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Philosopher: A Kind of Life

By Ted Honderich

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Philosopher: A Kind of Life by Ted Honderich, Grote Professor Emeritus, University College London, aims to give the reader a sense of the general and the particular. The general is what it was like to be a philosopher working in an English university of good repute in the second half of the 20th century. The particular is what it was like to be, under those conditions, the particular self that Ted Honderich was. At the same time, Honderich denies that this self, at least insofar as it is the subject of a story, was a unique one. Where Rousseau claimed that Nature had broken the mould after making him, raising the question why his readers should be interested in this one-of-a-kind production, Honderich emphasizes that his life is to be understood as a generic life. My aim, he says,

is not another autobiography. Who in my authorial situation does not promise more? The first of my two aims is to open up *a kind of life*. It is to make plain *a kind of life* by a good means, quite possibly the very best means. That is getting into view and telling the truth about a suitable instance or example of the thing. My life, although notable in parts, is not much more than middle-sized. I do not have the satisfaction and misfortune of being a real individual, so impressively and uselessly different that to learn of me is to learn only of me. (5–6)

A native of Baden, Ontario who left Canada for Britain in 1959, Honderich is known for his arguments on behalf of a determinism with teeth, i.e. one without the supposed consolations of compatibilism. These were developed and applied in *Punishment: The Supposed Justifications* (1969); in *A Theory of Determinism: The Mind: Neuroscience and Life-Hopes* (1988), and in *How Free Are You?* (1993). He is also well known in the UK for his writings on political ideology and equality advocating civil disobedience towards unjust regimes and on the scandal of global disparities in

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length and quality of life. His political views were set out in *Violence for Equality: Inquiries in Political Philosophy* (1980) and *Conservatism* (1990); and inform the more recent *After the Terror* (2002). His other books and articles have addressed issues in philosophy of mind (consciousness), causation, temporality, and ethics (consequentialism). This notice is, however, restricted to some philosophical aspects of the autobiography (I will refer to it as such despite the author's disclaimer) and makes no attempt to describe and evaluate Honderich's research contributions.

Philosopher is based on diaries, letters and administrative documents. It is, the author says, his first non-accidental book, the first that did not stem from a specific assignment. Like a typical work of philosophy, it embodies a commitment to veracity and clarity; unlike a typical work of philosophy, it pursues those values at some cost of tact and discretion. There are two strands to the narrative. One is cyclical and narrates the author's domestic life and his turbulent relations with women, running through Schopenhauerian sequences of hope and disillusion. The other is linear and narrates his rise in the profession, his successful struggle to become, as he puts it, first Professor and then the Grote Professor. These motifs might well be named the Enigma and the Game: the Enigma of marriage and the Game of career ascent. The two story lines are filled in with Honderich's accounts of his fixed and evolving views regarding sense-data, skepticism, the correspondence theory of truth, definite descriptions, moral judgments, and laws of nature.

Philosophy, according to Honderich, is different from linguistics, psychology, cognitive science, philosophy of life, history of ideas, history of morality, politics, or religion, classical scholarship, and feminism, as engaging as these subjects may be. Philosophy is the product of 'the impulse to reduce to clarity and thereby get a systematic and comprehensive hold on the nature of one or two of the fundamental parts of reality, including human reality.' It is, 'in comparison with morality, religion, and politics ... more committed to independence from desire and hope.' More committed, though not uncommitted, since political philosophy is usually not neutral on the question of the features of a decent world. I shall return to a puzzling inconsistency in Honderich's views in this respect, but it is sufficient for now to remark that with respect to the Enigma and the Game, desire and hope are the very engines of the story. They are subject to the same kind of clear-minded querying as the other topics. The central attention given to the Enigma—what are the necessary and sufficient conditions of Marriage, lasting commitment to One?—is alone sufficient to distinguish *Philosopher* from the run of

academic autobiographies. This includes most certainly Bertrand Russell's, believed in its time to be a marvel of self-knowledge and narrative honesty on the basis of a single line recounting an idea Russell had about his first wife whilst peddling his bicycle. Modern philosophers, as *Philosopher* makes clear, have the same troubles as anyone else; cash-flow worries, friction in the household, children who don't take advice, vexation from colleagues, and, for that matter, the same pleasures in food, drink, travel, the decoration of houses, courtship and companionship.

