

I N T E R V I S T E

**Conversation with Barbara Vetter**

*by Giulia Casini*

*Barbara Vetter is Professor of Theoretical Philosophy at Freie Universität Berlin. She has previously taught at Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen, and holds a BPhil and a DPhil from Oxford University. Barbara Vetter is the author of Potentiality: From Dispositions to Modality (Oxford University Press, 2015), co-editor of Dispositionen: Texte aus der zeitgenössischen Debatte (with Stephan Schmid, Suhrkamp, 2014) and has published various articles on dispositions, modality, abilities, and related issues in metaphysics, semantics, and philosophy of science. Most of her work focusses on developing and defending a disposition-based approach to modality. In this*

*interview, Vetter explains how she became interested in philosophy and in the metaphysics of modality specifically. She also talks about her book, Potentiality, answering some questions about dispositions, potentiality and possible worlds, concluding with some thoughts on the role of women philosophers in metaphysics.*

*1. Let's start from the beginning. How did you get interested in philosophy? Tell us about the path you followed to arrive where you are now.*

BV: I fell in love with philosophy as a teenager. I was a bookworm and read everything I could get my hands on; at some point I got a book on the history of philosophy, and I was hooked. I loved the ancient Greeks (Plato and the Pre-Socratics mostly) and the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Nietzsche and Kierkegaard). When I went to university to study philosophy, I thought that's what I would be doing. But then I took a class on contemporary metaphysics, and one on logic, and fell in love all over again. I started my university education at a small university in the south of Germany, close to where I grew up. I don't come from an academic family, and there was no one to tell me where else to go. But I was very lucky, in my very first year, to have a teacher who told me to apply to Oxford. I did, and after two years in Germany I went there as an exchange student, then stayed on to do the BPhil (the Master's degree in philosophy) and a PhD. Without that advice from my teacher I don't think I would be where I am now. When I first went to Oxford, I thought I wouldn't be able to come back to Germany. Academia there seemed a rather closed circle. Fortunately, by the time I'd finished my PhD (in 2010), this had changed dramatically. Having done my PhD in Oxford was a huge advantage in getting a position in Germany. Apart from a short stint back in the south of Germany, I've been teaching in Berlin (first at Humboldt-University, now at the Free University) since 2010, and I think it's a wonderful place to do philosophy.

*2. You decided to dedicate yourself to metaphysics, in particular to the metaphysics of modality. What led you to make this choice, rather than considering other branches of philosophy?*

BV: I was always more interested in the more theoretical branches of philosophy, rather than ethics or political philosophy – I feel much more comfortable applying abstract thought to abstract questions than to practical ones, and my attraction to philosophy was always based on a desire to better understand ourselves and the world we live in. (Maybe escapism plays a role as well!) Metaphysics was one of the areas that got me into analytic philosophy. Modality wasn't the first thing I thought about, but by the time I was thinking about a PhD topic, I had become rather sceptical of philosophers using the apparatus of possible worlds. The reasons for my scepticism weren't so much that I had an argument against it. I felt, rather, that it was sterile way of thinking, too remote from the concerns that drive us to ask the philosophical questions. Think about free will. When we ask whether we have free will, we quickly get into discussions of what we can or cannot do. But if that "can or cannot do" is spelled out in terms of what we, or our counterparts, do at other possible worlds, how is that relevant to our initial concerns? These are the kinds of thoughts that motivated me to look for another way of talking about modality. As it happened, I had also done some work on Aristotle's metaphysics, in which the concept of potentiality played an important role. So I thought, why not start with potentialities – the dispositions, abilities, tendencies, and capacities of the ordinary things that we deal with every day (and that we are ourselves)? It was only after I had started to think about this that I realized there was a whole debate going on in the newly invented "metaphysics of science" that had begun to rehabilitate the notion of a power or disposition. I was very lucky in that respect: I had a topic that I cared about, and that a lot of other philosophers were interested in, but no one had yet done the work I wanted to do.

*3. Talking about your works on the metaphysics of modality, there is your most recent book, Potentiality: from dispositions to modality. Do you consider it a milestone in your philosophical development?*

BV: Yes, certainly. It's a development of my PhD thesis, and it is to date my only monograph. Most of my philosophical work since then has spun off from its topics, developed the ideas further, and so on. And, since it's a book, it allowed me to develop my approach over more than 200 pages and tie everything together, thus offering an alternative and distinctive view for people to discuss – that's certainly one advantage of a book as compared to a journal article. I'm very glad to see that it is being discussed, and criticized, and developed further by others.

4. *Coming now to the subject of your book. Can you explain, generally speaking, what “potentiality” is?*

BV: I use “potentiality” as a technical term to cover a range of properties that we are very familiar with: our own abilities, like my ability to write or your ability to read this; dispositions of the objects around us, like a glass’s fragility or a sugar cube’s water-solubility; tendencies, like my tendency to stay up too late; and capacities, powers, whatever you want to call them. In general, anything that is attributed to an individual with the auxiliary “can” (or its cognate in other languages) is a potentiality. Potentialities are modal: that is to say, they concern not just how an individual is and what it does, but how it could be and what it could do. Potentialities can manifest: my ability to write is being manifested, for instance, by writing this, and a sugar cube’s solubility is manifested when it dissolves in water. But they are still there when they’re not being manifested. Moreover, potentialities aren’t just modal, they are modal *properties*: they characterize particular individuals, they are ways that these individuals are. A glass’s fragility is a feature of the glass, and the glass retains that feature even when we’ve safely packed it so that it won’t break. This is, I think, why potentialities are so important to us: they tend to be relatively stable features of things in the world (ourselves included), and so by learning about them we acquire a reliable way of projecting possibilities into the future.

