Virtues and vices of amour propre

Shahidha Bari delights in a lucid and graceful philosophical probing of self-consciousness

By Simon Blackburn

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Simon Blackburn’s Mirror, Mirror is a very fine and brilliant book, full of the sort of measured analysis and keen insight you might expect from that excellent University of Cambridge philosopher. But you’ll forgive me if I confess that the observation that stopped me dead in my tracks was the following, quoted from David Hume: “A man will be mortified if he tell him he has a stinking breath, but though it is evidently no annoyance to himself.”

The idea that that magnificent Scottish mind might have lent itself to meditations on miasmatic body odours is in itself remarkable enough to provoke a gentle laughter, but what’s more astonishing is that the plain truth is the plain truth of the observation itself. It is true that we might not care one whit for our own odours were it not for our imaginative ability to experience them via others. The way that Hume’s unobtrusive little note brings us up short and makes us cock our heads differently at the idea of self-consciousness is in some regard indicative of the quiet ways that this book works.

This is a book that concerns itself with “the emotions and attitudes that include some estimate of the self, such as pride, self-esteem, vanity, arrogance, shame, humility, embarrassment, resentment, and indignation” and that “often extend to the “qualities that bear upon it — integrity, sincerity, authenticity.” And Blackburn is unusually a supreme and supremely knowledgeable narrator in whom we can have utmost confidence, one with a quirky wit, a clear eye, alert to the curious side note and irrefut- able detail that can make his book sometimes dusty discipline gleam with a new sheen and edge.

But it is evidently that the observation that stopped you’ll forgive me if I confess that the volubility of a philosopher with an unerring touch for the precise aspect of Aristotle or quotation from Immanuel Kant that could refocus a tired argument and lend new light to a problem. The sources are wide, and the thicket of serious and substantial (rather than “popu- lar”) philosophy with an unerring touch for the precise aspect of Aristotle or quotation from Immanuel Kant that could refocus a tired argument and lend new light to a problem. The sources are wide, and the thicket of serious and substantial (rather than “popular”) philosophy with an unerring touch for the precise aspect of Aristotle or quotation from Immanuel Kant that could refocus a tired argument and lend new light to a problem. 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