The book's parallel organization and commitment to disclosure have brought down much adverse criticism that could have been anticipated. For no author of an autobiography can expect it to be judged merely as literature or evaluated for its descriptive accuracy. Moralistic sentiments, as Hume never tired of pointing out, flow naturally from the human heart and the most blasé persons cannot refrain from theorizing about and offering verdicts on their acquaintances' actions and the pattern of their lives. The writer is meanwhile in negotiation with his readers over the standards of proper conduct, for the telling of one's own life presupposes what H. P. Grice called a doubt-or-denial condition. Someone—perhaps the narrator himself, perhaps one of the plaintive ghosts who visit the bedside on bad nights—must have raised the question whether the life in question was a good one, or at least not such a bad one, or must have even expressed the view that it was not so good. At the same time, autobiography implies what the Germans called a *Wahrheitsanspruch*, a claim on, or aspiration to the truth. The knowledge that doubt-and-denial can be stilled by the promulgation of untruths and half-truths, self-serving delusions of which the author has become firmly persuaded, induces an attitude of suspicion in the reader, to which the writer is in turn sensitive. The ideal of the author is this: the truth laid bare, adverse judgment will be stifled. Real understanding is inconsistent with condemnation, not because it helps us to see the so-called agent as a victim of impersonal forces leading us at least to a partial suspension of what P. F. Strawson called reactive attitudes. Rather, it is because ample disclosure leads us to see how micro-rationality and micro-goodness in individual decisions can project to bad overall patterns. No one (or only the rare person) does evil willingly amongst her personal acquaintances. Most personal harm, as opposed to gross political harm to others comes about as a byproduct of the seeking of certain goods whose value no one disputes.

The truth-appraisal of any memoir—and we have to believe that it is true if it is to have the doubt-and-denial dissolving effect that

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is intended—is difficult. This is not because memory is unreliable, as is popularly claimed. Psychologists have shown that our memory for things that happen *to us* is excellent, and the facility with which false memory can apparently be induced does not impugn our competency for the simple reason that nature, unlike memory-psychologists, spends no time and ingenuity trying to fool us. Yet the truth-requirement is not easy to fulfil. A sequentially-organized collection of true sentences (whatsoever these may be) on the topic of the states and doings of *N* in the interval t_1 – t_n , is not equivalent to a true historical account of *N*'s states and doings in the interval t_1 – t_n . It is not necessary that all of *N*'s states and doings be reported in a true narrative—this would be absurd and impossible—only that nothing of significance be left out. Every fact that has relevance should be told—the ‘whole truth requirement.’ And in autobiography, we require not only a true account of what happened, but a true account of the narrator's responsibility for what happened, and this can only mean the degree of responsibility that a reasonable person aware of how the world works would ascribe to him. This is what we feel the author owes us, and Honderich delivers on this expectation. The upshot, however, is that just as Nancy Cartwright maintained that the truth doesn't explain much, responsibility turns out not to help much.

The hero of *Philosopher* finds in himself as many unheroic qualities as Rousseau did, including ignorance, shyness, snobbery, political timidity, excessive generosity in his duties as referee, and tendencies to rage and depression. He was an ungainly adolescent. ‘I was getting too tall, near to the final 6'4" and maybe skinny, a bean-pole. There were also the specs, those mortifying proofs not only of weak eyes but of a weak manhood. Further my head wasn't big enough for my height and the hair not wiry enough for the crew cut.’ His origins are rural and simple. He is the first member of his family to receive a higher education. His temper is bad and he doesn't get on well with other men. To the Americans, he is merely a Canadian and not exotic; in London, he is a merely a North American and therefore probably not clever. How does a man who is an object of mistrust become the Grote Professor? This makes for a good story.

