

## One world, like it or not?

Looking around Stephanie Bunbury's encounter with Alain de Botton

### *Peter Geyer*

*Some of us live like princes*

*Some of us live like queens*

*Most of us live like me and don't know what it means*

*To take our place in one world...*

John Martyn 1977.

Stephanie Bunbury: The Trials of Young Alain Good Weekend May 1 2004pp16-21.

One of the surprising things about listening to and talking about people is that genuine insight into another's world seems quite rare, notwithstanding all that's been written and researched about personality in the past century or so

Of course, making sense out of all this disparate information depends on where you look, how it makes sense to you and the level of curiosity you have about the similar and different ways others experience life. The best indications we can get are that personality, in its non-celebrity sense, is a mixture of innate predisposition and experience/culture. So, while there are common expressions of personality that we can use to generalise about people, it's important to get to the individual level and find out why that person is doing what they're doing, why they're happy, unhappy and so forth.

Chris Beck, for instance, in interviewing David Attenborough in the Age Green Guide some months ago, seemed to presume that Attenborough's interest in the planet and its animals meant they held a similar moral approach. He seemed quite startled and confused when Attenborough quite bluntly rejected those points of view. Nonetheless, it was a most insightful interview from both points of view.

Alastair Mant, in seeking to explain John Howard and George W. Bush, recently used the unconvincing metaphor of naughty boys to characterise both men, without seeking a broader point of view from their lives. One suspects that power and a simple view of the world is what these two men share in common, for their methods are quite different. Howard's general methods of management aren't too dissimilar to the Bracks-Brumby government in Victoria: conservative, oriented to the past rather than a vision of the future, position power and so forth.

Some people speak and write about themselves, or others, with greater clarity.

Notwithstanding the continuing industry of books about Elvis Presley, Peter Guralnick's work is still the most convincing, depicting Elvis in his normal state as a highly introverted, sensitive, realistic person, living mostly in the moment. His performances and his life can be seen more clearly in that context (1994).

Even Barry Humphries, who seems to have a vested interest in keeping his personality a mystery to others, provides some insights in his recent memoir (2003). An introverted man like Presley, but more non-personal in his approach. A sense of logic and detail about the present and the past from an aesthetic and vaudevillian perspective. Bob Dylan, a similar personality, has used circus and mime in a similar way, together with the sarcasm and wit both performers have employed over some decades.

Stephanie Bunbury's recent encounter with Alain de Botton (2004) has a theme of extraversion and introversion perhaps as a way for her of understanding her experience, and thus something about him.

Self-describing as "ebullient", and familiar more with external realities, as de Botton ideas "seem to refer to some other reality than the one we know", presuming her readers are in no doubt as to what the real world is. For all that, she writes with keen observation and clarity and constructs a portrait of de Botton that gives some insight into who he is and what he's about.

The context for meeting is de Botton's new book *Status Anxiety*, and Bunbury starts off by referring to his unpleasant experience at the elite Harrow school as perhaps a reason for the appearance of the book. One might also add his parents to the list, as well as the tendency for some people to be worried about achievement, even if they have different notions of what that might be. Not everyone who has the requisite knowledge wants to appear before Eddie McGuire, or Julian Berner for that matter, to express what they know. The prospect of monetary reward may in actual fact be a further deterrent to such an appearance.

Bunbury describes de Botton's book as being about *meritocracy*, that of his family and elsewhere. On what the author says in the article, it seems to be more about public assessment in the outside, or extraverted world. Performance, in fact. If you're an introvert, the external world is all about performance, including being someone else. It's harder for extraverts to do that because they are more comfortable in the outer world.

And, with regard to the trappings of success, it seems to be not that "you can't take it with you", but more a lack of interest in that sort of reward. Barry Humphries alludes to such a thing in his love of collecting artwork and books, there are comments down the ages of this sort of thing from philosophers and the like.

