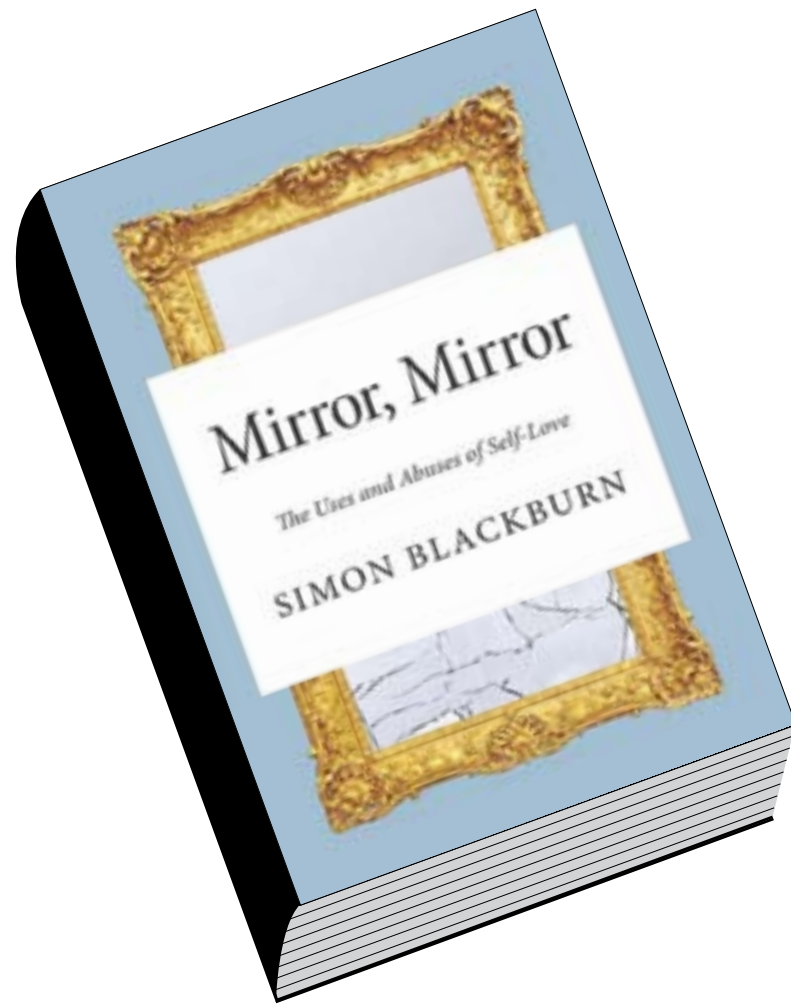


# Virtues and vices of amour propre

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



**Mirror, Mirror: The Uses and Abuses of Self-Love**  
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 you tell him he has a stinking breath; 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 (and mischievous), but what's most arresting 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 also extends to "the qualities that bear upon it – integrity, sincerity, authenticity". And Blackburn is not just a sure and supremely knowledgeable narrator in whom we can have utmost confidence, but one with a quirky ear, alert to the curious side note and irrefutable detail that can make his sometimes dusty discipline gleam with a new sheen and edge.

He is a discerning reader, selective and economical with the material he distils, steering us through the thickets 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. The sources are illuminating, but it is Blackburn's secure grasp and sound understanding that inspire our confidence to walk with him through the morasses of monstrous solipsism, patiently puzzling out our divided loyalties to a self that we might equally seek to "find" and strive to "forget".

The seriousness and substance of the material that Blackburn encourages us to navigate is no small part of his argument itself. To think through complex reasoning is to recognise selfhood itself as a phenomenon capable of such complexity. Blackburn is a helpfully deft and precise expositor. If at moments a regal professorial presence rears its head – elaborate deductions involving "mythical teapots", like examples involving divided apples or decisions made on sinking boats, are sweetly redolent of first-year philosophy – *Mirror, Mirror* is also full of lovelier, more gently reflective passages: "There is a melancholy pleasure in contemplating the wandering infirmities to which we are all prone." There is a wry candour to the truth that self-inspection pleases. Blackburn's particular grace here is not to censure this satisfaction, nor to permit us to laze in the language of fatuous self-help, but to insist on an intellectual athleticism. Every position is scrutinised from a different, sometimes more, sometimes less, redemptive angle. We must be agile thinkers and, more to the point, we wish to be so too, because Blackburn never underestimates our appetite, and inspires our ability for difficulty.

