

Philosophy and the Human Paradox: Essays on Reason, Truth and Identity, by Alan Montefiore, edited by Danielle Sands. Abingdon: Routledge, 2020. Pp. v + 194

I

In 2006, a conference was held at the LSE to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the founding of the Forum for European Philosophy, a society that Alan Montefiore played a central role in setting up, and for which he served as President for most of its existence under that name. The conference was entitled 'Thinking in Public'.

Montefiore was himself a participant speaker at the conference, perhaps in some ways the best-known speaker there that day. Befitting an occasion open to all, Montefiore was not invited to give a paper, but was asked instead to submit himself to an event format that he had more or less made his own over the ten years of the Forum's existence: an 'in conversation' event, where some thinker or theme might be discussed in a relatively informal way. His interlocutor was Robert Rowland-Smith, another person who had been involved in the Forum since its earliest days, and one of Montefiore's former DPhil students. Rowland-Smith's opening question was one that many people in the room just then would have wanted to ask, and to get pinned down: 'So, who is Alan Montefiore?'

'Well, I suppose I am', said Alan Montefiore with a boyish smile on his (then) octogenarian face. He was right to suppose that, I suppose, since among all the people just then in the room, only the one who then said 'I am' was Alan Montefiore.

II

A little cloud of philosophy belonged to that playful answer – but it was, in its own way, as stubbornly evasive as it was strictly true. On the other hand, evasive though he apparently was at that moment, it is not as if Montefiore shies from admitting the autobiographical into the philosophical. Far from it. Indeed, the interplay between the universality of reason and the particularity of culturally and historically situated human reasoners and the values by which they seek to stand is pretty much the centre and ground of his philosophical thinking overall, and he does not avoid, never evades, his own reflexive entanglement in all that. For Montefiore, philosophical testimony – attesting reflectively to one's being as a human being – cannot but confront what he calls the ubiquitous 'dual aspect' character of the human situation (p. 28): the human situation is one that is (not quite 'at the same time' since that determination belongs to just one side of the duality) in all its manifestations and appearances *both* alive to the demands of (atemporal) reason and, simply as an embodied being in the world of empirical manifestation and appearance, as subject to strict causal laws as any other (temporally existent) being, living or not. And with this duality in view, an account of Montefiore's cultural formation and personal identity is as philosophically significant to the question 'Who is Alan Montefiore?' as is an account of Montefiore's own philosophical account of the dual aspect human situation that is strictly anyone's. It is entanglement all the way down. And, as should already be apparent, in Montefiore's thinking it is an entanglement with Kant all the way down too.

III

Who is Alan Montefiore? It was a reasonable question to ask in 2006. He had, after all, published relatively little at that time, compared to those best known. And yet the known unknown status of Alan Montefiore was not simply the upshot of the fact that he had not been a constant publisher.

Indeed, his published writings, including the fascinating and sympathetically edited collection of essays under review here, tend to intensify rather than settle uncertainties about their author's identity. There is a certain modesty to everything Montefiore writes, a compelling openness to further questions, an acute sensitivity to qualifications and the need to attend more closely to premises taken as given, and (most of the time) a resolute resistance to offering a final word – all of which can make it hard to see that the astonishing conceptual fluency at work in his work is working towards even provisionally specific ends, pinning down the author's commitments in conclusive conclusions.

Having said that, some of the actual essay endings in this volume are strikingly pointed, especially when those endings want to free us up from precipitate conclusiveness. For example, he concludes an essay entitled "Reason and Reasoning" with a biting closing paragraph – not, in fact, in his own words but in a quoted fragment in which Susan Haack pulls no punches against what she sees as the increasingly 'commonplace' tendency to pursue what she calls 'advocacy "research"' (p. 111): a baleful strain of academic activism which largely foregoes the interests of reason in favour of (in Montefiore's words) 'staging complex performances' concerned almost entirely with 'the non-rational aspects of the overall activity of reasoning' (p. 111). As if, as Haack puts it, 'the best defence against racist and sexist stereotypes' (p. 112) is made not by arguing a case but by flame-throwing denunciations of racists and sexists, where the ambition for oneself and the invitation to others to do philosophy in what Montefiore calls 'a dedicated light' (p. 23) has been foregone – sacrificed, the pointed ending seems to imply, to dedicating oneself to self-righteous displays of one's own unswerving positional virtue.