Bunbury rightly points out that de Botton's originality is in his ability to reinterpret the writings of others, philosophers, novelists and so on in plain English. But, if his earlier work is a guide, they're expressed as timeless truths in a way, rather than something from the past, as fact, or data. Not like a *Reader's Digest* condensed book, at any rate.

An introverted view of the world is necessarily at a distance. One thinks of Bill Bryson's travel books, for instance, observing the world with dry wit, some humour and intermittent participation (e.g. Bryson 1999, 2000). So the reality de Botton "knows" is not the extraverted one, but he can construct principles to apply to its understanding, mediated by his experience, which is a little too melancholic for Bunbury in the world she knows.

This reserve of course also reflects culture and experience. The American Deirdre Bair points out in her introduction to her excellent biography of C.G. Jung that the presumptions she had regarding sources and private papers had to change radically when she encountered the very private Swiss culture, a point of origin for de Botton (Bair 2003)

The meritocratic principle he espouses in *Status Anxiety* has its critics, and Bunbury mentions Steven Poole as preferring a "real culture of corporate fat cats, lottery winners and drunken footballers" to his idea. It seems to me, however, that Poole's examples consist of aberrations as opposed to an overall cultural view, and that "meritocracy" has some merit as a description of success/anxiety. It's not by accident that "successful" people of any stripe are described in terms of money and possessions, and our governments put a dollar value on policies and promises rather than explaining what they will do, and why.

So too, with the approach to life.

Optimism is something more associated with extraversion than anything else, but there's evidence that introverts can have a more accurate perspective on life, with its ups and downs.

Saying anything is possible to younger people for instance, may not be helpful at all; they may want to know something about what isn't, in order to get some context, a more introverted view, perhaps. "The extraverted Jeff Kennett used to talk regularly about "positive thinking". At times this seemed to mean "don't critique what I do", when a bit of questioning, positive or otherwise might have helped, was necessary, in fact.

It's true that de Botton pursues a somewhat melancholy point of view, and it seems to worry Bunbury a little. Nonetheless, he doesn't seem unhappy, more aware perhaps that life isn't 100% ecstasy than those who pursue happiness relentlessly in whatever way. Melancholia is too often these days linked with depression, and one wonders what the happiness can be for those prescribed various drugs to mediate what might be normal behaviour and experience (Smith 1999). Having said that, being too extraverted has its downside in the rising tide of attention-deficit diagnoses and medical treatments.

We can see in the article many examples of de Botton's introversion, from the opening meeting (he didn't expect a personal encounter) to much of his idea of romance and relationship, including meeting his wife, and the living arrangements where both work at home, but communicate via email to meet for afternoon tea. Even the technique of asking people about their experiences, as he does with Bunbury regarding Berlin, is often a way of deflecting attention from themselves. Cheerfulness and interest in a one-on-one conversation isn't a contradiction of introversion; rather it's more likely to be where they will be most expressive.

But what else can we see?

Unlike ostensibly similar introverts like writer Adam Phillips (Crampton, 2002) or the "shabby scientists" of Alfred Loomis' Tuxedo Park, de Botton lives neatly. Not for him the chaos of papers and books, more familiar to me. He also admits to a daily schedule for being at his desk.

Bunbury gets no coffee, which may be absent-mindedness, or just a non-personal view of the world, which may also be suggested by his disdain for the agendas of self-help books, but also the interest in principles as a way of understanding people, rather than the other way around. De Botton is also obviously curious about life, but not to the point of interactions he doesn't choose. Curiosity is more in the head, than anywhere else, and the abstractions of ideas lead to whatever encounter there is with the outside world.

The encounter between Bunbury and de Botton seems quite pleasant overall, though she steps over the boundaries at the end when she genially offers to show him around Berlin when he is there next. "A good night out" for him would be safely observing people, with people he knows well, not necessarily engaging with them with someone he has just met. Interpersonal relationships take time and whereas an extravert has to live life in order to understand it, an introvert needs to understand life, in order to live it.

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