The Game narrative runs as follows. Honderich acquires an Honours degree in English Languages and Literatures from the University of Toronto. After a brief career in journalism, including a trip with Elvis Presley, he decides to study Philosophy. He is offered a place in 1959 as a Research Student at University College London by A. J. Ayer, whose *Language, Truth and Logic* he has read

and admired, only to find that Ayer has departed for Oxford. Ayer returns to London to run a weekly graduate seminar, and there, with the help of John Watling, Richard Wollheim, and Stuart Hampshire, Honderich learns how Philosophy is done. He acquires Bernard Williams as a supervisor, takes up a post in 1962 at the University of Sussex, and is commissioned by Patrick Corbett to write a book on the justification of punishment. He decides not to return to Canada, offering to repay the government his £1500 Commonwealth Scholarship. Wilson's labour politics agree with him. 'Canada,' he writes,

had seemed to me a tolerable society but also without *resolution*. My first compatriots had carried no large moral intention into reality in their society. They had not constructed or allowed others to construct a Welfare State. My second compatriots had. It existed, and it worked. (134)

'I came of age in a country of diffidence, rectitude, and classlessness,' he says elsewhere, 'and I was not so content with it as others were.'

Meanwhile, Honderich acquires a number of editorships, including that of the International Library of Philosophy and Scientific method, and a Penguin series, which miffs Ayer. He performs his editorial duties in a somewhat negligent but on the whole rather commendable spirit 'My practice was true to the attitude... that it was the author's job to write the book, and mine to decide whether to publish it, more or less as it stood.' He reads papers around the country, is awarded the Ph.D. for his punishment essay, obtains a Lectureship and, after much striving and strife, a Readership at UCL. He battles Wollheim over whether the Philosophy Department should accept the gift of a 'Freud Chair.' His demeanour prompts a visit from the older man to his rooms to ask whether Honderich considers him to be a ridiculous figure. And he makes a total of six unsuccessful fellowship applications to Oxford colleges:

There was inside me, still, 18 years after sighting England's green and pleasant land, a captured person,—a Canadian lad captured by Englishness. Oxford was the quintessence of it. How agreeable it would be to join the form of life that was The High and The Broad, college eccentricities, named staircases, High Table, and an unexampled academic history. There was truth in this, but also dream But I got none of the jobs. All, I think, went to Oxford persons, already known in the college in question.' (226)

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At forty-six, he turns over the possibility of becoming a Professor, but, thanks to the Freud affair and other clashes, lacks Wolheim's essential support. The Grote Chair is unadvertised. Truly distinguished persons are understood not to answer advertisements. Consequently, it remains vacant for six years. Ronald Dworkin is proposed for it, but this comes to nothing, and the College's promotions committee recommends Honderich for a personal chair in 1983 at the age of fifty. In 1988, while awaiting the results of the competition for the Waynflete Professorship at Oxford, the Grote falls to him and he occupies it until his retirement in 1999.

Meanwhile, there is the Enigma. It is hard to say which strand of the narrative has caused more upset, but there is a genuine chivalry in Honderich's treatment of the women. They appear as so many soft, watercolour portraits, a little diffuse and without edges. They are all astonishingly beautiful, as is evident from the photographs included in the middle of the book. Unlike the men, they are never made sport of. Honderich marries Margaret Penman, a poet and literature student, in Toronto in the late 1950s and they move to England together. At the end of 1959, he proposes a 'free marriage,' giving to understand that this is a mere philosophical declaration of independence, not an action-plan, but one leads to the other and the free marriage breaks up in 1961. Honderich then falls in love with Pauline Murray, the wife of an actor. He has a few affairs while waiting for her to move to London. They part, but move back together when Murray learns she is expecting a child, who is born in 1962. 'In setting up again with Pauline I was, so to speak, paying decent taxes rather than letting myself off lightly.' He has some entanglements at Sussex with undergraduates. The divorce from Margaret comes through, he marries Pauline in 1964, and they go on to have a second child. A casual girlfriend has a baby in 1966, which angers him; he feels he has been used. 'I was part of the story and could not write myself out of it. For me there was not whatever exculpation is provided by a grand passion. There could be no simple assignment of responsibility to the other party in the story.' He lives ten years with Pauline, they begin to quarrel, and he is denounced by her as unfeeling, chauvinistic, heavy-handed, angry and remote. This marriage ends in 1974. Honderich next sets up with Helen Marshall, a thirty-two year old undergraduate of striking looks and ability. Three years later, his attention has been diverted by the philosopher Janet Radcliffe Richards, author of *The Skeptical Feminist*. and then this too ends, especially sadly for the author, who, for the first time, is on the receiving end. In 1989 he marries Jane O'Grady, a columnist for *The Literary Review*. Four or

five years later, alienation has set in; they agree it is not working, she insists on a separation, and they are divorced in 1998.

