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Review: Bird on an Ethics Wire: Battles about Values in the Culture Wars

Review: *Bird on an Ethics Wire: Battles about Values in the Culture Wars*

Thomas Ryan, SM

Margaret Somerville, *Bird on an Ethics Wire: Battles about Values in the Culture Wars*, Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015; xviii + 358 pp.; Hardcover AUD \$37.35

The context of Margaret Somerville's latest book is distilled in one sentence. 'Western secular democracies, such as Canada, are often described as involved in "culture wars," manifested as conflicts between the proponents of conservative values and so-called progressive values' (86). Within this setting, she discusses key issues or 'battles about values' with a particular focus on bioethics. The book's title flags her basic position: 'a cartoon shows a long row of birds perched on a telephone wire between two poles. All the birds are facing forward, except for one. The bird next to him asks, "Can't we talk about it?" (3). Despite disagreement with many others (even the majority), the author is still intent on a serious engagement with them and their views.

In the first two chapters, Somerville deals with liberty rights and the values that protect them. She explores who can or cannot participate in debates, first, in the 'public square' and, second, in the academic setting of the university. The author contends that everyone has a 'belief system' (whether religious, secular or atheistic) that is the 'informing principle' of one's attitudes, values and behaviour. If a society is to be democratic, both religious and secular voices 'have a valid role in the public square on an equal footing' (45). More specifically, she argues that, within academia, there is the influence of a 'velvet totalitarianism' which, in the name of 'political correctness', tries to exclude particular views, values or voices from the conversation by suppressing certain freedoms (e.g., of religion or of thought). This is again undemocratic but is also antipathetic to the university's search for truth. By implication, Somerville questions the assumption that one needs to leave aside personally held convictions and commitments in order to be 'neutral' and objective and, hence, more rational. Such an approach distorts our humanity, rationality itself and the process of moral reasoning.

Chapters 3-6 examine case-studies or situations concerning respect for life and its protection. After surveying various disciplines on the understanding and use of the concept of human dignity, she concludes that, since there is no common agreement on the term, it needs careful handling (Ch. 3). This is followed by a detailed and well-sourced analysis of a landmark case from the Canadian courts on legalizing 'physician-assisted death' (Ch. 4).

In Ch. 5, perhaps the hub of this book, the author addresses the question of the special quality and beauty of human beings, how they (and human life) are worthy of respect in a way that is different from animals. She argues that human value and respect for life are anchored in the 'human spirit' - an inclusive term acceptable both to those who are not religious and to those who are religious (whatever form that takes). The human spirit is sustained in openness to experiences of 'amazement, wonder, and awe' (10, 191-196), in a sense of relatedness to 'other people, to the world, and to the universe in which we live' (44) and in the desire to find meaning and purpose in life.

Within this 'secular sacred' context, Somerville discusses the difficult question of finding meaning in, and alleviating, suffering, especially in beginning and end-of-life issues. For instance, on moral and legal grounds she argues against physician-assisted suicide and the use

of enhancement technologies to create ‘super children’ (183). She acknowledges the influence of personal witness and the counter-cultural impact of those who find meaning, love and hope in suffering without romanticizing disability, as with Jean Vanier and L’Arche communities (197). The challenge is how to appreciate and communicate ‘the unique and precious value of each human life, especially the lives of people who are vulnerable’ (199). This is pursued in Ch. 6 with the discussion of how a ‘crisis-pregnancy’ might be converted into a ‘mystery, the gift of life.’

The final two chapters deal with how social values are established, maintained, even, eliminated: first, how, in courts and legislatures, applied ethics in law affects societal values especially with advances in science (Ch. 7); second, what questions and issues arise in informal cultural contexts that can shape societal values (Ch. 8). These chapters confirm the author’s persistent emphasis on the need for enhanced palliative care (138, 176, 262), on the societal repercussions of individual choices and on the obligations we have to hold ‘the future in trust for the generations to follow’ especially in the context of human life, birth and death’ (199).

