New Books

*Ethical Formation*
By Sabina Lovibond

The central part of Sabina Lovibond’s second book elaborates ideas first sketched out in her admirable contribution to David Wiggins’s Festschrift. (See her ‘Ethical Upbringing: From Connivance to Cognition’, in S. Lovibond and S. G. Williams (eds.), *Essays for David Wiggins: Identity, Truth and Value.* ) These enrich our repertory of responses to a perennial problem. Nothing is more familiar within moral experience than a divergence between judgment (about what should be done) and decision (about what to do). One explanation is that this displays a kind of weakness, whence the Greek label *acrasia*, connoting a lack of control. However, philosophers who follow Socrates and Aristotle in taking decision to be no less an exercise of reason than judgment have difficulty accommodating the appearances. According to a Socratic paradox, no one errs willingly—that is, with knowledge. Aristotle argues that an action that is consciously contrary to a judgment betrays that the judgment was not seriously meant. That ploy has seemed implausible. Lovibond gives it a rationale by diagnosing the insincerity as a regression that is the converse of the gradual process, within ethical formation, whereby an individual comes to make the morality of a society her own. If it is open to reflection whether her own approach makes the most of this insight, that may confirm its status as an insight.

Lovibond takes over from John McDowell’s *Mind and World* the thesis that there is no necessary gulf between thought and reality. To have beliefs that are true is faithfully to capture the way things are; for our concepts do not misrepresent a world that is really amorphous, but constitute the very structure of experiences that are (most of them) essentially presentations of the world, and of nothing more private. She recommends a ‘quietism’ that declines to privilege one putatively truth-directed region of discourse over another. Unless, as she puts it there is initial reason to dismiss some way of thinking as claptrap (as most of us now view astrology), ‘then our respect for it as a potential mode of access to truth is *something to which philosophy must adapt itself*’ (19). She acknowledges Crispin Wright’s objection that quietism is a refusal to pursue focused debates between realism and antirealism that may serve, as she puts it, ‘as exercises in applying Wittgenstein’s advice to attend to the multiple communicative functions of language rather than to the formal (grammatical) homogeneity of much of its “surface”’ (22). Yet she prefers herself to use the term ‘quietism’ not of such a refusal, but of a rejection of any ‘sideways on’ scrutiny that might
try to adjudicate, from some neutral point of view, whether or not ‘this or that entire region of discourse succeeds in making contact with the “real world”’ (ibid.). To which a sceptic might respond by questioning both whether the term has two senses, and whether, if it does, distinguishing them does anything to clarify or neutralize the force of the complaint.

It is not Lovibond’s style, or policy, to engage with the opposition. The great merit of her first three chapters is that they bring together elements not only from McDowell, but from Plato and Aristotle, in a way that articulates an ethical perspective that attractively accommodates a pre-philosophical confidence that we may hope to retain. Her exposition of a viewpoint is always elegant and lucid, and it is enriched by a plethora of felicitous citation, ancient and modern. She interestingly hopes that the Greek notion of a \textit{logos}, interpreted as a ratio, might ‘serve as a counter-weight to the uncodifiability of the virtuous person’s knowledge’ (57). This would be a structure impressed upon the individual soul through upbringing, and then externalized in intentional actions that fit the web of circumstance—though Lovibond appears to waver between Plato’s respect for inner structures (56–7) and Wittgenstein’s privileging of external manifestations (60–61). Another point she draws from Wittgenstein’s aesthetics. She acknowledges that a moral sensitivity is not exhausted by the application of Bernard Williams’s ‘thick’ concepts, but may well be expressed by \textit{saying} very little (‘All right’, or ‘I could not possibly do that’). She nicely notes that such verbal economy is typical of intimate conversations that rest equally upon a common culture and personal congeniality (39–44).

