On Giving Up

By Adam Phillips

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*By*

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Readers of Adam Phillips’s books fall into two camps. To his many admirers, he is a supreme stylist whose elegant essays explore the tensions at the heart of the human psyche. But to others he is a literary show pony whose verbal prancing serves only to hide his lack of cogent thought.

Mr. Phillips is a psychoanalyst who for many years practiced as a child psychotherapist in the British National Health Service; he is also a visiting professor of English at the University of York. He emerged as a literary figure in 1993 with the publication of his intriguingly titled “On Kissing, Tickling and Being Bored,” a collection of essays applying a psychoanalytic perspective to everyday topics. It quickly found an enthusiastic readership. A further 25 slim volumes have since followed, most of them similar collections of psychoanalytically inspired essays, many of them with similarly structured titles (“On Flirtation,” “On Balance,” “On Wanting to Change”).

A typical Phillips essay aims to reveal paradoxical elements in some everyday phenomenon. (Thus, tickling is both uncomfortable and pleasant, both invasive and welcome.) The author will then draw on a wide range of sources to elaborate his conundrums. In addition to Freud, the psychanalytic theorists Jacques Lacan and Donald Winnicott make regular appearances. Literary figures such as Beckett, Kafka, Lawrence, Milton, Proust and Shakespeare are often invoked, sometimes two or three to a page. Mr. Phillips does not look to these figures to resolve his paradoxes, however. Rather than coming up with definite answers, he is content to lay out tensions between conflicting lines of thought.

Mr. Phillips writes gracefully; the issues he raises are always thought-provoking. But is that all there is? His detractors complain that his insistence on avoiding answers gives him a license to say anything. In their view, his style is nothing more than free association untrammeled by the constraints of reason. They cite his distracting habit of using phrases such as “in other words,” or “that is to say,” when what follows bears little apparent relation to what came before. Perhaps the reason he can’t deliver answers is that he never focuses on the questions.

The seven pieces in “On Giving Up” were previously published in literary journals such as the London Review of Books, Raritan and the Threepenny Review. The volume takes its title from the first essay; others include “On Not Wanting,” “On Being Left Out” and “The Pleasures of Censorship.”

It is unlikely that this new volume will shift the opinion of Mr. Phillips’s critics. If there is an overall theme to the book, it is that psychoanalysis should be viewed not as a source of knowledge but as a stimulus to conversation. The author cites the split between Freud and Jung at the beginning of the 20th century and bemoans the way Freud responded by insisting on the superiority of his own theories. It would have been far better, Mr. Phillips says, if Freud had instead promoted psychoanalysis as “a new kind of conversation in which people can acknowledge the benefits of not needing to know what they are talking about.”

The drawbacks of this attitude soon become apparent. Mr. Phillips starts his analysis of “giving up” by distinguishing the sense of quitting a habit—giving up smoking, say, or alcohol—from the sense of losing heart and perhaps contemplating suicide. But soon we have moved on, without really noting the difference, to the sense of abandoning some course of action, and then to the sense in which any decision rules out alternate choices. Now, these are all interesting phenomena, about which psychologists, economists and philosophers have had a great deal to say. But such discourse is not for Mr. Phillips. Instead he trips happily from one meaning to another, along the way throwing in insights like this: “To give up is always to give something up; something or someone is sacrificed. And sacrifice, whatever else it is, is a sadistic pleasure. To put it another way, perhaps we should not underestimate the pleasures of giving up.” One doesn’t really know what to say to this volley of non sequiturs. It seems beside the point to expose the equivocations driving the passage—but is there another point?

To take another example, at the beginning of the essay “On Not Wanting” Mr. Phillips asserts that, “I can never be surprised by what I want, because somewhere in myself I already know what is missing.” But then later in the same essay he quotes the poet Randall Jarrell, apparently with approval, saying, “if I can think of it, it isn’t what I want.” Well, which is it? What is this game that allows you to have it both ways?

Clearly there are many who enjoy Mr. Phillips’s free-wheeling wordplay. But for the unconverted, his writings can leave an unpleasant taste. At one point he distances himself from “monologues” that are free of interruption, and attributes their construction to a “fascist state of mind.” Mr. Phillips himself, however, is vulnerable to accusations of intellectual tunnel vision. He never, as far as I know, questions the credentials of his psychoanalytic perspective, despite the substantial body of evidence that calls it in question. And while he says he is only in the business of exploring, never asserting, his aphorisms are delivered in a register that precludes any opposition. He characteristically displays his insights as reactions that “we” will share, and he is overfond of reinforcing them with a dissent-blocking “of course.” (A quick search shows that “of course” appears on more than a third of this book’s pages, often two or three times a page.)

At one point Mr. Phillips says that the great virtue of the psychoanalytic approach is that “it stimulates the most interesting and inspiring and passionate disagreements among people.” This might well be true. But I fear that Mr. Phillips himself proceeds in a way that pre-empts debate. He insists that he is not aiming at definite answers, and then offers his gnomic thoughts as if they lie beyond dispute. In the end, there isn’t much left to disagree with.

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