There are four appendices: a personal essay on ‘the best teacher I ever had’ (the author’s father); three statements on academic freedom; notes on the concept of human dignity as found in four international instruments; the declaration of Montreal on the fundamental right to access to pain management.

For Somerville, allied with the ‘human spirit’ is a sense of mystery which, if rejected or ignored, has epistemological and moral implications. It entails a correlation with a limited view of rationality, namely, that ‘logical, cognitive, rational mentation is the only valid way of human knowing.’ This can lead to a ‘rejection of other ways of knowing such as intuition, especially moral intuition, examined emotions, experiential knowledge, and so on’ (40). Such considerations are relevant if one’s understanding of the human person is to be adequate to underpinning discussions of such legal/ethical import and of moral reasoning itself. Further, these corrections to a limited rationality, if developed further, could help counter the author’s concern that accusations of affective experiences such as ‘amazement, wonder, and awe’ as being too ‘ephemeral and “flakey”’ (x).

By way of suggestion, perhaps this could be done first, by drawing on the philosophical insights into the relational nature of human person, for instance, as found in philosopher John Macmurray. Second, one could tap into the extensive work done in virtue ethics specifically on how our emotions and embodied forms of knowing are integral to ethical awareness and moral reasoning. In this way, our relation to reality goes beyond ‘perception’ (5-6) so that the cognitive is integrally related to the affective, namely, those dispositions to being moved and responding to what is truly good. There is some convergence here with moral philosopher Raimond Gaita who draws attention to the role of witness that is embodied and realised in action in disclosing certain moral values (exemplified in L’Arche, as noted above).

Third, behind Somerville’s discussions one senses the presence of the Aristotelian understanding of practical reason as not so much speculative but appreciative knowledge of the good (value). Again, in moral matters we cannot have absolute but only moral certitude in specific situations, given the variables involved. While the ‘old’ virtue of prudence may, at times, involve ‘ethical restraint’ for the author (xiv), it is principally characterized by sensitivity to the unique features of people and situations and flexibility in evaluating them. Prudence often entails an element of risk and can involve wise judgment, not about the perfect choice, but about the best that is possible in the circumstances.

A final observation. The author's extensive discussion highlights how respect for human life as a fundamental value must be underpinned (especially with divided views on human dignity) by a solidly established case for the moral status of the human person as an absolute value (Kant's treating persons as ends in themselves). It is only on this foundation and its associated moral claims that one can incorporate instances of human impairment (intellectual and physical), of diminished autonomy or consciousness and the reality of suffering. In so doing, perhaps we can get only so far with the 'secular sacred', with philosophical argument or phenomenological analysis of human subjectivity with its capacity for wonder and awe and the drive to be part of something bigger than oneself. In the light of Somerville's extensive and insightful discussion, one wonders whether, in the final analysis, the human person as an absolute centre of value can only be firmly established through a transcendent and ultimate source from outside human experience, as in a personal deity, namely, within the 'religious sacred'? Further, in the face of suffering, while personal witness can offer a powerful argument (as noted above), will it always be the case that the Christian message, centred on the crucified and risen Jesus, is both a stumbling block and foolishness for Athens?

This is a very important book for its thorough and critically alert discussion of beginning and end-of-life issues. While centred on representative case-studies or court judgments, principally from the Canadian context, the author skilfully enables its scope to be comprehensive in its treatment of principles and legal/ethical considerations from a range of disciplines. Again, this is an enlightening and valuable study which is, at the same time, disturbing. The issues and concerns she addresses are not limited to Canada but are current and pressing—certainly within common-law jurisdictions (such as Australia) and beyond.

This book is timely and very professional—in the quality and scope of its research, analysis and references, in its detailed index and, importantly, in the clarity of the writing. We are indebted to Margaret Somerville for her depth of scholarship, her generosity of spirit and, to modify the controlling metaphor of the title, her persistence and courage in going against the tide.