It may be less fruitfully, even confusingly, that her eclecticism extends in later chapters beyond the premodernity of McDowell and his Greek forebears to the postmodernism of Jacques Derrida. She is troubled by Derrida’s charge that marshalling a particular under a concept amounts to a ‘violence’ of reason (164), despite an awareness that this risks resurrecting what McDowell has termed ‘the Myth of the Given’ (\textit{Mind and World}, 8). (One way of placing it is in relation to Hilary Putnam’s ironic likening of a formless ‘given’ to the dough that is first divided by a cookie-cutter. One may wonder whether, in exaggerating the violence of that image, a turn of the metaphorical screw is not masquerading as a point of substance.) Though she is verbally never at a loss, it cannot be said that her attempt to ride both horses at once (174–9) achieves any equilibrium. She is sensitive to a real worry: how can our conceptual structures be perfectly transparent to the structure of reality when some of them, at least, have a contingent human history? Yet she keeps recurring to certain feelings—‘the “thing”, the particular, which (some feel) cannot “speak”’ (177), ‘what we would like (albeit waywardly or “nonsensically”) to call an element of difference’ (178), ‘the recognition of this nonsensical (yet also non-arbitrary) impulse’ (178–9)—which she is able neither to exorcise nor to elucidate. Nor is it any easier to trace a consistent thread when she is receptive of Derrida’s complaint against J. L. Austin that a general practice that draws on the ‘general iterability’ of forms of words already makes
sincerity in speech not the default, but an idealizing illusion (104–5). (Is it implied that only a private language could make possible a perfect authenticity of utterance?) Nor again is it easy to reconcile McDowell’s quietism, which permits only the reflective modification of a tradition from inside (on the analogy of Neurath’s boat, which is only reparable while afloat), with Lovibond’s sympathy with a ‘recalcitrance’ that must indeed hope ‘to appeal to a strand of sensibility in our audience’ (144), but is resistant to ‘any operation designed to assimilate to the established forms of a culture some “matter” that lies outside them’ (154). Her book appears too broad-minded to be of a piece.

This may bring us back to the real originality of its three central chapters, which explore what I have already welcomed as a new idea (that rare thing) about the roots of acrasia. Those who follow Socrates in excluding the possibility of a conscious discrepancy between thought and action have been driven to take inaction (or contrary action) as a proof of insincerity in judgment. Aristotle likens the words of the acratic to the mouthing of the drunkard, novice, or actor (Nichomachean Ethics VII 3, 1147a18–24). R. M. Hare writes of an ‘off-colour’ or ‘inverted commas’ use of ‘ought’, whereby the speaker is expressing no conviction of his own, but ‘only paying lip-service to a convention’ (The Language of Morals, 126). Lovibond rescues these suggestions by recasting such failures not as the ad hoc corollaries of a parti pris, but as real indications that the agent has not completed the task of adopting the moral point of view as his own. Assimilation of a culture starts with imitation; and make-believe (as in Max Beerbohm’s fable of ‘the happy hypocrite’) may be part of the process of modelling one’s own face upon a mask, of transcending one’s own first and primitive nature by a second and social nature. As Benjamin Constant wrote, ‘Nous sommes des créatures tellement mobiles que les sentiments que nous feignons, nous finissons par les éprouver’ (Adolphe, chapter 6). Ethical formation, in this picture, becomes a long advance from the rehearsal of received ideas to the full authorship, as Lovibond terms it, of one’s own opinions; yet the progress even of the best educated may be imperfectly complete, so that they regress on occasion in a less authentic state. Hence full sincerity and commitment is not the default, but an ideal.

Lovibond is well placed to suggest that this new context ‘can help to dispel the air of dogma or arbitrariness surrounding the Socratic position by helping us to do justice to an element of indeterminancy which already, in our pre-philosophical thinking, attaches to questions of moral conviction’: one may ask oneself whether one really believes that some act is necessary or impossible, and be uncertain of the answer (96–7). Yet she is tempted into cutting the Gordian knot by a piece of stipulation. She concedes that we normally associate the concept of holding a moral belief ‘with a fairly loose cluster of criteria’, no single one of which is either necessary or sufficient (94). But she finds room for ‘an ideal concept’ which makes the connection between judgment and action tight and indefeasible (95); one may then ‘refuse in advance’ to recognize any state
of affairs as ‘a genuine instance of akrasia’ (ibid.). She admits that ‘to adopt this attitude is to place the indefeasibility thesis beyond the reach of empirical falsification’, and so debars it ‘from featuring in a psychologically informative theory about the origins of virtuous action’; yet she is glad to cut ‘the Socratic paradox free from any semblance of grounding in a substantive psychological theory’ (95–6).