Montefiore's own attitude is recognisably liberal: he recommends that we strive endlessly to find ways in which we may be (individually and collectively) that better recognises that there are indefinitely many non-wicked ways in which we may be (individually and collectively). This is a theoretical 'meta' position which is also, inevitably, a practical one, a position. However, it is a position which knows that its proper understanding does not entail that its opponents or dissenters are necessarily or even typically proved immoral, but requires seeing instead that the outcome of (perhaps heated) deliberations and arguments with opponents and dissenters in actual cases of conflict and contestation is simply that, in the end, there are always winners and losers.

It was a rare enough event for Montefiore himself to lose for him to recall, in recalling a committee put together 'to recommend possible changes in the set text for the philosophy component in the preliminary examinations' for PPE at Oxford University, not the argument(s) that led to a decision but, at the end of it all, him 'losing it' (p. 25). For a moment I read that as saying he (finally) lost his temper. I found it hard to believe, given what I suppose him to believe, that he would in that way lose it, but I could not entirely exclude it as a possibility: I do not suppose him to have attained a 'meta' position that in any way weakens his attachment to his own positional convictions. In conditions where one does oneself have very strongly held convictions about what is right and true, affirming that others might dissent from them without proving themselves wicked or intellectually weak is always a somewhat baffling situation. Indeed, for a position in philosophy that itself remains committed to its own 'meta' position about the plurality of mutually incommensurable but theoretically valid positions, it cannot but reflect a particular understanding of the universal human situation as itself somewhat baffling. And while he seems to have come so resolutely and reflexively to terms with the fact that, where you have very strongly held convictions, others will not always agree with you, and that you will not always come out on top, I could not entirely exclude the possibility that, when he lost it, he lost it. Alan Montefiore can seem baffling all the way down.

IV

One might think that being told what he believes, if that was on some occasion told, should make Montefiore better known. However, it does not always seem to help. Indeed, what he believes, or at least what he presents as what he believes in the course of an argument about argumentative truthfulness, itself takes a turn that simply sets the hares running again.

It belongs to Montefiore's understanding of the distinction between (universal, atemporal) reason and (particular, spatio-temporally situated) occasions of thinking in public that what is presented in the latter can never be entirely reduced to matters concerning only 'the validity of their argument structures or the truth of their theses' (p. 106): when communication is part of the context, and when one is thinking in public it always is, there we have to be concerned, Montefiore insists, not simply with the truth of someone's ideas or the validity of their arguments but 'the truthfulness of their attempts to communicate' (p. 106). There are no hares running yet, since 'communication can only be truthful in so far as the sender of the messages seeks to transmit nothing that he or she does not in fact believe' (p. 107). Nevertheless, one is still obliged, if one wants to make this attempt, to adapt what one says or writes to the specific public one supposes one is speaking or writing to. These conditions introduce considerations which will always concern, Montefiore goes on to say, 'non-rational aspects of the overall activity of reasoning' through which one tries to persuade these others to accept the argument one is presenting (p. 111) – considerations that concern winning rather than losing it on and at that occasion with that audience. And even if speaking or writing what you believe to be true is a necessary condition of truthfulness, it is not a sufficient condition, and may even require something that gets perilously close to contradicting that necessary condition. Here go the hares:

Truthfulness is tied not only to sincerity, but also to the conditions of communication prevailing in the relevant context. Once again everyone must know of circumstances in which it is strictly impossible to get the true message across to its intended recipient or recipients by the simple assertion of its truth. There may be all sorts of reasons why this should be so. The recipients may have been conditioned by past experience to react with counter-suggestibility to whatever message is addressed to them by this particular source. Or they may have become peculiarly allergic to messages with a certain unwelcome content or expressed in terms whose force (as speech act theorists might put it) has for them more impact than has their meaning. No matter. The hard fact is that if I want someone to believe what I take to be the truth of what I seek to convey, I may on occasion need to convey it by saying something that I do not believe to be literally or strictly speaking true. (p. 148)

Elsewhere in the essays under review Montefiore ramps it up further: 'there are', he insists, 'a great variety of situations, of which one has to make convincing sense, in which people might conceal what they are later found to have "really" believed' (p. 169).

