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

It is hard to believe that fundamental philosophical ethics might have something to say for family science. I shared this opinion until I got Gusztáv Kovács's *Thought Experiments in Ethics* in my hands. It changed this presupposition by triggering my intuitions through clever and sometimes even tricky imaginary stories.

In general, Kovács's book provides an insight into the world of thought experiments for those who are keen on working with ethical dilemmas and other morally complex scenarios. Originally targeting university lecturers – who set the goal to reach out “not only to the minds but also to the hearts of their students” (p. iii) –, the text provides a perfectly designed intellectual adventure to all readers interested in questions of ethics and moral theology. The work is split into two major parts: the first part explores the concept of thought experiments (Chapters I–IV) and the second part, provides an analysis of the classical examples of thought experiments, such as the Trolley Problem, the Violinist Scenario, and the Experience Machine (Chapters V–VIII).

While much of the contemporary academic discussion of thought experiments is centered around their role in argumentation, Kovács takes a different starting place. He focuses on the characteristics of thought experiments, such as their capacity “to create a unique, high-pressure situation in which a clear moral decision must be reached” so that “once somebody has heard (and understood) the story at the heart of the thought experiment, he cannot rid himself of its influence” (p. 16). The reader will appreciate the abundance of illustrations from the Bible, literature, and movie, providing not only a deeper understanding but a more fundamental experience about how these narratives work. Some

of the examples come from Central Europe (e.g., the story of Tomoceanszakatiti and Gyugyu) which makes the text even more intriguing.

But what do these thought experiences say about the family? Kovács's approach appeals to our intuitions, and thus, relies heavily on our everyday experiences which are strongly shaped by connectedness to our families. We are all descendants of previous generations, most of us have everyday family duties and we place ourselves in the world with reference to our family bonds and relationships. This also shapes our "intuitive apparatus", which is a key term of the book. We react intuitively to certain dilemma stories differently if they concern strangers or family members. One of the most striking examples is a modified version of Judith Jarvis Thomson's Violinist Scenario, where a father finds himself connected with the circulatory system of his teenage daughter (p. 233). In contrast to the original thought experiment, when the reader is faced with the situation of being kidnapped and connected to a stranger – the violinist –, here we find a very strong family tie between father and daughter. While the intuitive response to the first scenario might be rejection or at least hesitation, it is most probably a clear "yes" in case of the latter. It seems that close family bonds are strong formative elements of intuitive responses to interpersonal matters.

Another example is, although of a different character, Robert Nozick's Experience Machine Thought Experiment, where the crucial difference between a man-made, pre-programmed, illusionary world and the real world is drawn on an intuitive basis. One of the reasons why we would not plug into an experience machine and change our real life to a virtual one is that we aim at developing true relationships: "Relationships in people's current lives are real relationships with real people, and as such, are never fully under one's control, while relationships in the experience machine are pre-programmed, fully controllable, and simulated" (p. 116–117). These two random examples demonstrate the insights we might gain about the nature of family relationships by being confronted with the numerous thought experiments about interpersonal relationships drawn up in the book. Even the Last Man Argument, which concerns the immanent value of nature, uses the solitariness of the last remaining individual of mankind to challenge our view of our created world.

There are also some emotionally challenging stories in the book. The author uses them to exemplify how intuitions – or rather the circumstances driving the protagonist and the reader both in a corner – might paralyze rational decision-making. Not just the thought experiment from Zoltán Fábri's *Fifth Seal* (p. 1–15), but also the underlying dilemmas in Alan J. Pakula's *Sophie's Choice* and Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Dekalog, Eight*, are subtly interwoven with family

bonds (p. 158–160). These stories show that understanding often requires more than simple logical argumentation. Our struggle with emotions and immediate intuitive responses might also be important elements of the process leading to a deeper understanding. Family relationships seem to be the aptest to challenge our intuitive apparatus since they are emotionally loaded and demanding for all of us.

Kovács's book, however, is not a guide in understanding families through intuitions. It was certainly not intended as such. Still, readers seeking to understand why family matters so much for us might find the intuitive responses drawn by the dilemma stories useful. Those who expect Kovács's book to provide step-by-step instructions to solve ethical dilemmas might be disappointed. This is also true for family matters. It does not tell us how to act in a certain situation, neither how to dissolve dilemma cases, which are certainly known to all people living in families around the world. Readers must accept that it is not a handbook for casuists, but rather an example and guide for those who want to reach back to stories to understand themselves as human beings living in the network of family relationships. To put together, this book intends "to bring about a change of hearts and to establish the Kingdom of God" (p. 16).