Booknotes

Normally this column focuses on new and recent books. However, given the current move by the British government to change the institution of marriage by statute, it seems worthwhile mentioning a book defending the traditional conception even though it was originally published in 2006. It is particularly worth mentioning in the British context because in this country, in distinction to the case in the USA, there has been virtually no discussion of the merits of the case, other than a generalised assumption that any opposition to marriage reform must be based on prejudice against homosexuality. So Brenda Almond's *The Fragmenting Family* (Oxford University Press, 2006) is, in a way, more timely in 2013 than it was when it was originally published. Not only is it topical, it is also well and dispassionately argued, on strictly secular grounds and in a way that would be very hard to convict of irrational or unjustified prejudice. Both supporters and opponents of the current legislation could learn a lot from it.

Almond's central contention is that the traditional heterosexual family is the best context we know for the upbringing of children. It is also, for those who engage in it voluntarily and with commitment, a, or perhaps the, quintessential network of bonding. None of this denies that children may be brought up well in other circumstances, or badly in these. But, she argues on both theoretical and empirical grounds that the heterosexual nuclear family is the setting that overall does best for both children and parents. Seeing the family as an institution for the procreation and upbringing of children, she argues that divorce does hurt all concerned, that deep attachments cannot be unilaterally shattered, that cohabiting is not as good as the committed relationship of marriage, that genetic relationships and the respective contributions to upbringing of natural mothers and fathers do matter, and that we do not (yet) understand the consequences of the undermining of any or all of these assumptions. She recognises that on all these points she will be strongly resisted by those who regard marriage as dispensable or malleable. But as her aim is to resist the temptation to think that the 'family' can mean whatever we (or our politicians and pressure groups) want it to mean, and as her arguments are patiently and carefully laid out, they should certainly be considered before we undo in a short time what it has taken centuries to develop.

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Having referred to one book which is not strictly speaking new, we might mention another, again on a topic which is gaining in topicality since the book originally appeared. The book in question is Margaret A. Boden's *Creativity and Art: Three Roads to Surprise*, originally published by OUP in 2010 and just reissued in paperback. Boden's discussion is timely because both conceptual art and computer generated or assisted art increasingly dominate large swathes of the fashionable art world, and much of her analysis of creativity is devoted to its applicability in these areas. The three roads to creativity are combinatorial, exploratory and transformational, all of which are shown to have different emphases, while creativity itself is seen as the generation of novel, surprising and valuable ideas. As such creativity goes beyond the artistic or aesthetic, which is surely right. Moreover, Boden, who draws on her pioneering expertise in the area, shows that there is an important difference between art which is computer generated and that which is computer assisted. She argues that much conceptual art is designed to be in one way or another shocking, not so much transformational in method as, in her terms, combinatorial, by exploiting unexpected combinations of familiar ideas. Boden also develops a careful analysis of craft works, as opposed to works of fine art, concluding that on the whole craftworks do not involve adventurous creativity.

In terms of Boden's analysis both conceptual and computer art can be creative, even if some might jib at ascribing truly transformational creativity to computer generated work, and even at calling computer generated work 'art', if human agency and intention are taken as essential to art. As Boden herself points out all sorts of tricky and complicated questions are involved here, but if Tate Modern or the Turner Prize are anything to go by, there is no denying that considerable interest is generated by both types of art, and in some cases perhaps not unjustifiably. What is in any case clear is that both conceptual and computer art are going to continue to a large and probably increasing role in our cultural landscape, particularly among the young, so Boden's informed and level headed exploration of many of the issues involved is to be welcomed. However for some observers there might still be a question as to the relative value of craft and creativity. If artistic creativity can be produced out of mere (?) concepts or through admittedly ingenious and fascinating computer programmes, maybe we should re-appraise the value of the type of manual skill and physical labour involved in the craft of making a pot or a table or an architectural detail. Traditional modes of painting and sculpture may have more in common with what is now seen as craft than with much of what is involved in art production in the

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21st century. Has 'art' thus changed its meaning, as 'marriage' appears to be doing. If so, does it matter?

To turn finally to something right up to date from a publishing perspective, in contemporary philosophy the topic of luck is somewhat neglected. This is surprising in a way because luck (*fortuna*) is a topic which was much discussed in Roman times, and also by more modern thinkers, such as Machiavelli and Montaigne. So it is interesting that Ed Smith has stepped into the philosophical breach with his engaging *Luck: What it Means and Why it Matters* (Bloomsbury, 2012). As would be expected from a distinguished former cricketer, there are plenty of examples from the world of sport (as well as from finance and personal life), to bring out the extent of the influence of luck, which many people, particularly the successful, are loath to admit. Smith sees luck not in terms of randomness, but in terms of factors in our lives which we cannot control, ranging all the way from our genes and upbringing to the catch which was dropped in Kevin Pietersen's epic and Ashes determining innings in 2005 and the 'chance' meeting on a train which led to Smith's own marriage. Of course Pietersen is as close to a genius as one would find in present day cricket (annoying as it may be for some to admit this), and in his book Smith is careful to accord sheer natural talent its proper role in whatever field, but as KP himself says 'Luck has to be huge. That dropped catch. I mean, how huge was that?' It was indeed huge, because of the context, and what happened after it. In another context a dropped catch might have been insignificant, which points to another aspect of luck: how these uncontrollable events may have influences way beyond their intrinsic importance, which is perhaps another reason why the notion of luck can offend the over-rationalistic mind.

It is in discussing what happens when people fail to recognise luck or its importance that Smith's book becomes really interesting, and a good starting point for a philosophical consideration of what might be called the ethics of luck. For, as he points out, there are societies where luck is not recognised. The Azande, for example, put every happening, good or bad, down to the influence of agency, particularly, in the case of what we might see as bad luck, to the malicious agency of witches and enemies. We in the modern scientific West may look down on this, but are we wholly immune from wanting to apportion blame and to seek compensation whenever something goes wrong? This can often be unfair, and lead to what in the context are significantly known as witch-hunts, where people who have been unlucky are pilloried and persecuted way beyond their real culpability. Recognising the role of luck in our lives is thus a

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recognition of human vulnerability, of the way things often happen beyond any ability to control or predict, even on the part of those who unintentionally harm us. It might also lead in cases of success to a due humility, as opposed to the bullying and bragging we often find in the (fortunately) successful. Macchiavelli, seeing *fortuna* as a woman who needs to be mastered, suggests that the vigorous man is often more likely to ride his luck than the passive one, which may go some way to explaining the arrogance of some of those on top of the heap. Leaving aside his doubtless offensive 'sexism', Macchiavelli may be right, in that people who are adaptable and responsive to circumstances so as to master them rather than be mastered will have an advantage over those who are passive and stuck in their ways, as Smith himself recognises, but the successful characteristically underestimate the importance of luck in their success. To this and to witch-hunting Smith's book is a humane and philosophical corrective, showing, in his own words, that we should be 'worried when *stop* believing in the idea of luck'.

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