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

In these difficult pandemic times, a number of monographs have been produced that seek to reflect ethically on our times. One of them is a monograph *Thought Experiments in Ethics* by Gusztáv Kovács, Rector of the Episcopal Theological College in Pécs, Hungary, and Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Human Dignity and Social Justice. Kovács is also the head of the Religious Education Research Group of the Content Pedagogy Research Program of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and this monograph was written as part of that project.

The presented publication attempts to connect the moral-philosophical ethics of modern times with bioethical and theological themes in the English-speaking world in eight chapters. The author's entire thought process is based on the 1976 film adaptation of Ferenc Sánta's novella *Az ötödik pecsét* (*The Fifth Seal*) by Zoltán Fábri¹. The plot tells the story of how four friends meet every evening in a restaurant. Behind the walls, the Second World War rages in 1944. At night the neighbours disappear without a trace, kidnapped by the secret police. But the friends console themselves with the fact that, as ordinary people, they do not have the power to make a difference. They wash their hands of their own innocence and are not responsible for the atrocities that are happening outside. However, their hopes of surviving the war without taking an active part are soon dashed when a mysterious World War I veteran visits the restaurant.

¹ Ferenc Sánta. 1963. *Az ötödik pecsét*. Budapest: Szépirodalmi Könyvkiadó.

One of them (Gyuricza) addresses the company by means of an ethical dilemma, that of choosing the fate of either Tomoceanszkatatiki² or Gyugyu, according to the old legend of the tyrant and his slave. Timotheus Katatiki was the leader of an imaginary island and Gyugyu was his slave. The powerful and careless Katatiki treated the poor Gyugyu with extreme brutality, but never felt any remorse as he lived by the barbarian morality of his age. Gyugyu lived in eternal misery and suffering but found consolation in the fact that whatever cruelty happened to him it is never caused by him, and he is still a clean, guiltless person. What would you choose if you had to die and be reincarnated as one of them? Another one, the photographer says that he would choose Gyugyu, but the others do not believe him, so as revenge, he later reports to the Arrow Cross Party that the four of them are murderers. As they go home we get to know some of the deepest secrets of their lives. It turns out that Gyuricza is hiding Jewish children at his flat. The next evening they are taken to an office of the party where an unnamed arrow-cross man forces them to slap a dying partisan in the face.

Kovács already emphasizes in the first chapter that we take thought experiments seriously because we feel that they reveal something hidden about ourselves (p. 7). He is very precise in trying to establish the rules for these ethical thought experiments and to define them from all possible angles. In the next chapter, our author attempts to establish a parallel between the biblical story of the Good Samaritan and the ethical thought experiment for activating the moral thinking capacity of the audience (p. 16). One of the concepts which helps to determine the impact of the parable is the dilemma (p. 25). And the dilemma, according to him, leads to intuitive judgment (p. 31). Jesus' purpose was not to teach, educate, or inform people, but rather to inspire conversion, to change hearts, and to establish the Kingdom of God (p. 33).

In the third chapter we finally get to the definition of the theory of thought experiments, which the author adopts from James R. Brown (p. 34)³. The history of thought experiment is as old as the history of philosophical thought itself: it begins with ancient Greek authors and extends to modern thinkers. However, this theory of thought runs across disciplines. Kovács begins with the story of Galileo Galilei's thinking (p. 38). He later adds that it is a characteristic feature of scientific and philosophical thought experiments that their authors attempt to say some-

² According to several entries on Wikipedia, however, this mythical tyrant was supposed to be named Timotheus Katatiki, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Fifth_Seal.

