

In Conversation

with Dr. Alex Voorhoeve

Abstract

Dr. Alex Voorhoeve is an Associate Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Philosophy, Logic, and Scientific Method at the London School of Economics and Political Science. He first joined the Department in 2004 as a lecturer. He completed his PhD in Philosophy from University College London in 2006. His primary areas of interest in philosophy are liberal egalitarianism, descriptive and normative decision theory, and the fair distribution of scarce resources. In this interview for *Rerum Causae*, we ask him about his path and approach to philosophy, his work, and other things.

Pujan Modi (PM): What led you to analytic philosophy?

Alex Voorhoeve (AV): I was led into analytic philosophy by accident. For my undergraduate (and Mastersthere was no separate Bachelors then at Dutch universities), I studied Economics (with a specialization in Development Economics) at Erasmus University Rotterdam. However, most of my courses were very narrowly mathematical and oriented merely towards being able to sit a multiple choice exam and there wasnt any opportunity to ask questions about the usefulness of these models, which were often built on false assumptions. As a result, I, and many of my peers started taking courses in other fields, trying out various subjects, including Latin American studies, Environmental Studies, and Philosophy. In Philosophy, I took a course on Mandeville, Hume, and

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Smith, which deeply influenced me, since it engaged with broad questions in social and ethical theory and involved the kind of questioning approach that I had missed in many economics courses. After completing my degree in economics, I worked as an economist at the Dutch Ministry of Finance on international debt relief and finished my MA in Philosophy in the evenings. Seeking adventure, I then applied for two totally different positions. One was a scholarship to do an MPhil in philosophy at Cambridge, the other a position as a teaching assistant in economics (funded by Dutch Development Aid) at Ho Chi Minh university in Vietnam. I didn't get the latter, which I really wanted, but Cambridge accepted me. So there was a fair bit of unpredictability in my journey to philosophy.

PM: How has philosophy informed your decisions outside academic life? For example, your commitment to Giving What We Can.

AV: To be honest, my principal convictions, including a concern with global poverty, have not changed much since I first started to think about global issues as a teenager. I think I would have been committed to something like Giving What We Can even without philosophy. However, one way in which philosophy shaped my convictions is by making me aware of the importance of deontological factors rather than purely consequentialist ones. My training in economics made me, I think, prone to consequentialism, but conversations with Michael Otsuka (who was my PhD advisor) and reading Frances Kamm and other deontologists persuaded me of the importance of non-consequentialist factors. To take the example of donating, my assessment of the causes to which I should give also incorporates other factors such as avoiding doing harm (as well as merely maximizing the expected good).

PM: Do you think your background in economics affects how you do philosophy?

AV: Absolutely, in fact I would be doing philosophy very differently had I not been in economics. Questions of fair allocation, the measurement of well-being, moral decision-making under risk and the moral limits of markets all require tools from economics to address them adequately. Moreover, it affects the way one looks at institutions and political questions; an economist always asks first: what information and incentives do individuals have, and how will these cause them to act? I find that approach very useful. I don't think my views, or the topics I study would have been the same had I a different first degree.

PM: Do you have any advice for the readers of *Rerum Causae* when it comes to considering an academic career in the field?

AV: I would say: pursue a PhD in philosophy only if you're genuinely gripped by the philosophical questions you wish to study and also can handle (or even enjoy) the lifestyle, which (especially at the start) involves low income, quite solitary work and being exposed to a great deal of (necessary) criticism from your advisors and peers, with a great deal of uncertainty at the end regarding job prospects. You must find and exploit your comparative advantage (this is where the economics training shows!), because you have to be able to make a contribution to thinking in your chosen field, and also, because pragmatically speaking, there are so few positions and so many candidates. Of course, it helps if you enjoy writing and teaching. Personally, I'm a bit of a showman, so teaching is my favourite part.

PM: Why did you join the LSE?

AV: Good academic positions in philosophy are rare. I picked the LSE because they were the first ones to offer me a job! But it's also a wonderful department, in particular because its staff all do interdisciplinary work and have strong backgrounds in social or natural sciences, or in mathematics or statistics. This gives us a distinctive approach to philosophy, and a shared set of values to do philosophy in a manner that is continuous with the sciences. The students, who are mostly pursuing interdisciplinary study, mirror the staff in this respect. There is also an excellent atmosphere; it is a wonderful and collegial place to teach and do research.

PM: What do you hope to achieve as a philosopher?

AV: I see myself as carrying on a long tradition of critical and innovative enquiry into key normative questions (such as: How am I to live? What is the meaning of life? And: What is a just society?). I believe in the value of this tradition, so I want to transmit some of its great ideas and methods of inquiry and argument to students. That is why I like teaching the classics, such as Aristotle, Hume and Smith. I also think that each of us can make progress as a researcher and writer on these questions. For example, I am confident that the long debate about principles of distributive justice which started from Rawls's

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and Gauthier's criticism of utilitarianism as failing to respect the separateness of persons has led to a deeper understanding of the requirements of distributive justice and to new, intriguing theories such as the prioritarianism proposed by Parfit or to new foundations for older theories, such as egalitarianism.

PM: Do policy makers listen to moral and political philosophers? What makes philosophers well placed to advise on public policy issues?

AV: In fact, Britain has a strong tradition of involving philosophers in the public dialogue and policy formation. Indeed, studying Philosophy, Politics and Economics (PPE) has been a standard path into government. Moreover, academic philosophers have often been asked to advise on policy. For example, Bernard Williams chaired the influential Committee on Obscenity and Film Censorship, led to significant liberalization of laws regulating the availability of obscene material to the public. Another prominent example is bioethics committees, on which philosophers such as Mary Warnock and Onora O'Neill have played influential roles. I am also involved in a project with the World Health Organization, called Making Fair Choices on the Path to Universal Health Coverage. On this committee, philosophers play a prominent role (alongside doctors and health policy experts) in articulating criteria for the fair allocation of health resources. Philosophers are well-placed to contribute because they have been exposed to many detailed arguments in the field (e.g. of distributive justice) and are therefore typically more aware of both the foundations and implications of various principles. They are also commonly practiced at engaging others in reasoned dialogue on moral issues, which helps when one has to work through disagreements when serving on a diverse committee.

PM: How was your experience of interviewing some of the prominent philosophers of our time for *Conversations in Ethics*? Bernard Williams, who you mentioned earlier, was one of them.

AV: It was quite the experience, and also intimidating at times. I started the project when I was a graduate student. Every interview felt like an exam, because you really needed to do a lot of reading and understand each interviewee's work in depth. I didn't sleep the night before the interview with Bernard Williams, I was so nervous at meeting him, especially since he was known for his clever and cutting style. Some philosophers, I remember Philippa Foot being

one of them, were really good at engaging in a Socratic dialogue, rather than it being a mechanical Q&A. Then the discussion really came alive.

PM: Have you always been passionate about music? Are the rumours that the Critique of Pure Rhythm is a favourite for next years Grammys to be believed?

AV: To the second question, no! On the music, funnily enough, it started off as me being a choir boy in The Hague. My mother is American, and she signed me up with the American Protestant Church (even though she is Jewish!) because they had an excellent choirmaster, Henry Blackman. That man really had soul! So you might say I had a bit of the same education as many R&B greats.