5. *In your book, a big attention is given to the distinction between dispositions and potentialities. Could you tell us something about it?*

BV: When philosophers these days talk about potentiality, they are likely to use the term “disposition,” a technical term used to refer to such properties as fragility, solubility, elasticity, etc. – the paradigmatic cases are properties, roughly, that we express with the suffix “-ble” and its cognates. (We sometimes forget that it’s a technical term; but outside philosophy, no one calls fragility a “disposition.”) It’s not always clear exactly how the class is circumscribed, but a standard assumption has been that dispositions come with clearly specified counterfactual conditionals describing their manifestation and the conditions under which it would occur, such as “if the glass were hit, it would break.” I use the term “potentiality,” which is also a term of art, for two reasons. First, I want to move away from the counterfactual model. I think that the properties at issue are more possibility-like: a fragile thing is one that *can* easily break, a soluble

substance is one that *can* dissolve, and so on. No particular set of circumstances that would trigger the manifestation is expressed with a term like “fragile,” and we have no reason to think that it must be part of the property we ascribe with it. Second, and more importantly, I think that in metaphysics we must go beyond the properties that are usually covered by this term. A champagne glass is fragile, as is my coffee mug; my building is not, and nor is a steel bridge or a gold ring. But all of those things *can* break, and there is no sharp cut-off between the glass and the mug, on the one hand, and the building, the bridge, and the ring on the other. Rather, the difference seems to be one of degrees only, and any distinction we can draw between the fragile and the non-fragile objects must be vague and to some extent arbitrary. I don’t want to stipulate such vague and arbitrary cut-offs in metaphysics, but rather think that they are a matter of how we think and speak about the world. Hence the underlying metaphysics, if we take dispositions seriously, should include the whole spectrum of degrees, from the champagne glass to the gold ring. Since it is, I think, incompatible with standard usage to call a gold ring fragile or disposed to break, I have decided to use a different term, “potentiality,” to refer to the property that is possessed, to different degrees, along the whole spectrum.

*6. Considering your commitment to explaining modality through dispositions and potentialities, without appealing to possible worlds, a natural question comes up: what is your opinion on possible worlds? Is there a place in your theory for them or do you think we should abandon possible worlds theories altogether?*

BV: I think possible worlds can be a useful tool in logic and semantics, but we must take care not to confuse the tool with the underlying metaphysics. Possible worlds talk provides useful models to bring out formal or structural features of various notions, from modality to obligation, vagueness, knowledge, and various other phenomena. We can think of possible worlds as sets of sentences, or just as points, indices, to which we assign sentences in some way. I have no objection to this practice. But possible worlds thus understood certainly aren’t worlds – they’re points in a model. Nor do they bear any very special relation to possibility – we can stipulate them to include only sentences that are jointly possible, or we might not, depending on our purposes; and if we do, then that should be done on the basis of some other understanding of what possibility is. So, while it may be useful to think in terms of possible worlds sometimes, I do not think that they have

any role to play in understanding the metaphysics of modality – what possibility and necessity *are*.

*7. Speaking of “worlds,” dispositions and potentialities are usually understood as belonging to the objects of the world: Do you think there are dispositions and potentialities that belong to the world itself as a whole, rather than to its individual objects?*

BV: Yes, but what they are depends on what we think “the world” refers to. We may think of the world, roughly, as either “everything there is” – a sort of mereological sum of all the objects in it – or we may think of it as “where everything is” – as a sort of place or container in which everything that exists is contained. In each case the world will have potentialities of its own, but in the first case those potentialities will be wholly derivative from those of the individuals in it. In the second case, the world is an individual of its own, though of course a very special (and big!) one; we may identify it with spacetime itself. In that case, it might well have such potentialities as the potentiality to contain different things from the ones it actually contains.

*8. In closing, what do you think about women working in metaphysics? Are they still rare gems or they are getting more and more numerous? Do you think there can be ways to encourage women to undertake such a path?*

BV: I think we’re getting more and more numerous. There is still much to do, but I feel very optimistic. There are a number of established women in metaphysics, and many more junior women who will make an impact on the field. I think that to a large extent, whether a field attracts women is a sociological matter. Take philosophy of language. There are very few women in the more formal parts of it (there are some brilliant women working in the philosophy of language! But there are fewer of them than, say, in ethics or epistemology). Some people might think that women just tend to be less attracted to this formal work. But it’s easy to see that that’s false: if you turn just a little bit more formal, you’ll end up in linguistics, where the majority of researchers are women (including the really big names). I think this can be generalized: whether there are many, or only a few, women in a field, depends not so much on the content of the discussion but on various sociological matters – who dominates the discussion, who supports and encourages whom, etc. It’s difficult to say exactly what’s the right path here. But I generally adopt a policy of small, individual steps. I benefited hugely from the support and encouragement I was given

throughout my studies, such as the teacher who encouraged me to apply to Oxford. So I try to reciprocate: to encourage women early on, to provide role models for them (not just me!), to tell them very explicitly that they are doing well, to push them a little bit to be more confident and take some chances. I have had many excellent female students over the years, all of whom are doing very well in their academic careers so far. The more there are of us, the easier it becomes for the next generation!

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