This may disappoint. It apparently reduces the Socratic paradox to a tautology gratuitously generated by conceptual innovation. Even Aristotle did not simply stipulate that ineffectual utterance is insincere, but explained its idleness by supposing that the rampageous appetites which he took to be active in central cases of akrasia actually change one’s physical state, much like intoxication (NE VII 3, 1147a11–18). And the idea of incomplete ethical formation surely invites psychological spelling out in any number of ways: one might try speaking of the recalcitrance of first nature, or of the internalization of values with which the agents fails fully to identify, or of his failure (in a term made pregnant by Richard Wollheim in The Thread of Life) fully to accept propositions to which he rationally assents. Such language is familiar to Lovibond, who identifies ‘a time-honoured view about the psychological basis of accountability’ as ‘the idea of upbringing as a process that creates a unitary character out of the various motivational “fragments” present in us from day one in the form of transient impulses, and so gradually enables us, as this character gains definition; to speak as one person, self-consistent over time … in our desires, beliefs, and habits of judgment’ (71). So what inhibits her elsewhere from psychological explanation? We may recall her vein of aversion to the ‘unnecessary shuffle’ (a phrase from Wittgenstein) of looking behind the ‘physiognomy’ of behaviour for an explanatory ‘mental “principle” or “structure”’ that could disclose itself ‘only to substantial psychological enquiry’; her hope was instead to be able to say of the surface phenomena, ‘That is all that happens’ (60–61). These are indeed debated and debatable issues. And yet, without either aspiring to any rigidly structured psychological ‘theory’, or assuming the elusive mental acts of which Wittgenstein awoke suspicions, one may still hope to articulate how our second nature exploits the repertory of our first nature in ways that can reconcile culture and authenticity, but at the risk of making each of us an instance of Baudelaire’s homo duplex.

It may indeed be salutary to return from the lucidity of McDowell and ludicity of Derrida to two classic presentations of mental conflict in nineteenth-century fiction: the wrestlings of conscience and temptation in the minds of Mr Bulstrode in Middlemarch (chapter 70), and of Jean Valjean in Les misérables (book 7). Without changing their minds about what duty demands, Bulstrode ends up behaving basely, Valjean nobly. We can stipulate ex post facto that Valjean had achieved the ‘authorship’ of decent opinions of which Bulstrode enjoyed only the usufruct. This would carry no implication that Valjean was bound to succeed, and Bulstrode to fail; indeed, it would explain nothing. And yet there is a genuine understanding that Eliot conveys to us (more soberly than Hugo), one that need not be
opaque to a philosophy sensitive to the contingency and frailty of our second nature.

Of course, such speculations should not be taken as ungrateful to Lovibond’s still valuable book. They, and others, may lead us down paths to which she has opened the gate.

Anthony Price

Conditions of Love
By John Armstrong

John Armstrong has written a book that is a pleasure to read, on a subject of real-world practical relevance for almost everyone. Its style and content are both instructive. It also raises philosophical questions, and I will concentrate on some of them.

One question is what a philosophy of love would be like, and why the literature is so small. Obviously there are many books about love, or supposedly about love, all the way from Mills & Boon to the Kama Sutra and beyond. In principle, ‘Conditions of Love’ could be a Mills & Boon title, but on the cover, instead of a drawing of a girl and a ruffian on a hillside, it has a very nice painting by Ingres, and its subtitle is ‘the philosophy of intimacy’. Armstrong also mentions various philosophers including Socrates and Hegel, but most of his sources are novelists or dramatists such as Goethe and Tolstoy and Woody Allen. An excellent study (which Armstrong doesn’t mention) of ‘Love and Friendship in Plato and Aristotle’ by A. W. Price was published by OUP in 1989. Nozick’s ‘The Examined Life’ (Simon and Schuster, 1989) includes chapters called ‘Sexuality’ and ‘Love’s bond’ and the surprising claim that ‘there is no limit to what can be learned and felt about each other in sex; the only limit is the sensitivity or responsiveness or creativity or daring of the partners’ (p. 63). Nozick also mentions a book called ‘Love’ by Robert Solomon (New York: Anchor, 1981). But it is plausible that less philosophy is currently being written about love than about Searle’s Chinese room, or the logical form of adversarial sentences, let’s say. The series of Oxford readings in philosophy includes a collection of papers about Conditionals, but not one about Love. So why is that?

