

BOOK REVIEW

Gusztáv Kovács, *Thought Experiments in Ethics*, Pécs: Episcopal Theological College of Pécs, 2021, 291 pp., ISBN 978-615-5579-28-8.

Gusztáv Kovács is professor of ethics at the Episcopal Theological College of Pécs. This volume is the result of his teaching experience and research, as well as his conversations with colleagues from the international scholarly community and students. The author argues convincingly that thought experiments are useful tools for teaching ethics, more generally for reflecting upon ethical principles and behaviour. They are imaginary scenarios that may be used to explore complex ethical problems. They raise questions, pose dilemmas, they engage the listener / reader, encouraging discussion and debate. They can be helpful for illustrating ethical questions, for shaping the moral thinking of students, while also allowing them to learn about themselves, their own values and (potential) choices.

One of the shared features of thought experiments is that they tell a story. Storytelling engages listeners or readers, inviting them to identify with characters, to look at apparently merely theoretical issues from a different perspective. They challenge preconceptions and create a certain distance from previously held convictions about what is right and wrong. They appeal to our moral intuition.

Kovács highlights the importance of storytelling for ethics on the parable of the Good Samaritan, looking at the history of its reception and on the manner it opens new horizons, by creating a dilemma, through an (incomplete) analogy and by appealing to the intuition of the listeners. (Later on, he will discuss another biblical narrative, the parable of Nathan in 2 Sam 12.)

The volume revisits some classical thought experiments used in ethics: Robert Nozick's experience (or pleasure) machine, the last man on earth argument (devised by Richard Sylvan and Richard Routley), the trolley problem of Philippa Foot and Judith Jarvis Thomson, and the violinist analogy used by Judith Jarvis Thomson to address the ethical implications of abortion. To these Gusztáv Kovács adds a significant piece of Hungarian literature and filmography, *The Fifth Seal*. I highlight here only this latter, less known example. *The Fifth Seal* (*Az ötödik pecsét*, 1976) by Zoltán Fábri is based on the 1963 homonymous novel of Ferenc Sánta. The narrative is set during World War II and the grim years of the rule of national socialist Arrow Cross Party in Hungary. The conversation of a group of friends turns

into a thought experiment. One of the main characters (Miklós Gyuricza) invites his friends to ponder on a serious ethical dilemma. Should they be reborn, they would be compelled to choose between living as a powerful but cruel and amoral tyrant or as the slave he constantly torments and humiliates but who preserves his dignity and moral integrity. The debate will eventually turn into a drama. The thought experiment materialises, reversing the positions held by the conversant parties. Those who have identified with the tyrant will eventually preserve their moral integrity even at the cost of their life. The author of this thought experiment apparently turns into the despicable tyrant of his story, causing suffering to an innocent victim of the Arrow Cross executioners, in order to remain alive. Yet, the viewers realise that his choice eventually saved the life of the Jewish children he sheltered. The complex plot, the conversations and debates, the unexpected turns make *The Fifth Seal* an outstanding example of thought experiment.

Kovács discusses in detail the essential features of thought experiments and their main types. He examines their pragmatics, the ways they work, and analyses their applicability in practical philosophy and bioethics. He also addresses the weaknesses of thought experiments and the scholarly critique they raise.

Thought experiments are highly stimulating; they induce students, more generally all those who attempt to understand the oft-hidden resorts of ethical behaviour, the value judgments, dilemmas, and difficult choices we may face when attempting to make moral decisions, to think about the complexity of ethical choices. At the same time, thinking of the particular examples presented in this volume, one may also perceive certain limitations of thought experiments. Such is, for one, the artificiality of the story and the radicality of the ethical dilemma (as in the trolley problem and the violinist analogy, the *tertium non datur*, which seems to demand listeners to choose between two extreme, equally problematic options. In fact, one of the merits of *The Fifth Seal* consists precisely in showing that persons and their decisions are far more complex and complicated; they are not unequivocally blameless victims or wicked perpetrators, and real life situations are far more complex. Including *The Fifth Seal* in the discussion of thought experiments, Kovács has a significant contribution to the topic.

The volume authored by Gusztáv Kovács is particularly useful for those who teach or study ethics, but it also proves to be an exciting reading for anyone interested in ethical reflection.

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