Are we, we who read the texts signed by Alan Montefiore, in one of those situations where the one we are reading has found it necessary to say something that he does not believe to be literally or strictly speaking true? Might we one day find out that he has, perhaps for good reasons, concealed what he 'really' believes, and hence who he 'really' is? Might he sometimes be, as he puts it in a wonderful parenthesis, 'a secret agent':

(Nor has it necessarily to be supposed that a man of integrity will never dissemble. A secret agent, for example, may be professionally committed to a life of deception, but such

commitments may be entered into on the basis of, precisely, a more fundamental commitment that provides the framework of constancy to his life.) (p. 109)

It is at the ending of this discussion of truth and truthfulness that Montefiore concludes by letting Susan Haack conclude for him, with her very, perhaps excessively force-fully communicated condemnation of those now-far-too-commonplace academic communicators who, in the course of their hardly-deserving-the-name 'research', basically dissembling at doing proper research, those who are really doing 'advocacy "research"', let our concepts of truth and reason get dangerously 'loosened' (p. 112). Anticipating an objection that she is herself merely advocating on behalf of 'a "Western" ideal', she says, without any argument at all, that 'I shall say only that "Western" or not, it is an ideal of nearly incalculable value to humanity' (p. 112). One might imagine the objector responding in turn: 'Well, you would say that, wouldn't you?'

Haack might be regarded as a kind of secret agent here: outwardly speaking up for truth and reason but, in reality, little more than an agent of a Western hegemony presenting itself as the champion of reasonable humanity. 'Expressed in terms whose force (as speech act theorists might put it) has for them more impact than has their meaning', one might wonder: who's losing it?

V

That I am raising these questions with respect to Montefiore's own thinking in public does not mean I am directing them pointedly at *him* (or Haack for that matter). The point is that these questions can be raised with respect to *anyone* – and this in virtue of considerations about our thinking in public that Montefiore himself insists on: on any occasion of such public thinking, truthfulness may itself demand that a speaker or writer say something that s/he does not believe to be strictly true, and no speaker or writer at all can avoid getting tangled up in at least some 'non-rational aspects of the overall activity of reasoning'.

This is not the only secret agent story in Montefiore's text either. Because of the 'dual aspect' character of the human situation that Montefiore describes, where freedom and causal determination cohabit so comprehensively and inexplicably, a further sense of a quite general secret agency pervades his presentation of the human situation. Where the human situation is conceived as one in which making sense of any putatively rational intervention or initiative, and the responsibility that implies, necessarily appeals to an aspect of ourselves which is entirely invisible in the spatio-temporal scenes of our winning or losing it, we cannot but come to see ourselves, each and every one of us, always and everywhere as secret agents of sorts.

The conception of our lives related in these essays deserves to be better known. It is, in its own terms, somewhat baffling, but it is not beyond summary. Indeed, Montefiore outlines, I believe, a striking and genuinely 'coherent account of what it is to be a human being' (p. 42), and at the end of this review, I will do my best to capture its core features in the form of what he calls 'the roughest of nutshells' (p. 151).

VI

For Montefiore, our ineluctable sense of the general 'mystery' (p. 189) of human agency does not get flattened by our equally ineluctable sense of our spatio-temporal situatedness. Indeed, 'temporally locatable events' in our worldly lives make the effort to forge 'linkages' across the gap, for us, 'unavoidable' (p. 28). Within Western philosophy's own recent history this is nowhere more evident than in the efforts made after Kant's thinking itself became an event in that history to dismiss the mysterious Kantian gap altogether: either (in a mostly German tradition) to push on

further, 'to seek a resolution' (p. 29) to Kantian gap-finding by absolutizing his idealism (to include, perhaps impossibly, our understanding of empirical history) or (in a mostly Anglo-Saxon tradition 'from which, of course, I [Montefiore], myself emerge' (p. 125)) which seeks the same by absolutizing its empirical realism and naturalism (to include, perhaps impossibly, our understanding of atemporal reason).