There is also a question about the role or place in the philosophy of love of first-person information. Descartes thought the idea that ‘I exist’ was somehow fundamental to all philosophy, and in his first book, ‘The Intimate Philosophy of Art’, Armstrong often writes about his own feelings for paintings and buildings: ‘The clump of mature trees in Walton’s picture makes me think of some trees I came across in my childhood ...’ (p. 66). But ‘Conditions of Love’ contains almost no personal information. The blurb on the inside cover says that ‘in this territory, Armstrong is a graceful and accomplished guide’, which sounds as if we are about to be led into a ballroom, rather than taken through a philosophical argument. But the
text gives no details of Armstrong’s exploits or accomplishments in the
territory of love, and when it occurs, the first-person pronoun does not
function as it did in Russell’s autobiography, for example, but as a variable:
‘If, at certain moments, I adopt a Pauline attitude to my partner it is partly
because I identify with the need for charitable interpretation...’ (p. 116). So
is the philosophy of love going to be a lot of one-person meditations or
two-person arguments, or a long string of abstract nouns about lovers-in-
and-for-themselves, or what?

‘Conditions of Love’ is 161 pages long, divided into 22 chapters. In the
first chapter; Armstrong says our idea of love is dominated by the roman-
tic hope of falling madly in love, but it is continuing, long-term love that
we all want. (Maybe so.) Subsequent chapters consider possession, infatu-
ation; recognition, imagination (twice: its roles in illusion and in percep-
tion), charity, sexuality et cetera. The longest chapters are called ‘why love
has a history’ and ‘maturity’ (the final chapter). There is an index, but not
much about popular subjects like marriage or polygamy or divorce or
choirboys.

The logic starts in chapter two, where Armstrong argues that love can’t
be defined, citing Wittgenstein’s discussion of games and family resem-
blances (Investigations 65 ff.), and concludes that love doesn’t have an
essence, as gold does, but it consists of a set of themes. Here, I think, more
than one philosopher’s eyebrow may be raised already. Certainly, love is
not easy to define. A formula like ‘love is friendship plus sex’ would imme-
diately exclude platonic love. But the alternative is not just a set of themes
or a shapeless fog of ideas. A family does not consist of pure resemblances,
and Wittgenstein was aware of this. If love is like a family, then it has a
structure like a family tree, and it is open, not ‘closed by a frontier’
(Investigations 68). Its branches may include platonic love, romantic love,
intimacy, the love between parent and child, and caring for someone in
hospital. On the branches, different philosophers and parents and nurses
may be in different positions, or criss-crossing the field of love on differ-
ent paths. All the same, love has an essence. It must involve two people.
This doesn’t mean our definition of love is now closed. It means that if I
say ‘I love chocolate’, or ‘I love Tibbles the cat’, that is either a metaphor
or a report of an illness.

Armstrong’s own theory begins in chapter three (love’s evolution) with
the claim that the capacity for love is genetically inherited. In genetics, the
basic plan is to have as many babies as possible. This is why we are attract-
ed to the appearance of health and fertility, and males have evolved to the
point where a peacock can mate thirty times in a morning (Matt Ridley:
‘The Red Queen’). But a gene for maximizing babies only survives on an
evolutionary timescale if the resulting babies survive long enough to have
babies who survive long enough to have babies and so on. A million dead
first-generation babies would not achieve anything. Now, ‘loyalty to, and
care for, a mate in the period following conception helps to ensure the well-
being of the offspring’ (p. 17). The offspring of loyal carers have a better
chance of survival therefore. So the gene for loyalty and caring will emerge.
Armstrong expresses reservations about this part of the story, and adds that our experience and behaviour in love are also influenced by society and culture, not just by our genes. Chapter five is called ‘the perfect union’, and is a good example of philosophy in action. In the beginning, according to Aristophanes in Plato’s Symposium, we had four legs and four arms until Zeus cut us in half, saying ‘If this doesn’t keep them quiet I’ll bisect them again; they can hop on one leg’ (p. 32). If we had to hop around trying to find three other quarters, not just one other half, it would be pretty ridiculous, but part of Aristophanes’ theory of evolution survives in the myth that there is exactly one person who is right for us. Woody Allen had a character called Spencer who was ‘searching for a woman interested in golf, inorganic chemistry, outdoor sex and the music of Bach’ (p. 33).

