

MEMOIR

Graham Harrington Bird (1930-2021)

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I am grateful to Howard Williams for asking me to adapt the eulogy I gave at my father's funeral into a memoir for the *Kantian Review*. I accept the invitation with some trepidation, because I'm confident that Dad would have disapproved of any such endeavour and told me not to bother. He was a shy and self-effacing man, sometimes to a fault; he shunned publicity and found praise and honours thoroughly embarrassing.

He sometimes spoke of an incident from his school days that is revealing in this regard. As part of the required training for the corps, in which he had (I think) been involuntarily enrolled, he was taken to a rifle range and given the task of shooting a hundred bullets at a target. Without much experience with a rifle, Dad had difficulty coping with the recoil; the resulting pain in his shoulder became harder and harder to bear. By the time he had fired around 75 times, he had had enough and asked the schoolmaster in charge if he could be excused from completing his assigned total. The schoolmaster tried to cajole him into continuing by reminding him that he was only some 25 shots away from earning a badge for his uniform. My father responded that he didn't 'think that the badge was worth the trouble of sewing it on.'

The remark got him into hot water, but I was always proud of Dad for this minor act of insolence. It was characteristic of his mistrust of institutions and of his clear-eyed recognition of their pretentiousness, mindlessness and vanity. And, consistently with this outlook, he had little interest in the conventional trappings of recognition. So, while he would certainly have resisted the publication of any official memorial, I hope he wouldn't have minded this more personal tribute too much, particularly since it's appearing in the journal he helped found.

It's hard for me to think about Dad's altercation with his schoolmaster – and some later run-ins with police officers, a golf club pro, academic officials and insurance companies – without recalling Kant's complaint in 'What is Enlightenment?' that 'on all sides, I hear: "*do not argue!*" The officer says, "*do not argue, drill!*" The taxpayer says, "*do not argue, pay!*"'. Dad was no libertarian, but he never accepted the abuse of power meekly. His temperament combined personal modesty with dogged intransigence in the face of unfairness or wrongdoing. This goes some way toward explaining his deep affinity for Kant's life and work, in which patience and intellectual honesty also coexisted with an unbending commitment to principle.

Dad's first encounter with Kant must have been as an undergraduate at Oxford, under the tutelage of T. D. ('Harry') Weldon. I imagine it being a revelation to

him, coming after an aggressively conventional middle-class English childhood in the suburbs of the Midlands and East London, and an adolescence disrupted by the war. His parents were suspicious of academia and harbored the sort of anti-intellectual attitudes we might associate today with the readership of the *Daily Mail*. While leaning on the prestige of the scholarship Dad won to attend Oxford, they didn't support his studies or subsequent teaching career with any enthusiasm; indeed, they gave every indication of resenting it. He found life at Oxford to be stressful, and never felt at home there. Nevertheless, Oxford introduced him to many things that would be important throughout the rest of his life: music, opera, poetry, philosophy and, of course, Kant. Dad was also fortunate to arrive at Oxford during a golden age of philosophical vitality; though they intimidated him, figures like Gilbert Ryle and J. L. Austin would exert a life-long influence on his own philosophical interests and approach.

Dad first pursued his study of Kant's epistemology as a post-graduate fellow at Magdalen College in the 1950s. This would become the central preoccupation of his entire career, book-ended by two seminal studies of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, his 1962 *Kant's Theory of Knowledge* and *The Revolutionary Kant*, published 51 years later. Despite their Oxford origins, his interests in Kant were in two senses rather uncharacteristic of the sort of philosophical work that was encouraged in mid-twentieth century Oxford. On the one hand, close readings of major historical philosophers were then rather out of fashion, even frowned upon. On the other hand, to the extent that Kant's arguments had been discussed by Oxford philosophers, they had been construed in a way that Dad thought seriously misleading. From Prichard to Strawson, Oxford audiences tended to uncritically accept what Dad called 'traditionalist' readings of Kant's first critique, to which he opposed his own 'revolutionary' interpretation.

Dad was hardly the first to regard Kant as a revolutionary figure. But his dogged exposition of Kant's ideas led him to conclude that their radical implications have even today yet to be fully appreciated, over two centuries after their conception. He found the standard interpretations of Kant's thought superficial and naïve, particularly those dominant in Anglophone circles. His courageous effort to retrieve Kant's true intentions again attests to his sense of fairness. For he was certainly motivated in part by a desire to defend Kant against critics who traduced him, often because they were more interested in caricaturing his views for their own purposes than in making a serious attempt to understand what Kant was actually doing.

Exposing these misrepresentations mattered to him not only because he thought them simply wrong, but also because he believed Kant's actual position to be still worth considering in its own right. Dad thought Kant's views too important to be left to those interested only in scoring cheap pedantic points in an academic game. He strongly identified with Kant's heroic struggle to put an end to long-standing and pointless philosophical disputes. He had no time for those who have made their academic careers by indulging such vain scholasticism. He was fond of quoting a remark of J. L. Austin, addressed (probably unfairly) to H. L. A. Hart in a seminar at which the latter had presented a paper: 'we're trying to get out of the soup, not navigate ourselves across it.'