Montefiore is insistent on the fact of his own Anglo-Saxon or 'analytic' training and background. But he found within his own formation motivations that made him deeply suspicious of all post-Kantian attempts to overcome the Kantian gap: an internally consistent rational construction of the human situation simply cannot be attained, he argues, from only one side of the human duality. Montefiore is, as a result, equally suspicious of the standard post-Kantian evaluations of a properly shaped philosophical formation, analytic or continental.

In this way semi-detached from the tradition in which he nevertheless emerged, Montefiore also found an ally of sorts in Derrida, and embraces something of Derrida's 'notion of deconstruction' (p. 87):

Deconstruction may not unreasonably be understood as the work of showing how, when appropriate pressures are applied, every form of discourse can be shown to contain within itself the mutually conflicting elements of its own self-undoing...That is to say that it will always be possible to find latent within it the starting points for lines of argument that, if developed, may be shown to undermine each other and thus, taken together, to generate contradictions; and this is tantamount to saying that all would be rational constructions may be shown in the last resort to generate their own characteristically recurring irrationalities. (p. 87)

One might suppose that my generalisation of the marginal figure of the secret agent in Montefiore's text is an example of such a deconstructive demonstration of self-undoing. However, what Montefiore's presentation of deconstruction passes over is that such an exercise does not simply undo rational constructions of the human situation, or merely winds up showing recurring irrationalities, but is, in intention at least, the work of revealing a universal condition that is otherwise occluded by the lines of argument that belong to a philosophical text's own inherited understanding of that universal condition; in the secret agent case, by seeing that a (particular) example of rational agency, an example that is presented in the text being read as an exception to the typical or normal or ordinary case of rational conduct, belongs, in a certain way, to the (universal) condition of rational agency in general. Deconstruction is, then, a project whose final intention is to find resources within the text it reads that go beyond the tradition of understanding the meaning our own being, the (supposed) knowledge of an idea of Man, that guides that text's own standard or central lines of argument and rational construction. And, yes, this takes us back to the formation of Western or European philosophy in general, and not just its two dominant models, analytic and continental.

VII

The idea of Man that belongs to this broad Western or European tradition is, first of all, an idea of Man as having a certain kind of history: it is the telic history of rational animality. This is itself a fundamentally Kantian idea. In his short text on "The Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View", Kant outlined a philosophical vision of human history that was explicitly based on what he claimed to be knowledge of an idea of Man as a rational being. It was a vision of Great Progress for humanity towards universal peace, freedom and well-being, a

development attainable for all humanity – a telic world history with Europe, the Occident, the West, at the head of the pack on the way to what Montefiore cites Husserl ('one of the last great representatives of the tradition of rational enlightenment' (p. 36)) specifying as the ultimate historical destination of Man thus understood, and thence the radical significance of philosophy to that development: the becoming actual in history of 'the true being of humanity' as a rational being:

The wholly personal responsibility that we bear to the truth of our own being *qua* philosophers . . . carries with it a responsibility to the true being of humanity, which is but drawn towards a Telos that it can actually reach, if indeed it can, only by way of philosophy – that is by way of ourselves, provided that we take our role as philosophers seriously. (Husserl, cited p. 39)

