Discussion

Langton on duty and desolation

Langton's much discussed essay 'Duty and Desolation', first published in *Philosophy* (1992) and reprinted in anthologies and on web-sites, deals with a problem Maria von Herbert, an Austrian noblewoman, put to Kant in a pair of letters.[1] She was the sister of Baron Franz Paul von Herbert, who in the 1790s established a philosophical *salon* in Klagenfurt, the capital of Carinthia. A visiting philosopher wrote:

> I am persuaded that few places in Germany match Herbert's house, which is proof of the beneficial influence of Critical Philosophy not only on the head, but even more on the heart of its devotees . . . Herbert's house is an Athens! Men, boys, women, girls – all are devoted to philosophy . . . I am proud to belong to this circle of outstanding people, where muses and graces live in harmonious association, their artless ease of manner reminiscent of the golden age when children of nature lived in cheerful innocence.[2]

Women played an important role in the discussions of the Herbert circle. His sister Maria and the Baronesses Ursula and Babette von Dreer were 'admirers of Kant's philosophy' and well versed in the *Critiques of Pure* as well as *Practical Reason*.[3] This is what Maria von Herbert wrote:

> Great Kant, to Thee I cry for help, as a believer to his god, for consolation, or for a verdict (*Bescheid*) to meet death. Thou hast in Thy work shown me sufficient reason to believe in a future existence, and this is why I seek refuge with Thee.[4]

The letter is more intense, more charged with emotion than the usual translations indicate. She uses the second person singular as if invoking a deity. *Bescheid* in eighteenth-century German is the *verdict* of a judge (Adelung 1774–86).

Herbert wrote that she had lost the love of a man who 'seemed to encompass everything within his person, so that I lived only for him'. The reason was a 'protracted lie which I have now disclosed to him, though

there was nothing unfavourable to my character in it – I had no viciousness in my life that needed hiding, the lie was enough, though'.[5]

In his carefully drafted response Kant drew a distinction between lying and withholding the truth, a 'scope distinction', according to Langton, between *saying 'not-p'* and *not saying 'p'* (p. 484). The latter, Kant says, is sometimes excusable:

> It seems that we cannot demand of human nature openness in full measure (since everyone fears that to reveal himself completely would make others despise him), but this reticence is very different from the lack of sincerity that consists of dishonesty in the actual expression of our thoughts.[6]

Langton takes issue with this: 'Contrary to Kant's letter, there is no principled distinction to be drawn between lies and reticence' (p. 491). Her reasoning, which is indebted to Christine Korsgaard (1986: 335), rests on a distinction between 'interactive' and 'strategic' speech: in the former we treat interlocutors as persons, in the latter they are 'things' to be influenced.[7]

> Kant's principles support not a rejection of lying *per se*, but a rejection of strategic speech in general, speech which treats people as things, not persons. (p. 490)

These are strong words. 'Treating people as things' defines *cupiditas*, 'Lust and rape are forms of cupiditas, because they entail using another person as a thing . . . murder for profit is also cupiditas' (Zimbardo 2007: 4).

I shall not discuss the merits of this view, but will focus instead on the fact that Langton herself was not averse to strategically altering the relevant text. She excerpts a letter from Johann Benjamin Erhard to Kant, of 17 January 1793 as follows:[8]

> I can say little of Miss Herbert. She has capsized on the reef of romantic love. In order to realize an idealistic love, she gave herself to a man who misused her trust. And then, trying to achieve such love with another, she told her new lover about the previous one. That is the key to her letter.[9]

Langton infers that Kant 'relies on the opinion of his friend, whose diagnosis of the patient resorts to the traditional and convenient malady of feminine hysteria' (p. 499).

Nothing of the sort follows if Langton's deletions are restored. Erhard wrote (with the elision italicized):

> I can say little of Miss Herbert . . . She has capsized on the reef of romantic love, *which I myself have managed to escape (perhaps more by luck than by desert)*. In order to realize an idealistic love . . .

Obviously, since Johann Benjamin Erhard was just as predisposed to capsize on the reef of romantic love as Maria, he did not diagnose the ailment as 'feminine hysteria'. Langton's conclusion can be drawn only if some text is withheld.