If this is a version of "popular"

philosophy or a philosophy of personal life, then it is one that is exceptionally dignified, often kind, always unsentimental and unclinging. You might think, by way of contrast, of those other usual and tiresomely numerous suspects who trade indifferently in platitudes, banalities and generalities, or, worse still, who wear their learning heavily and whose writing lacks the very life for which they claim usefulness. Utility is barely a notion that Blackburn attends to. Rather, he writes with the unspoken understanding that the philosophy that could be of "use" to us will make itself

**“He is irritated by the vacuous diktat ‘Because you’re worth it’. There’s something tickling about his being foxed by the voluminously coiffured Eva Longoria”**

apparent, doing so with neither fanfare nor declaration. And our ability to seek out that use, or not, is ours, not his, to dictate.

Indeed, it is Kant, who lopes in and out of this book with the perambulatory regularity for which he was famed, who leads us to this, in defining "pragmatic knowledge" as the "investigation of what *he* as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself". This notion of us as free-acting agents capable of self-making is the crux of the book. If we are vain-glorious idiots sky-high in our self-absorption, we have every possibility of thinking our way out of it. Blackburn provides us with resources. He is, though, a decided rather than impartial guide, unsexed, for instance, by the easy reductions of contract-based philosophy and its claims to right selfishness. Such contracts, he points out sensibly, must be predicated on self-cultivation, as generations of philosophers (Cynics, Stoics, Epicureans, Sceptics, Aristotelians, Peripatetics) all knew: "Living is a process, not a product."

And it is the commercial production of selfhood for which Blackburn reserves a white-hot fury. L'Oréal's exasperatingly ubiquitous slogan "Because you're worth it" emerges as a provocation for the book, with Blackburn confessing, somewhat

sheepishly, to being irritated and niggled by the vacuous diktat. Truth be told, there is something tickling, lightly absurd, about the eminent philosopher scratching his head at/being foxed by the voluminously coiffured Eva Longoria. But Blackburn's response is a powerful and compelling condemnation of the iniquities of the beauty industry, at the heart of which is that catastrophic inversion, "because I am worth *nothing*", that leaves selfhood destitute.

In the latter half of the book, George W. Bush, Tony Blair and bankers all make for fair game, Blackburn neatly manoeuvring into the right angles for a series of elegant potshots during a discussion of the grey shades of charisma, confidence and hubris. Perhaps this makes the book timely. Yet much more interesting is the closing discussion of Christianity, whose traditions of abstinence and asceticism might be understood as forms of self-abasement. God, Blackburn reasons intelligently, might easily be cast as a narcissist who neglects, or a busybody who endangers, but there is also a gentle defence of religious thinking here, and an unusually balanced argument. In

fact, his subtlety leaves Richard Dawkins a mere brutish braggadocio, grunting and lumbering in his graceful wake.

This is not to mistake Blackburn as a religious thinker – rather he is a resolutely *sociable* thinker, one in whose company we find balance, kindness and clear sight. Dignity and decorum are ideas that have purchase for him, but we are enervated beings if we are without desire, he notes too. At the heart of the book is an idea of the care of the soul. Here, one might think of Michel Foucault or Sigmund Freud, and if the book lacks anything, it is this continental tradition that so frequently concerns itself with that very thing. It matters little though. There is something modest and true in Blackburn's account of conscience and cooperative care, something he calls "company" in terms that are secular, sociable, readily understood. As he writes thoughtfully, "We do not need to believe in souls in order to find some people soulful."

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## THE AUTHOR



Of the selfie, Simon Blackburn observes: "If someone thinks the most important thing about the *Mona Lisa*, the Parthenon or Nelson Mandela's memorial service is 'Look, here I am!', then I do feel a bit sorry for them. Why not try really looking at the *Mona Lisa*, Parthenon, etc for a change? It might do you good."

Blackburn was born near Bristol and raised near Sunderland. "I like to think Northerners are more down-to-earth than other people; I then like to think that I am as well. Sunderland people are

intransigent, stoical, sociable and humorous, all of which sound good to me," he says.

The first philosophical work he recalls disagreeing with was G.E. Moore's *Principia Ethica*, while he was still at school: "Moore tries to show that beauty cannot be 'in the eye of the beholder' by asking us to imagine a lovely scene (or ugly scene) with nobody looking at it – and then you have to admit that it is still lovely (or ugly). I thought that wouldn't prove what he wanted at all, and I still do." His own earliest philosophical writings, Blackburn adds, were "probably adolescent musings, which I hope left no trace".

Until 2011, Blackburn was professor of philosophy at the University of Cambridge, and he remains a fellow of Trinity

College, Cambridge. He is distinguished research professor of philosophy at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill and visiting professor at the New College of the Humanities. Of this last institution's £18,000 annual tuition fees, he says: "I would prefer it that those who can afford it spend their money on education, and therefore on the people providing it, rather than on the rubbishy things for which they tend to use it, including rubbishy ideas that they wish to promote."

Has he been tempted to retire entirely? "I hope that while I draw breath I will continue to think about hard things...It's what I do."

**Karen Shook**

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