³ James Robert Brown. 1991. Thought experiments. A Platonic Account. In *Thought experiments in Science and Philosophy*. Eds. Tamara Horowitz, Gerald Massey, 119–128, here 122. Lanham: Rowman& Littlefield.

thing about reality simply with the help of thinking (p. 49). Subsequently Kovács seeks to answer the question: what is it that we can learn by performing an ethical thought experiment (p. 53)? And he answers that thought experiments challenge our moral beliefs and theories and stimulate our intuitive machinery and capacity for judgements (p. 60). In addition, intuitions are important to him, so he writes that intuitions are often ignored in ethical theories (p. 64). In addition, he goes on to say that intuitions are strongly connected to what we call conscience (p. 70). This chapter ends by stating that personal participation is essential for thought experiments because of the singularity and uniqueness of every concrete thought with which it is performed (p. 74). In the following chapter Kovács attempts to show the practical workings of thought experiments in modern philosophy and bioethics and discusses the popularity of this theory in the 1970s and 1980s in the USA. At the same time, he also highlights debates about this theory in social ethics and the pursuit of social justice (p. 91).

In chapter five Kovács first discusses St. Anselm's *argumentum unum argumentum*. Most ethical thought experiments begin with an imaginary scenario where a particular life episode calls for an ethical solution (p. 92). His concerns focus on Nozick's experience machine, which in today's much digitalized world offers guidelines for ethical action (p. 93). In the conclusion of this very long chapter, the author addresses the problem of the terminal phase of human life, the problem of suffering and pain in the context of experience machines (p. 121). Finally, he discusses here the position of the philosopher Robert Spaemann, who shows how the experience machine works taken out of isolation and placed in a proper context (p. 125).

In chapter six Kovács introduces the argument of the *Last Man Thought Experiment* originally formulated by Richard Routley in 1973 as a new ethical approach to environmental questions (p. 130). But for our author even after the death of Mr. Last Man, the audience of thought experience are present as subjects imagining and enjoying the beauty, diversity, and liveliness of nature, and evaluating it as something good (p. 153). But he adds that the Last man example was not only successful in academic discussion but yielded practical results as well. It contributed to the development of the discourse about the intrinsic value of nature in academic, politics, and policymaking (p. 156). At this point Kovács also uses for the first time the theological argument of God the Creator as the guarantor of the continuation of creation (p. 157).

The last two chapters of Kovács's book are extremely long. In the seventh chapter, he revisits aporetic ethical dilemmas and asks whether ethics is capable of resolving such cases (p. 160). In any case, these dilemmas require a context that

raises moral issues, challenges moral beliefs, propositions, and theories, and can activate the moral intuitions of the audience or reader through its collision with reality (p. 162). One of the positive features of Trolley Dilemmas is the protection of human life as a fundamental ethical factor (p. 171). Kovács points to several applications of these dilemmas in practical life, where he is interested in debates about the beginning of human life (the Siamese twins' operation, p. 207) as well as debates about the use of artificial intelligence, e.g., in future driverless cars (p. 204). At the end of the chapter, he adds that trolley problems may not be useful for solving ethical questions in real life. They show how our intuitions can be influenced by different, often unnoticed elements in a particular scenario and warn us to be cautious about how we react to them (p. 210).

In the last chapter Kovács discusses the violinist analogy, a challenging parable for explaining the protection of newly conceived life (p. 215). The author attempts to take a positive position on this analogy, which he simultaneously compares with many other theories from the 1970s and, finally, with the views of the utilitarians, and especially Peter Singer (p. 231). Despite all the extensively cited arguments, it is this chapter that seems the least complete. Also, the conclusion of the whole book comes across as a forced summing-up of ideas to complete the composition of the various articles, rather than a monograph discussing the predominantly Anglo-Saxon views of the last 50 years in the field of Central Europe.

Very many hypotheses in the whole work are without citations, as if they were all invented by the author of the publication. Later one can assume where they are quoted from, but it would be very useful to make them more scientifically sound. Also, to write that “environmental ethics, which can be called the purview of bio-ethicists only if the boundaries of the discipline are generously drawn” is a very unfortunate statement (p. 129), precisely given the relevance of these ethical issues today.

Despite these critical perspectives, I think that in our area of Central Europe such a publication is very necessary for a fruitful discussion of traditional and “new” moral-philosophical theories. For it is from such a necessary dialogue that we can move forward in using thought experiments for appropriate moral decision-making of individuals as well as of the whole society.