

Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

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

MARGARET SOMERVILLE

Montreal, QC: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015; xviii + 358 pp.; \$34.95 CAD (paperback)

doi:10.1017/S0012217316000305

Likely the first question about Margaret Somerville's book will concern the title: what does *Bird on an Ethics Wire* mean? She explains:

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)

Somerville's book is true to this picture in two ways. Firstly, she defends views that run contrary to the mainstream on various ethical issues. But, secondly, she does so while generously engaging views with which she disagrees.

The next question concerns the topic of the book. This answer is less straightforward. On the one hand, it is about, as suggested by the subtitle, the "culture wars" of contemporary Western societies: "permissives"/neo-liberals/secularists versus "restrictives"/neo-conservatives/religionists. The various issues it discusses—religion in the public square (Chapter 1), academic freedom (Chapter 2), human dignity (Chapter 3), physician-assisted suicide (Chapter 4), abortion (Chapter 6), and genetic enhancement among them—are simply illustrations of clashes between these warring factions. On the other hand, as the book progresses, it seems increasingly that these issues themselves and Somerville's views on them are what the book is about. In the end, this is more a book about bioethics than sociology.

What of the contrarian views she defends? Of the several issues discussed, physician-assisted suicide and genetic enhancement are of particular concern to Somerville, with both issues popping up throughout the book. Negatively, she argues that physician-assisted suicide is immoral and ought to be illegal and that germ-line editing also is wrong. Positively, she argues for enhanced palliative care (e.g., 138, 176, 262) and proposes that we recognize a human right "to be born from natural human biological origins" (248; cf. 110).

Dialogue 55 (2016), 791–798.

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In part, Somerville draws these conclusions on the basis of general considerations. In part, she offers arguments specific to various issues. For instance, as one reason to not evict religion from the public square, she writes, “I propose that the most important task of religious voices in the public square is to place and keep social-ethical-values issues in a moral context” (31). In the following comments, though, I focus on a couple of the general considerations that I found insightful.

One element of Somerville’s approach is to consider these issues not only at the individual level but also at the societal level. While discussions of issues such as physician-assisted suicide and reproductive technologies normally focus on individuals and individual cases, individuals’ choices also have a “cumulative impact” on societal values and institutions that should not be ignored (141, 240, 252; cf. 132, 181, 225, 253, 267). She distinguishes between respect for an individual’s life and respect for life in general (101, 178, 262), concerned that mainstream views sacrifice the latter. She also detects this same tendency in Canadian jurisprudence which, since the inception of the *Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, sees through a “charter”—i.e., individualistic—“lens” (155; cf. 252). Even if one disagrees with her conclusions regarding specific issues, it is hard to dispute her diagnosis of individualistic tendencies in contemporary philosophy and law.

Another noteworthy aspect of Somerville’s general approach is the long-term view she urges. “What must we regard as sacred and hold in trust for [future generations] in order not to leave them worse off than we are or with fewer choices or options than we have?” (96) Will our legacy be a society “in which no reasonable person would want to live?” (284) Specifically in regards to physician-assisted suicide she asks, “How do we want our grandchildren and great-grandchildren to die?” (43) These provocative questions substantially reframe the issues. A controlling analogy throughout the book compares our physical environment to our “metaphysical” one, the “values, principles, attitudes, beliefs” on which our society is based (196; cf. 45, 166, 255). We “hold in trust” both the physical and metaphysical for future societies (52, 112, 163, 199, 255).

As pregnant with wisdom as this long-term perspective is, Somerville’s treatment of other key ideas is insufficient. Her response to the charge of speciesism is one example. She says that what “differentiates us from all other animals” is that humans are “meaning-seeking animals” (194; cf. 113). However, this characteristic seems untrue of human beings with serious cognitive impairments. If, then, moral status is simply a biological matter of having human genes, apart from possessing any particular capacities, such as autonomy or self-awareness, Somerville remains guilty as charged. Similarly, while she identifies the “essence” of humanity as the human spirit, this spirit is under-explained. While she typically associates it with “transcendence” (78), she also refers to the “essence of our humanness” as a “messy quality” that she thinks should be left untouched by attempts to perfect the human genome (186). But what exactly is this “messy quality”? If we are to hold in trust the human spirit, it would behoove us to know what it is. Additionally, while she generously engages with opposing views as they are presented in popular discourse, she largely leaves professional philosophical opponents undressed. For instance, one wonders how she would respond to John Rawls and other public reason advocates who argue, quite unlike Somerville, for a considerable degree of religious restraint in the public square.¹

¹ Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*, Expanded Edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005).

On balance, *Bird on an Ethics Wire* should likely be judged in one of two ways. One is that it is full of wisdom, a wisdom that learns from the past with an eye to the future and that recognizes the limits of language and reason. The other is that it is a less-than-cogent philosophical treatise, lacking clarity and precision, overly reliant on intuition and inexpert sociology. It seems only one can be true. Readers will draw their own judgments, but I suppose the ultimate judge, as Somerville suggests, will be history.

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The Meaning of Science: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science

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New York: Basic Books, 2016, xvi + 254 pps., \$26.99 (softcover)

doi:10.1017/S0012217316000299

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In this book, Lewens asks a series of questions about the broad value and significance of scientific work. It does not assume any scientific knowledge *per se*, nor does it presume that one has any familiarity with philosophy. In this book, Lewens notes that, whether they like it or not, scientists invariably end up engaging the same conceptual issues that have puzzled philosophers for millennia. It turns out, then, that the issues addressed by the philosophy of science—which this book explicitly addresses—matter in practical and pragmatic ways, for the most important questions of all address the human condition.

This book is divided into two parts, with the first part addressing what is meant by the terminology of ‘science,’ and the second part covering what science means to humans. Part One is composed of four chapters, with the first covering how science works, the second exploring issues of whether a given branch of investigation classifies as a science, the third covering the paradigm concept of Thomas Kuhn, and the fourth, explicating scientific realism. Part Two is also comprised of four substantive chapters, followed by an epilogue. Chapter Five covers values and veracity in science, and Chapter Six addresses the concept of altruism. Chapter Seven addresses whether there is such a thing as ‘human nature,’ and Eight addresses the perennial question of human freedom and if that concept is valid in view of contemporary science. The epilogue wraps up the volume by covering the reach of science. In what follows, I will delineate with more exactness the entailments of this text.

In commenting on how science works, Lewens dialogues greatly with Karl Popper, as he is the ‘authority,’ if you will, on the general nature of science. Popper was concerned