

❖ **Phillips, Adam – On Balance, Penguin Books, 2010 (pp 313) ISBN: 978-0-241-14388-9**

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Adam Phillips is a psychoanalyst whose many books have taken a radical and playful view of the psychoanalytic encounter. He has done this through an eclectic, though distinctly literary, emphasis on the writings of Freud.

In the preface to his latest book, *On Balance*, Phillips begins by addressing the title, in which the idea of 'a balanced life' is rendered problematic. He suggests that psychoanalysts realised early in their treatments that there might never have existed the 'balanced lives' that individuals sought to have restored through analysis and argues that the return to an earlier state of 'balance' is largely a myth. Nor should a 'balanced life' be a life goal, but rather a means to decision-making or other essential life activities.

At the end of the preface, Phillips invokes Shylock's demand for a "pound of flesh" in the *Merchant of Venice* as an example of the darkest corners to which the 'demand for balance' will go. The essays that follow are probes into alternatives to making 'balance' the goal of either a therapeutic or philosophical engagement within the stratagems and designs of our social and psychological existences.

The book comprises ten chapters and is a mix of materials that have been either presented as talks (BBC Radio 3, conferences) or published in literary reviews and journals. The writing style, in line with the 'talking cure', is conversational and accessible to a non-academic audience. There are few notes or references and no index. The book is consistent with Phillips' earlier work in not engaging within or providing a formal academic contextualisation. As such, Phillips' writing is deliberately intent on being popular beyond the academic or professional psychological fields to which it pertains.

"All truths are woven from extreme consequences" – Alain Badiou (4)

The impetus to review this book is linked to the theme of this GMJ/AU issue on obsession and addiction. This relates directly to the subject of Phillips' first series of talks, *Five Short Talks on Excess*. If obsession and addiction are about anything, they are about excessive behaviours.

Phillips' interest in 'excess' is flagged in the preface in his discussion of the 'balanced life'. He identifies the value of a balanced life with the liberalism of John Stuart Mill and implies that it is not relevant to contemporary living. In a reversal attributed to Lacan, Phillips is keen to underscore that much of our reaction to the excesses of others is based on what it reveals about us. He asserts that we, who are offended, concerned or disgusted by the excessive

behaviour in question, also deem these behaviours important because they reveal something significant about our relationship to them. Quick to anticipate the rejection of an “unconscious attraction” to these excesses, Phillips translates drug addiction into issues of dependency. In this way he can claim that the reaction to drug addiction can “stand in” for a reaction to the many dependencies that engage us that are “drug-like”.

Phillips writes: “... Tell me which kind of excesses appal you and I will tell you who you are ...” (8) This quote from Phillips is, however, a pre-text (an excessive one) to make the point that excessive behaviour provokes and challenges, creates conflict in oneself and demands that we work through the excessive behaviour. We need to understand its pertinence to our life, to make the issue personal and to scale it to our situation. “... I don’t want to be a drug addict, but I do want to be free to need someone ...” (8) Furthermore, excess is a teacher of what constitutes appropriate desire. We think of the testing of boundaries by children and adolescents and this suggests something of the “wisdom of excess”. By going further than we should go, we learn what the right ‘balance’ should be.

Phillips works on sexual excess as a way of furthering his thesis on desire and its compensating features. For Phillips, too much sex means too little of something else and as Foucault has noted, excessive sex is both punished and tolerated – encouraged and damned as a threat and risks betrayal and torment. For Phillips, psychotherapy in its treatment of excessive sexual activity may be caught between the negative effects of acting on desire as much as the negative effects of not acting on desire. The key concept of self-awareness in dealing with excessive sex is similar to that in relation to addiction – that the focus should be on what we can learn from excessive sexual desire, about what it says about ourselves and in this way moves us closer to the life we want.

From the sensory excesses of hunger and sex, Phillips uses a notion of self-oriented excess to map a trajectory across adolescence to adulthood. “... Adolescents are excessive compared with the children they once were and the adults they have supposedly become ...”(36). Here, the purposeful slippage from children to adults and back again is to remind us that generational change is less a change of patterns of excess as it is one in which both generations suffer from feelings of helplessness – helplessness born of inexperience for adolescents and helplessness born of experience for adults. This double dip into helplessness allows Phillips to segue into the often-proposed solution – to what might be called the ideal Freudian “object relation” – a belief in God.

The arguments regarding excess continue however, as the fifth of the five “short talks on Excess” ends when we are thrust into a critique of fundamentalism – a logical follow-on to the analysis of religious fanaticism. Here, Phillips turns to Freud’s assertions that our largest problem is the difficulty most of us have in speaking about what is fundamental to us – while those who we would fear most (e.g., suicide bombers) have no difficulty at all in expressing these beliefs as well as dying for them.

With the specific engagement of children’s issues (*Children Behaving Badly*), Phillips draws on his long experience (eight years) as a child psychotherapist at Charing Cross Hospital in London.

The last two chapters showcase Phillips’ talent for literary criticism with four insightful essays under the general title of *Forms of Inattention*. The essays are on Diane Arbus (*Arbus’ Freaks*), W.G. Sebald (*Celebrating Sebald*), Daniel Mendelsohn (*Mendelsohn’s Histories*) and W.H. Auden (*Auden’s Magic*). His readings of these significant cultural producers are insightful accounts of the intersections of their lives and work. The engagement is less psychoanalytic and more litero-analytic in the way Phillips manoeuvres through the salient themes.

He sees Arbus for example, in a confrontation with 'otherness' – the freaks she photographs. But in her own exclusion from her social milieu, she becomes the 'other' while her photography (all photography?) is a secret that hides a secret. The scenarios in Sebald's work are a series of imminent disasters that follow every glimmer of hope and in this way narrate the tragic motifs that characterise much of the 20th century.

The imbrications of Jewish and Gay histories of oppression in Mendelsohn's work are most potent when as Phillips writes: "... The real torment begins when wanting turns into wanting to know. When 'What can you know?' becomes the question rather than 'What do you want?' sexuality and the writing of history become daunting and obsessive ...When wanting has to be transformed into knowing, only the satisfactions of narrative are available." (259)

The extended meta-criticism of Auden's *The Sea and the Mirror* is analysed as a parable about art, magic and "... the disillusion of being human ... you can hold a mirror up to a person, but you may make him worse ..." (286) Does this make Shakespeare insufficient, or perhaps psychoanalysis?

The book concludes with two fairy tales reported in psychoanalytic terms – Jack and the Beanstalk and Cinderella – under the title of *Mothers and Fairy Tales*. In a moment of self-deprecation, Phillips writes, "... If Jack ever wants to understand his own life all he will have to do is see (or read) 'Jack and the Beanstalk'. (297). It may go to the heart of the psychoanalytic project that has frequently been accused of first providing the disease for which it then offers the cure.

In Phillips' hands however, this seems nullified by the shift in the ground he provides, where he is as much at odds with the conventional 'scientific' Freud as he reinvents its civilisational perspectives. To this end, this book entertains as much as it informs us, not solely about psychoanalysis but about the engagements and desires that form the excessive practices (obsessions and addictions) of our everyday lives.

About the author

Hart Cohen is an Associate Professor in media and communication at the University of Western Sydney. He is also a founding editor of *Global Media Journal*, Australian edition.

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