This is a book about love and the havoc it can wreak, though love is not portrayed in these pages as the gryphon that seizes its unwilling victims in its strong claws and shakes them half to death, but rather as a delectable bait that is constantly on offer and that is a welcome distraction. Honderich describes himself as, like Sartre, not strongly affected by sexual desire, as 'prim'. And he had, he reports, a habit of appraising women and sizing up their potential that was unbreakable. Like Browning's Duchess, with a heart too soon made glad, the author was often *ému*, but it was always possible too that something better lived just around the corner. Women were preferable to men because 'they were more reassuring to me. Women were not competitors.' Even with the switches and infidelities, Honderich never maintained a deception for long; but whether this was on account of a principle of veracity or because there was little to lose by telling the truth is not clear. If tables were overturned in restaurants, or clothes thrown out the window, or if financial settlements were punishing, we don't learn of it. The worst that seemed to happen was that Honderich's car had a bucket of pink paint tipped over it by a jealous husband. Yet tears flow, and they are male tears.

Honderich describes himself as rejecting conventional sexual morality, 'weakened by philosophy and its skepticism.' He believed that individuals were collections of properties:

There is no coldness or want of humanity in registering the fact, even the happy fact. There are no soul-to-soul or I-Thou relations that are not relations to particular facts of body, mind, and character, and personality, properly and usually taken together. I did not offend in 1952 and have not offended since by not pursuing what contains an illusion. That is the self-defense. (60)

But if selves are only collections of properties, there is no 'I' that can defend itself against any accusation by claiming that it did not pursue an illusion. If there is a possible pursuer of illusions, there are necessarily other souls for it to encounter. It may be a psychological deficiency of souls that they have trouble believing in the existence of other souls, but the defense from limited competence is rather different from the defense from the cool-headed appreciation of the truth.

However it is not clear that moral indignation is the appropriate response to these sections of the book, or that there is much to condemn, except where relations between unequals were part of a wider institutional arrangement that permitted women always to be

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students, journalists, free-lancers, but rarely or never to be professors and politicians. Abandonment there was, but at the same time continuity and the establishment, in most cases, of lifelong connections, in which interest and affection persisted. Every live-in partnership that outlasts infatuation is something of a bargaining situation. Happy people manage to arrange good terms; unhappy people do not. All that can be morally required is that there be no systematic tendency for women to accept worse terms than men do. Though there is controversy about this, it is far from clear that a social norm of staying together forever improves women's bargaining position. Women will not learn from these confessions anything about human nature that they don't already know in principle, namely that the World is full of lures and that they must be vigilant and look to their own interests as men do. But they do illustrate that intelligence, analytical ability, aesthetic sensitivity, appreciation of the other sex, and even domesticity in a man is not necessarily predictive of his staying around. The doubt-or-denial presupposition that attaches to any autobiography not motivated by venality or exhibitionism is important in this context. The presupposition in force is that everyone is accountable in terms of background community standards, whatsoever these may be. At the same time, it is understood that everyone has a right to try to change the background standards by which he or she is being evaluated by pointing to their cruelty, hypocrisy, or the happy delusions upon which they are founded.

The book has prompted, as noted, a number of reviews of a decidedly judgmental tone. It was bad enough, reviewers implied, to have done all the things Ted Honderich did, but, granted, others did them as well, and perhaps worse, if one adds into the balance Honderich's distinctive dislike for any protracted *status quo* of betrayal. The real offense was not in laying before the world his living arrangements, which could have been done in the usual *roman à clef* format, but in telling stories on other people, puncturing reputations and perhaps even settling a few old scores before leaving the stage. Racism and sexism, preening, pettiness, sadomasochistic curiosity, and plain dumbness are much in evidence in this book. (Paul Ricoeur, who was maybe just trying to be witty, but probably not, is reported as saying that 'time is profound because both Anglo Saxon conceptual restraint and French spirituality were true of it.')

Honderich's attitude towards his book is anything but take-it-or-leave-it, and a portion of his website is devoted to the analysis and refutation of reviews of *Philosopher*. A kind of implicit quarrel is now occurring over the uses of truthful narrative, for none of the

accusations seems to concern the telling of any substantive untruths. To what extent are the tacit conventions that set our expectations morally regulative? None of us expects that the most fatuous remark ever made in some future author's hearing will be printed in thousands of copies; nor do we expect to be skewered for our pink socks, our diminutive stature, or our frequently pathetic extraphilosophical aspirations. From now on we will all be more careful.