Kant was, for Dad, a philosopher of escape rather than navigation, and worthy of admiration and emulation as such. Conversely, Dad regarded many of the mainstream

debates in contemporary philosophy as lost at sea, squabbling over how to read maps that (as he believed Kant had shown) will always remain ambiguous. I was often surprised by Dad's low opinion of recent and contemporary work in his own field, and of academia more generally, although I must say that my own experience as a university professor has tended to confirm his reservations. Daniel Dennett likes to cite 'Sturgeon's Law' – which states that '90% of everything is crap' – and while I don't recall Dad ever referring to it explicitly, he certainly viewed his own discipline as conforming to Sturgeon's ratio. In his later life, he occasionally confided to me that he wished he had chosen to pursue a career in the sciences or a technical field in which his work could have had more of a concrete impact. I suspect that, latterly, he despaired of academic philosophy's ability to absorb Kant's deflationary view about the limits of metaphysical argumentation. He feared that he had wasted his efforts in elaborating Kant's case for preferring more modest and fruitful tasks, and for deferring to other disciplines that engage them already, when it might have been better to simply pursue them directly himself.

Such pessimism is understandable given stubborn persistence of views that both he and Kant wished to usher offstage. Certainly, I know that he was personally frustrated that some adherents of 'traditionalist' interpretations of Kant imperiously dismissed his revolutionary alternative. But I doubt that the pessimism he occasionally expressed in his last years will prove justified in the long run. Orthodoxies always die hard. Thanks to Dad's tireless efforts, nontraditionalist construals of the Kantian project receive an increasingly sympathetic hearing among Kant connoisseurs. And, of course, Kant's work will continue to be read and studied, and those struggling to understand it will turn to Dad's work for assistance. These future readers, not current proponents of traditionalist readings, will ultimately determine whether they, or something closer to Dad's interpretation, more faithfully and fruitfully represent Kant's actual position. I suspect they will be kinder to his view than to that of his opponents. In any case, Dad's work has without question made a lasting, and salutary, contribution to scholarship on Kant, as the very existence of this journal attests.

Even in a journal devoted to Kant, it is worth mentioning that my father's affinities for Kant had definite limits. On the philosophical side, Dad wrote a good deal about other figures – William James, Rudolf Carnap, Bertrand Russell, to name only the most prominent – and about many topics that have little or nothing to do with Kant. And he recognized Kant's own limitations, especially with regard to the sometimes ambiguous and confusing mode in which Kant presented his arguments. Conversations I had with him over the years about my own work also revealed some important reservations about Kant's ethical and political thought, about which – tellingly – he wrote and published virtually nothing. There's also a strong ascetic streak in Kant, which comes out both in his moral philosophy and his apparent indifference to music (except military marches). Dad had nothing of such austerity. His ethical sensibility was warm, kind and forgiving, closer to Hume and Mill than to Kant's more pietist outlook. He loved music – opera especially – and was powerfully affected by it. To be sure, his engagement with the good things in life was detached and reserved, and he often preferred to enjoy them by himself, and on his own terms. He was also uncomfortable in large gatherings (in a way that Kant probably wasn't) and wasn't an easy man to get to know. But his guardedness was more a matter of his Englishness than of anything even vaguely Prussian, and anyway represented only one facet of his character.

Given his unease and shyness in public settings, I suspect that many of his students and professional colleagues would have been surprised to learn of the child-like warmth and twinkling sense of humour he brought to his intimate relationships. He could take, and crack, bawdy jokes with the best of them, and he was a master of word-play and satire. Who can forget the line from his effort to spoof the Victorian adventure-novel: *'I came across him through a clearing in the kitchen, wrestling with a **giant tablecloth**, many times larger than himself'*? I can't imagine Kant engaging in such parody: where Dad's sense of humor was ribald, full-throated and playful, Kant's seems to have been drily witty and deadpan. And, of course, as a family man, there was a dimension of my father's life that was beyond the limits of Kant's experience, since he never married. Here, I can only say that Dad was a wonderful and devoted father, always palpably loving and supportive, never cold or distant.

Kant famously denied that the point of a well-lived life is to secure personal happiness. The true aim, he taught, is to become **worthy** of happiness. I doubt that I'll ever meet anyone more deserving of happiness than Dad. And, fortunately, he did lead a largely happy life. He grew old to see his children and grandchildren flourish. His academic work commanded the admiration of the most sophisticated minds of his generation, and will continue to inspire current and future philosophers, myself included. He had ample opportunities to delight in music, opera, literature, poetry, film and comedy. He relished his explorations of the mountains of Scotland, Wales, the Lake District and the Alps. He prepared – and enjoyed – many delicious desserts.

Although solitary and self-contained, he took pleasure in the companionship of his friends and family, and his smile was brighter than the sun. I learned more from him than anyone else, and I miss him very much.