Unfortunately, in logic, this is an indefinite description, whereas ‘Mr Right’ or ‘Ms Fantastic’ should be singular terms, and Armstrong shows that the demand for compatibility is never satisfied (p. 34). So the condition is not necessary and the names are empty. We could try to widen our search, for example by deleting the word ‘inorganic’, but there is a more important point. Priorities change through a relationship (p. 35). If I am looking for someone who is $F_1 \ldots F_n$, and I find the person who uniquely fits that description, then in logic I must have everything I want. But love is not like that. The first thing that happens is that you want to go to the cinema together, which was not mentioned in the original specification. So the condition is not sufficient either.

In any case, the argument continues, there is a prior question: what do we want from love? Aristophanes’ story doesn’t tell us that. Armstrong suggests that sometimes we hope to acquire admirable qualities by being close to someone else who has them already. And as well as wanting love to improve us, educate us or cure us, we want to be cherished as we are now, for the qualities or ideas we like in ourselves. Alternatively, Armstrong says, we might want someone with whom to continue the unfinished business of childhood. So we want someone to help us or appreciate us or participate in a fantasy. In every case, we need to be close to another person. That is the theory.

The next few chapters talk about what happens in practice. Cupid is not a good shot. He is blind and lacks experience, but when his arrows hit someone, there is a flowering of the imagination. We look forward towards fulfilment and a blissful future, and dream about having babies:

‘Falling in love, then, is a result of two things coming together: the longings which we have and the workings out of our imagination.’ (p. 93).

But if this is going to work, our imagination must be applied to the real world: ‘what it might be like to try to get a recalcitrant three-year-old into a car seat while your one-year-old is crying because the rain is dripping onto her face’ (p. 80). There is also a role for virtue and discernment:

‘Just as a muted work of art; like Turner’s small sketch [of a kitchen], would be quickly passed over by someone alert to only the most obvious
signs of artistic bravura; so a muted person (an ordinary person) has attractive qualities which will probably not be evident to a casual observer. In other words, imagination can be allied to acuteness of perception, rather than to distortion.' (p. 96)

This looks like a clear and distinct idea. Love involves two people such that x is close to y. Two is more than one and less than three. And if love is a relation like ‘x is close to y’, then it is not reflexive or transitive, but it is symmetric. In other words, if x is close to y, then y must be close to x, and if x wants y to help her sometimes, or to love her just as she is, then y may want x to love him just as he is, and to help him sometimes, and so on. So long-term love demands the same things from both partners: imagination, creativity and what Armstrong calls ‘katabasis’, seeing depth in small things, and a mature vision of love which ‘sees problems not as the end of love, not as a sign that love is over; but as the ground on which love operates’ (p. 144).

I return to my earlier questions. Armstrong’s philosophy of love is not completely a priori. It is firmly attached to life on earth by detailed examples and reminders, connected in a logical structure. It is more complete than Plato’s discussion, and more up-to-date than Aristotle’s. As far as Descartes is concerned, readers of ‘I think therefore I am’ must recognize in it their own existence, not just Descartes’ previous existence. ‘Conditions of Love’ is not autobiographical, but it works like the cogito, by presenting a picture of love that makes sense to another person. I know this because, when I’d finished reading it, I bought a second copy, and when we were in Urbino together, I gave my girlfriend one as an anniversary present, and she said she likes it as well.

Gary Jenkins