In (specifically) European or Western philosophy, the history of the being that we ourselves are is conceived as the history of the self-realisation of rational animality: a history of the rational potential in Man becoming actual in a form of life in which universal peace, freedom and well-being are secured for all. This is the idea of Man that comes down to us (at least) from Kant in the idea of universal or philosophical history. The emergence in that (projected) universal history of Man of philosophy itself – one should really say of European or Western philosophy but for Husserl, as Montefiore notes, 'the whole philosophical tradition of the West' just is, for Husserl, 'the philosophical tradition as such', there is no other (p. 35) – is not only an event in which that idea of Man and his ideal Telos becomes, for the first time in that history, known, but the time and place that, precisely because it becomes known there, contributes most to its actual attainment: 'through a complex process of more or less informed osmosis with the general surrounding culture' (p. 40), a fundamentally philosophical (universal) rather than a merely regional (particular) way to be starts to emerge, and humanity, through the leading example of the philosophically informed spirit of this 'European' humanity, thereby attains to a new and higher stage of history in the movement towards the ideal end. Hence 'Husserl himself, indeed, makes it abundantly clear that what he saw as the crisis in philosophy [in his time] was at the same time and *ipso facto* a crisis of the "European" spirit and way of life' (p. 34).

Deconstruction belongs to the movement within European or Western history in which its various grand philosophical-history-telling narratives fall apart, and 'no longer have any plausibility for us' (p. 42); the movement in which the (more or less latent) ethnocentrism and phallocentrism (ethno-racism and males-first sexism) and the (more or less explicit) Eurocentrism of Western philosophy becomes increasingly visible, and hence, as Montefiore stresses, the movement through which we (actual) Europeans cannot but come to 'to recognise ourselves as belonging still to a very far from "reasonable" community of mankind' (p. 47). Montefiore rightly urges us to push on:

But what, then, of 'the true being of humanity'? Can we plausibly or even fully meaningfully say that simply to be capable of recognising oneself as a human being among other human beings is to find oneself committed to a project governed by certain norms? If I had a convincingly positive answer to this question, I should be a better and more important philosopher than I am. (p. 47)

Montefiore's effort at a positive answer to this question frames two basic and genuinely important ambitions. First, to open the field of philosophy to all 'others' – to non-Europeans and to women – in a way that attempts to make it so that philosophy gives 'full room for all the culturally-dependent variations that humanity as a whole exhibits' (p. 43). Second, and despite affirming the 'need' to 'produce a coherent account of what it is to be a human being' which remains 'an account of man as a rational animal' (p. 42), Montefiore urges us to accept that we can no longer conceive 'the goal-

directiveness of rationally motivated behaviour' (p. 43) as having what one might call a Super Telos in a single, all-embracing form of life as the final end of human historical development. We have to give up a vision of the human adventure that cleaves to a 'faith in any meaningfulness in history' as having a Telos with a capital 'T' (p. 44), just as we have to give up the idea (which is really the same idea) that whatever happens in history is the 'cunning' work of 'Reason with a capital 'R'' (p. 85).

VIII

This is not, however, to give up on the human adventure altogether. A 'rough nutshell' remark of Montefiore's own sketches what seems to me close to the kernel of his own commitments in this regard:

[Certain concepts] may also be said to come into the class of what have been called essentially contestable concepts. Concepts whose proper determination raises questions of a nature to which the concept in question is itself appropriately applicable. Thus, the question of the bounds and limits of the political is itself a political question, that of the bounds and limits of the public is itself properly open to public debate...and so on. (p. 160)

Democracy is just such a concept. Indeed, democracy above all – since it is the name of the only political regime in which its own essential contestability belongs to its concept, from top to bottom. Democracy is the only form of political organisation that calls for its own critique, admits to its own revisability, and its openness to challenge in its present institutional or constitutional and legal set-up. Indeed, as Montefiore notes, citing William Galston in another extremely pointed essay ending, democracy itself, and the pluralism it necessarily welcomes, must (necessarily) allow that 'democratic normative authority' does not trump 'all other claims' public and private' (p. 142). In short, in the name of democracy it is necessary to make room for 'certain alternatives to democracy within the sphere of politics' (p. 143). In the case, uniquely, of democracy, its form of 'autoimmunity' (self-destroying that takes the form of interminable self-critique) becomes a source of perfectibility rather than suicide, though the former is never complete and the latter is never excluded: the election, by a democratic majority, of fanatics who present themselves as democrats but then, in its name, simply destroy it, always remains a standing threat, and the open future of everything essentially contestable (including democracy itself and considerations concerning 'the scope of democratic political authority') can get closed down.