A number of the stories told on the living portray the philosophical establishment of the 1970s and 1980s in the UK as a particularly poorly-functioning meritocracy, in which background, panache, and a certain *je ne sais quoi* counted for more than productivity and earnestness of philosophical purpose and in which competitions were closed and manifestly unfair. Bentham and Mill, the founders of the British ideal of the competency-based institution, would have shaken their heads over what passed as procedurally correct. The book details the faults of commission and omission, the cadging of letters of reference, the uses of eavesdropping, the tit-for-tat of hostile and friendly reviews, gossip, reciprocity, disloyalty, and envy, that determine people's fates in the pursuit of truth in analytical philosophy. Honderich's struggles were successful, except where fortress Oxford was concerned, but he lets us know that they were a good deal harder than they ought to have been and came later than they ought to have.

Moving from the particular to the general, what does the book actually reveal about the condition of women and men's treatment of them in the intellectual-social-political environment of the last quarter of the 20th century? It is an ancient paradox of social life that the affection of women is experienced as validation; their capacity to understand and judge is acknowledged to be adequate and reliable for this purpose, even while it is held to be inadequate to the occupation of the highest posts in meritocratic institutions. There are only the briefest mentions in the book of contemporary female philosophers, such as Jennifer Hornsby, Mary Warnock, and Hidé Ishiguro. Elizabeth Anscombe is mentioned once, not for philosophy, but for chiding a speaker at the Moral Sciences Club for going overtime. When it comes to whom Philosophy has room for, Honderich is generous. Philosophy has in it 'excellent judges of things, understanders, natural logicians, realists, reasoners, clever cats, talkers, seers, mere elaborators and complicators, mere Oxonians, county pushers, bumbler and dimwits. It has in it, so far as can be ascertained, no one with all philosophical strengths and hardly anyone with most. We unhappily make do with our share.' Only this capacious world of

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Philosophy doesn't have women. But this is not, it seems, because Philosophy can't accommodate their particular weaknesses and peculiarities. It's that in the environment being described, what any individual woman thought of any individual man *impersonally* made no difference to anything. Women were incapable of threatening anyone intellectually and so their opinions were never interesting in that particular sense of the word. One reason they didn't threaten was that it was understood to be men's right to choose, on the basis of preference and liking, when, where, and how they would interact with women, and which women they would interact with.

This brings me to the puzzling inconsistency mentioned earlier. It is part of the fulfilment of *Wahrheitsanspruch* that women be represented precisely as they were thought of and treated by men. But not only does the book keep its two strands separate and parallel, making no attempt to analyse the socioeconomic predicaments of the women, there is a certain lowering of the eyes on this and all related topics. Honderich explains his refusal to resign from the Garrick Club after its vote to sustain its identity as an all-male institution, 'In fact I have not looked too closely into the question of whether my being in this exclusive and self-approving crew is consistent with my principles.' This formula is repeated elsewhere 'I did not reflect a lot on my actions and my moral standing or suffer guilt, partly because of the optimistic feeling that if I worked at a defense, a confident one might be constructed.'

All this is puzzling to anyone who thinks of Philosophy in Honderich's own terms, as 'good thinking about the facts,' and as an antidote to the desires, fears, and hopes concerning other people and things that obscure clear thinking. The avoidance is all the more curious because of Honderich's subscription to the Principle of Equality, the principle that freedom and power, respect and self-respect, as well as material goods and the goods of culture ought not to be controlled by the favoured nations and classes. Honderich worked for Ban the Bomb and Fair Housing. He was appalled by the discovery drawn from the U.N.'s demographic yearbooks comparing the lives of the worst off 10% with the best off that the latter, living forty years longer, actually had two lives. One can't say that the human propensity towards forcible suppression of the interests of other human beings and negligence of their needs was unknown to him. And he is savvy about the favour-trading and payback norms of academic life. But in the end, his attitude to the functioning of systems of prestige and exclusion is ambivalent.