Erhard was a physician, later prominent in Berlin, who introduced into Germany John Brown's gentle method of supporting and stimulating, opposing the old practices of 'lowering' by bleeding, leeches, etc., because he believed that disease results from debility rather than excess of toxin. He was also a Jacobin, promoting a south German republic, wrote a tract on the right of the people to have revolutions – quickly outlawed by the authorities – and tirelessly promoted the emancipation of women and Jews. He wanted to encourage and establish a society of women whose purpose would be 'to restore through intellectual education and promotion to half of humanity the rights they lost and that were suppressed for millennia'. He did indeed establish such a society in the city of Nuremberg (Erhard 1990: 838). One must doubt that Erhard, as alleged by Langton, meant to make a point about 'women as things, as items in the sexual market place, [who] have a market value that depends in part on whether they have been used' (p. 504).

This was not the Biedermeier or the Victorian period, rather the age of Revolution and Empire, noted for salons, passionate friendships and ease of manner, when a noblewoman with a succession of lovers might attract attention, but no censure. I note Emma, Lady Hamilton, the Marquise du Chatelet, Bettina Brentano, Rahel Varnhagen (Levin), Germaine de Staël, and many others.

It is not likely, however, that Erhard's phrase 'romantic love' meant to refer to sexuality at all. The expression has now assumed this sense, and has become a technical expression in the psychological literature, as in the title of Helen E. Fisher's *Why We Love: The Nature and Chemistry of Romantic Love*, which occurs 'when the ventral tegmental area . . . sends out dopamine to many brain regions' (2004: 105). It did not have this sense when Erhard wrote; 'romantic', adopted from the French, had just come into use in Germany. Adelung's dictionary defines 'romantic – like a novel . . . reminding of a novel, a wondrous poetic invention . . . to have a novelistic concept of love'.[10] The antonym was 'prosaic'.

I am not sure what Erhard meant when he said that Maria, like himself, was unable to realize her 'ideal' love. The description of his own earlier liaisons does not encourage the thought that he was given to physical passion. They rather suggest resolute abstinence. I cite some notes from his diary and letters:

> This firm trust in the harmony of our souls, this severance from anything physical in our union, this was what perfected our being. I thought I could realize this ideal, and although after a few years I had to admit my delusion, I would not wish to loose from my memory these years of blissful dreams.[11]

He wrote to a friend:

> Kissing her hand was the strongest outward sign that I gave of my love, and our sensual desires seemed respectfully to recede as our souls approached each other.[12]

In another letter he maintained,

> Love, Wilhelmine, is the only happiness of rational spirits. Only a few noble spirits will know it and you, my dearest, belong to that number. This higher love alone protects us from dissipations of sentimental ecstasy and raises us above the low passions.[13]

This does not encourage or support Langton's view that Erhard thought of 'women, as things, as items in the sexual market place, [who] have a market value that depends in part on whether they have been used' (p. 504). Rather, the 'reef of romantic love' that led to the failure of his liaisons, and of Maria's idealistic love, was most likely their expectation that they could maintain a purely ideal, non-physical but enduring love relation.

Maria von Herbert took her own life nine years after her last letter to Kant. Her brother wrote to Erhard:

> My sister Miza . . . left this world a hero . . . I was not in Klagenfurt, and only know that she ordered her affairs . . . and on her last day gave a *déjeuner* where she was very spirited and serene and then disappeared without compromising anyone. Only her intimate friends, who must and should know about her death, were informed through letters she left them.[14]

In a later letter he remarks on her persistent insomnia. He suffered from the same, both of them probably victims of lead poisoning, contracted in the wretched lead paint (ceruse) factory they owned. Both relied heavily on opium to relieve the symptoms.[15] Franz Paul, too, took his own life in March 1811. He wrote a final essay 'Repaying My Debt to the World', in which, after arguing contra Kant that suicide is sometimes justified, he alludes to a final celebration among friends before taking his life (1995: 259–301).