With respect to political projects, we can distinguish then between what, today, is best understood as a democratic project, which wants to keep its own future open, projects involving a commitment to what Montefiore calls 'pluralistic democracy' (p. 112), and other political projects, the values which they embody, and which its proponents stand by, which effectively shut down such interminable contestability by projecting or anticipating a quite definite conception of a single finally liberating ideal telos, whether that telos is a regulative idea one can only ever approach or an actually realisable final goal. It is in relation to an unswerving commitment, theoretical and practical, reflective and reflexive, to pluralistic democracy that Montefiore's thinking in public takes its distinctive shape.

As I say, this is not to give up on the human adventure altogether. Indeed, if the point about the essential contestability of pluralistic democracy is accepted, and I think it should be, it is exactly not that. Without simply rejecting or abandoning 'Reason with a capital 'R'', indeed accepting that there is always 'a relationship between the rational and the reasonable', even if that is 'never fully certain, never fully secure' (p. 45), Montefiore finds a space there for the ongoing, if always inconclusive

adventure of the constitutionally strange animal, the secret agent, that we are, and attempts, once again, to re-start it:

We are returned, then,...to the question of whether it may not be possible so to elaborate the notion of the reasonable as to show it to be something more than one of a resolutely drab and unadventurous prudence devoid of any feeling for passion or romance. It would seem to me that any adequate account of the (humanly) reasonable – adequate, that is to say, to serve as the basis of a response to Husserlian need – must make allowance, within itself so to speak, for the paradoxical idea that it may sometimes be reasonable to act unreasonably; sometimes, but not at all times and in all ways, for there are some forms of unreasonableness which must always be unacceptable. Indeed, it may well be that the reasonable is better adapted than the rational to make proper allowance, within the overall territory of Reason, for that element of paradox, which, so it seems to me, can never be wholly driven out from any thoroughgoing account of the human situation. (p. 45)

To forego hope to save Reason with a capital 'R' through 'a return to an unreconstructed version of the faith that has been lost' (p. 41), the faith in the idea that the history of the rational animal has a Telos with a capital 'T', does not leave one throwing up one's hands in despair or giving way to those who have lost it, but, Montefiore insists, to committing oneself to philosophy in a more modest de/reconstructive mode: committing oneself to taking philosophy, the putatively rational inquiry par excellence, where it cannot obviously avoid going anyway: 'into a realm of perhaps ultimately unavoidable intellectual, but not exclusively intellectual, adventure' (p. 58): committing oneself to 'truthfulness' in one's thinking in public.

IX

So, without raising a standard, Montefiore sets one. It is not a bit drab or unadventurous: it gets its strength and speed from passionately wanting there to be, for everyone – European and non-European, men and women – no final end of philosophy, and no final end of history for rational animality. And while such a position, modestly 'meta' *and* not so modest at all, has to accept that there is also no final end of complete conceptual clarity in philosophy, and no final end of conflict in politics, one is nevertheless 'condemned to carry on trying' (p. 190), trying to do what one can to oneself embody the norms of truth and truthfulness to which the project of philosophy commits us, and for the chance that it will sometimes, along paths that remain as secret as they are unpredictable, win out against those who have lost it.

And here we reach the roughest of nutshells for finding one's feet with Alan Montefiore and his dedicated thinking in public. In the name of speaking truthfully, it is necessary (now, as ever) to make room for saying what you do not believe is strictly true; in the name of democracy, it is necessary (now, as ever) to make room for alternatives to democracy; in the name of Europe, it is necessary (now, as ever) to make room for all human variations, regardless of skin colour or sexual characteristics; and, finally, in the name of reason, it is necessary (now, as ever) to make room for acting unreasonably. This is the adventure of thinking in public that was the interminable and final calling for the mystery that is Alan Montefiore – as ever like everyone else, only a little more so.

SIMON GLENDINNING

London School of Economics and Political Science, UK

s.glendinning@lse.ac.uk