The class system, Honderich writes, created confidence in its beneficiaries and 'Confidence would sometimes make for better

philosophy. Further, it was a fact not only of the confident person's achievement, but also something with an effect on others. The system's beneficiaries used and defended their confidence, and thereby reduced that of others. They did not do so unknowingly, in a dream. Here was something like injustice.' This took the reviewer back in memory to the seminar room. Does not a great deal in our field depend on mode of presentation? Confidence is good; it is a condition of hard labour and is contagious. Yet it would seem incumbent on a political philosopher to think further into the nature of that something-that-is-like-injustice and yet so delightful when you are on the right end of the stick, or at least have the prospects of being so.

What it is to be a decent person and to have a good life are topics that are contested in this book. And we seem to have two competing ideas about how to answer these questions reflected in background standards. The first is that a good life lived by a decent person is one in which production-and-recognition-goals are achieved, and in which unnecessary pain is not inflicted on others. The second is that a good life lived by a decent person has moral value in the form of personal integrity and self-sacrifice.

Honderich allows some weight to both sets of standards. His pursuit of knowledge was, he observes, driven partly by intrinsic motives, but largely by concern for the regard of others: 'Was my motivation mixed? Was I drawn to more than clear truth? Very likely, as on a similar occasion mentioned earlier. If I wanted to find things out by getting them straight, I also wanted the standing of the professors about whose judgment on my book page I speculated.' His generosity never extended to the distribution of his personal income and his consumption habits *inter alia* contributed to a break with Gerald Cohen. His children, though they did remarkably well, had reason to complain of his inattention. Yet he gave of his time to people and causes, endured reverses and lawsuits, and was—though this aspect of his career is in fact modestly downplayed—a 'diligent, popular, successful tutor.'

In the end, the narrative doesn't explain any of things readers are most likely to wonder at. We decide, Honderich points out, what causes are, not the world. And the moral of the book seems to be that causation isn't even applicable to the individual case. Why did the author leave Canada? Why did he occasionally think of becoming a policeman? Why so many live-in partners? Reasons for such things can be given in terms of signal events and their reverberations, posited vectors of need and aspiration, and the filtering of possibilities by such traits as insecurity, ambition, self-doubt, individuality and audacity. Yet we know that the recitation of these

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supposed determinants does not provide sufficient conditions or else reduces to tautology. The explanation for all the women in terms of the author's rejection of conventional morality or his habits of an appraisal is an example of that. Only—and this was perhaps the point of the cautionary remarks quoted at the start—insofar as it is possible to see the narrator not as a self but as representing a *type*, in this case, those who came of age in a world that was both receptive to foreigners and closed to them, sparing of luxury but generous to students, meritocratic and prejudiced, innovative and hidebound, and in which women were trying to get greater control over their own fates but lacked full social opportunity, does it seem possible to explain the general outlines of the narrator's life.

This is a book nearly every philosopher will enjoy (especially if they aren't in it). The style is trenchant, complex, and witty. Readers will be reminded of the beautiful cadences and deft syntactic twistings of the above-mentioned Victorians, Browning, Tennyson and Gerard Manley Hopkins—perhaps a marking left by the Toronto English curriculum. And Honderich is a good observer, a good optical *appraiser*, as he points out, and a talented colourist when it comes to rendering indoor scenes, especially the dining room, the restaurant, the club, the study. Above all, the book is a stimulus for philosophers to reflection on their own lives and the extent to which they were ruled by the same or different motives and values. It clarifies both the rewards of reflection and the inherent pitfalls of self-analysis. In a thoughtful passage Honderich writes:

There is another kind of inner life, perhaps inner life proper. I have a lot of it. It is reflection and feeling not aimed at expression and other action. Its owners may keep it to themselves, even forever. Since it is not shaped or coloured by the intention of speaking or acting, not so much constrained by convention, prejudice or principle, it may have more truth in it ... But there is another side to the coin. Since this reflection and feeling is also not constrained by the scrutiny and judgment of others, by public tests, it may have less truth in it. So if inner lives can have less hypocrisy and calculation, they can also have less sense and realism ... (25)

It might even convince you, as the author of the book seems to have become convinced, that, while the pursuit of Love and Honour sets the basic pattern of a life, the happiness that is to be found in it depends more on the filling of the coffers of memory with a sufficient number of satisfying individual experiences than on the solution of the Enigma or the mastery of the Game.