Langton discusses a further communication: Kant sent Herbert's two letters, as well as Erhard's, to Elisabeth Motherby, the daughter of his friend Robert Motherby. In an accompanying letter he called Maria von Herbert *die kleine Schwärmerin*, which is rendered as 'the ecstatical young lady' (Kant 1999) and 'the ecstatical little lady' (Langton 1992), and read as derisory. But this is very doubtful. *Schwärmerei* was one of the fighting words of the German Enlightenment; it is the 'enthusiasm' that Hume inveighs against. Luther originally used it to designate the feeling-oriented, anti-institutional, anti-liturgical 'left wing' of the Reformation. In time it came to denote irrationalism of a certain kind, where actions flow from 'mere sentiment (*Empfindungen, Sinnlichkeit*) to the detriment of reason' (Adelung 1774–86: n.5). *Schwärmerei* was seen as the main hindrance to

the progress of reason and, indeed, a form of derangement. Both Kant and his friend Borowski wrote tracts against it, and both agreed that von Herbert must be helped out of this particular distress.

I don't find it objectionable that Kant sent Maria von Herbert's letters to Elisabeth Motherby. Langton construes this as a breach of trust, reducing Herbert to an object. I conjecture that Kant perceived Elizabeth Motherby to have encountered some problem that the letters were meant to mend. They were certainly sent not with the intent to entertain, but to help. We know that he often showed concern for the children of his friends (e.g. he recommended William, a brother of Elisabeth, to Erhard in Berlin,[16] and had placed another brother, George, in the *Philanthropin*, a famous school in Dessau that was run on Rousseau's principles; Ritzel 1985: 539).

Langton's dramatic coda begins with 'Kant never replied' to Herbert's second letter. How does she know? Negative facts are difficult to establish, and in this case we have an indication to the contrary, viz. a letter to Karl Leonhard Reinhold of May 7, 1793, in which Kant promises to send letters to Erhard and Herbert 'in the next two weeks'.[17] (The mail via Reinhold and Jena was the preferred route.) The letters are not preserved, but were probably sent some time later that year. All one can safely assert is that no letter of Kant's to Maria or Franz Paul von Herbert has survived – but then neither did the first letter he wrote to Maria – we only have his own draft.

Finally a word about Langton's claim that Erhard's diagnosis – which she managed to morph into 'feminine hysteria' – is 'exactly wrong' (p. 499). Langton had two letters, two hundred years old, to establish a diagnosis, which she pitted against that of a physician, later famous in Berlin for his diagnostic skills. She did not consult any of the material and documentation about Erhard and his work, about the Herberts and others that figure in this story. They too are persons deserving respect.

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Notes

1 For a thoughtful discussion cf. James Edwin Mahon (2006).
2 Karl Friedrich Forberg in a letter to Karl Leonard Reinhold of May 1791, cited in Baum (1996: 492).
3 Karl Friedrich Forberg, *Lebenslauf eines Verschollenen* (1840), 39, Baum (1996: 497–8 n. 2).
4 Letter 478, 11: 272 (Volume and page number in the Academy Edition of the works of Kant) in Kant (1999: 379–80).
5 Kant (1999: 379–80 n.3). Jens Baggesen wrote in his diary that the man was Ignaz von Dreer, brother of the two Kantian Baronesses, friend of Paul von Herbert and also a member of the philosophical circle. Cf. Baum (1989: 149).
6 Letter 510, 11: 331 ff. (Kant 1999: 411).
7 The terms are borrowed from Habermas (Langton 1992: 490).
8 Letter 557, 11: 406 (Kant 1999: 453).

[9] Ibid. This differs from her own claim that the reason for the separation was not her previous attachment, but her hiding it from the new friend.
[10] Einem Romane, einer wunderbaren Erdichtung ähnlich . . . Romanhafte Begriffe von der Liebe haben (Adelung 1774–86: n.5).
[11] Denkwürdigkeiten des Philosophen und Arztes Johann Benjamin Erhard (Ense 1874, vol. 9: 23).
[12] To Osterhausen, September 5, 1787 (Ense 1874, vol. 9: 168, n.16).
[13] To Wilhelmine, March 14, 1788 (Ense 1874, vol. 9: 219, n.16).
[14] Herbert to Erhard, October 7, 1804 (Ense 1874, vol. 10: 183, n.16).
[15] Herbert to Erhard (Ense 1874, vol. 10: 497, n.2).
[16] Letter 850, of December 20, 1799. 12: 296f.
[17] Letter 577, 11: 432

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