages of engaging in discussion rather than simply reading an author's text. Are there, though, any advantages in a text that explicitly records such a discussion in dialogue form over the ordinary kind that does not? This latter case is harder to make since, as he points out, authors may in effect debate with themselves, raising and answering objections to their own work, without us thinking that the benefits of this depend on the final work being written as a dialogue. Voorhoeve's suggestion (pp. 2–3) is that, by contrast, a real dialogue with another may be particularly lively and revealing in virtue of the interviewee lacking control over the objections and being forced to respond to an independent questioner. In fact, of course, a real debate with others is also very often a helpful stage in the production of an ordinary philosophical text; but suppose we agree both that the characteristic liveliness is thereby lost and that it is sometimes worth preserving it explicitly in dialogue form. How precisely is this best done? Arguably, it would involve reporting verbatim the actual response of the subject at the time of the exchange, up to and including the barely coherent splutterings of apoplectic rage, should these occur. With this in mind, the editing of the original transcript becomes critical to the project, for it will determine the degree to which the liveliness will be retained. Thus a small complaint: although there are one or two remarks on the matter, a slightly fuller and more systematic account of the process of editing the conversations and compiling the final versions would have been helpful. As to the outcome, one point to note about this volume is that although, very infrequently, such things as pauses or laughter are recorded, the text of the conversations is not presented in conversational English. In most cases, it seems, the original material was worked on by both participants following the interviews and the outcome is generally the clearly structured style of prose familiar from academic philosophical writing. No doubt we thus do indeed lose some of the liveliness, and some of our sense of the personalities involved; though we might reasonably expect to have gained thereby in the clarity and readability of the exchanges. In any event, the results of the compromise are both a pleasure to read as well as philosophically valuable.

Voorhoeve's stated aims were to talk to experts who would provide material accessible to the non-specialist and, in each conversation, to address three of the main problems in ethics: the nature of our intuitive responses to moral problems, the possibility of objectivity in ethics in the face of the diversity of our judgements and the basis of moral reasons as a guide to action. The conversations are also arranged in five sections in

accordance with their particular relevance to one another. The first section, "Ethics and Intuitions," opens with the non-consequentialist work of Frances Kamm and establishes Voorhoeve's usual, if not invariant, policy of beginning the interviews by making some biographical enquiries of his subjects, particularly concerning what drew them to philosophy, an approach that, naturally enough, varies in its interest through the book though which proves particularly engaging in the case of Kamm. Thus, in the rest of the interview we find not only an approachable outline of her characteristic interest in imagined examples of doing and allowing, and in our moral responses to them, but a lively presentation of her thoughts on the method underlying it, providing a useful adjunct to the more severely concentrated focus of her published works. There is also a direct link between her doubts over whether the authors of the opposing consequentialist theories actually believe some of their more extreme moral conclusions and the next discussion, where Peter Singer sets out his case for impartiality in ethics and his reservations about the status of our intuitive moral judgements. Finally in this section Voorhoeve makes especially telling use of a contribution from outside philosophy by talking to Daniel Kahneman about the way in which studies in psychology may make us question our confidence in our moral intuitions, demonstrating how the details of an example may lead people to a convinced judgement on a basis that would be repudiated when made explicit, and thus obliging us, in Kahneman's view, to be sceptical of the reasons that we suppose to underlie our intuitions in ethics.

The remaining sections each comprise two interviews. "Virtue and Flourishing" begins with Philippa Foot's account of our judgements of moral goodness as part of the more general class of judgements concerning what is practically necessary for a good way of life and moves on to Alasdair MacIntyre's discussion of flourishing and its connection with our having a sense of the need for care that results from our vulnerability. Ken Binmore opens the section entitled "Ethics and Evolution" by presenting his naturalistic account of moral rules in terms of their usefulness in cooperative enterprises, and this is followed by Allan Gibbard, also drawing upon the role of evolutionary forces and our search for coordination with others in his account of moral norms, while discussing as well the place of anger and guilt in our commitment to them. Next, "Unity and Dissent" comprises interviews with Thomas Scanlon and Bernard Williams. Scanlon discusses his contractualist theory of moral principles and the important guiding test of which of these might reasonably be rejected, while the conversation with Williams, as we would expect, is less focused on devel-

oping a theory and much broader in its sweep, including the role of history in the study of ethics and political philosophy, his views on contractualism and ending with some brief but provocative comments on the conditions for effective criticism and a commitment to truth. Finally, in “Love and Morality,” the interview with Harry Frankfurt gives us an excellent short introduction to his work on the self and freedom of the will, together with his appeal to the idea of caring as the ultimate basis for deciding how we should live. The section, and the book, then concludes with David Velleman, where we find early sibling rivalry as the distinctly personal prompting of his enquiries into the idea of love, and also, in a return to theme of the discussion with Frances Kamm, a questioning of the relevance to ethics of our responses to imaginary cases.

One might imagine a book like this being quickly assembled from interviews and left to make what impression it will, but Voorhoeve has made a great effort to turn this collection into something much more satisfying. He provides a short introduction to each of his chosen thinkers, setting out the main themes of their work. Brief footnotes explain any technicalities. Linking passages are occasionally supplied between parts of a conversation, filling in further details of an interviewee’s thought where this helps the reader follow the line of argument to the next topic of discussion. Then, at the end of each interview, there is a guide to reading that includes references to everything that has been mentioned, however briefly. Overall it is an excellent book, providing something different, involving and very welcome.

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