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Editors

Logic, Mathematics, Philosophy: Vintage Enthusiasms

Essays in Honour of John L. Bell

Preface

*If things of Sight such Heavens be
What Heavens are those we cannot see?*

Andrew Marvell

This collection of essays was put together to celebrate John Bell's sixtieth birthday on the 25 March 2005. The list of contributors signals some of the important stations of John's career as a mathematician, teacher, colleague and friend: the student days in Oxford; the years of the young Lecturer, pacing the rooming houses of Londinium's Bedsit Land; the years of the Reader, ensconced in more sedate accommodations; the years of the Canadian Professor in London, Ontario, no longer a philosopher in a mathematics department, but now a mathematician in a philosophy department. And all of them years of books, records and beloved recordings, from low-fi to high-fi, the sounds of Beethoven and Schoenberg, Heifetz and Gould, Parker and Powell, conversations (monologues?) late (very late!) into the night—vintage years of undying, revivifying enthusiasms, not least among them, the enthusiasm for vintages.

The contributions are in no way intended to be commentaries on John's work; they are to be seen rather as presents from some of the people John has influenced, been inspired by or inspired, encouraged, amazed and amused through the years. They include contributions from former fellow students, former and current colleagues, former pupils, collaborators and joint authors, and from friends and admirers. The papers are grouped into a small number of broad categories, though the breadth of topics gives some indication of the range of John's interests and influence, running from mathematics to aesthetics, and from philosophy of science to political theory. What unites the material in this volume is what is characteristic of John's work: when it is mathematical, the topics are chosen because of their philosophical interest; when it is philosophical, it takes, where appropriate, full advantage of illumination from relevant work in mathematics and formal logic.

The attentive reader will no doubt have noticed that a considerable time has elapsed between March of 2005 and the date of publication. Some of the lapse has been in the interests of the quality of the volume itself, as we waited for some of our eminent, and correspondingly busy, contributors to complete their papers. The Editors, less eminent but perhaps not less busy, accept full responsibility for the rest

of the delay. We wish to thank the contributors, not just for their papers, but for their patience and efficiency in the face of delays, pesterings and quibbles. We also wish to thank John, Bill Demopoulos (the General Editor of the Western Ontario Series in the Philosophy of Science, in which this volume appears) and the publisher for their tolerance and understanding. We also owe an enormous debt to the meticulous work of Oran Magal on the penultimate draft of the manuscript, and for compiling the Name Index; his diligence and care has saved us from numerous infelicities.

Because of the various delays in its completion, John began referring to the book waggishly as “the memorial volume.” But the joke, meant entirely good-heartedly, has now, sadly, a cruel sting. We had intended to dedicate the volume to the fixed point in John’s “perpetual motion,” Mimi, or $-M^2$ as her dedicatory sobriquet became. However, Mimi died from cancer on 20 November 2009; she had been John’s constant companion for over 40 years, from their early days together at LSE.

Two of the editors first got to know the Bells at LSE in the early 1970s. Thanks to John’s (literally) prodigious talent, which led to an Oxford Scholarship at the age of 15, he was officially our senior as teacher and supervisor, and indeed, it seemed then, as intellectual and cultural being, although he was scarcely older. We picture John and Mimi in the large LSE Refectory (the standard meeting place, and John’s constant resort), at one of the long formica tables, perhaps with a bowl of the stodgy spaghetti or one of the glutinous curries, or just mugs of coffee or tea and a biscuit or a cheese roll. The sense of fun was intense, as was the Bells’ delight in the ridiculous, of which the Refectory, with its food and habitués (including ourselves), provided a constant supply. John, of course, was the outwardly dominant one, but Mimi was firmly in charge, a fact which became clearer as one got to know them better. John was never allowed lasting dominance, and Mimi wouldn’t permit the conversation to be swamped by John’s obsession *du jour*. After a first rebuke, John would try reviving the topic on which he had fixed, especially if there was some *aperçu* which had occurred to him and he was itching to get out; this would be followed by a somewhat exasperated second rebuke, and the cycle would repeat itself. Eventually, Mimi would exclaim “Oh John, you’re so irritating,” and the cycles would be at an end. It was hard work, but Mimi always won, as she did at Scrabble. Many eccentric and odd characters would turn up, and (of course!) gravitate to the Bell circle, if sometimes only briefly. John encouraged this, and delighted in it; in fact, for him the odder and more eccentric, the better. Mimi, however, would usually remain aloof, composed, dignified and mildly sceptical, a rock of reassurance in the unpredictable political and emotional turbulence.¹

Eventually, the centre of this semi-communal social life shifted from the LSE to the Bells’ rented flat in Alexandra Grove, where the lads of humble English origin, having grown up in the monochrome aftermath of the Second World War, were first exposed to new worlds of intellectual and culinary creation. The only occasion when

¹ A fine sense of many of the LSE characters encountered by the Bells at this time is conveyed by the chapter “London, 1968–73” in John’s memoir *Perpetual Motion: My First Thirty Years*, available from his website.

at least one of the Editors saw John genuinely silenced and overawed was when their son, Alex, was born. After witnessing Mimi give birth, John came to a dinner party to which he had been previously invited. He hardly spoke a word all evening and sat amazed by what he had experienced; when he did speak, it was to express his admiration for Mimi and his complete devotion to her and their new son.

Evolving social and academic commitments and careers dispersed us somewhat, and, as the years went by, there was less communal life and social gatherings became rarer; new circles were formed of which we were no longer part. At the end of the 1980s, the persuasive powers of some of John's future colleagues at the University of Western Ontario, following on a decade of Thatcherism, convinced the Bells to swap Londinium, as it became known for purposes of disambiguation, for London, Ontario. This was a massive disruption, involving significant adaptation, no matter how willingly undertaken. Academic life remained relatively familiar, and, for John, the major difficulty now was being surrounded by students and colleagues with philosophical, rather than mathematical, background. But Canada generally, and London in particular, involved considerable cultural bemusement for both the Bells. John greatly enjoyed regaling visitors with lists of pros, cons and constants. John was eventually able to reconcile himself to the strange ways of Canadians; one suspects that he would thrive anywhere, but it has been the good fortune of Canadian philosophy that he has been thriving in Canada. The Bells came to admire greatly Canada's well-run, multi-cultural mix, largely untroubled as it is by the hatreds that had scarred old London in the thirties and which were, by the time the Bell family left, beginning to reassert themselves in the darker corners of British political and social life.

Once they'd arrived in Canada, and escaped a particularly miserly landlord (a source of new obsessions!) by moving to their own home, the Bells kept a busy social schedule, one that included frequent visits from graduate students. It was during this transition period that the third editor got to know the Bells, again first as John's Ph.D. student, then as friend. For the shyer or more reserved of the Canuck students, a visit to the Bell household promised intimidation, what with John's boisterousness on home soil added to his brilliance. But, once arrived at the house, Mimi (again firmly in charge) ensured that everyone recognized how welcome they were. This third editor, who doesn't think of himself as a shrinking violet, fondly remembers spending a good portion of his first party at the Bells in the kitchen helping Mimi prepare the food, a respite from the storm of conversation in the living room. That job involved, among other things, the peeling of vegetables the editor had never seen before, and was a first hint of the fact that every visit to the Bells involved marvellous food, prepared with flair and imagination.

While John pursued his usual academic life, one of enormous productivity and Oxonian "effortless superiority," Mimi's endeavours in new London were more varied. For years, she worked at a local shelter for victims of domestic violence, putting her deeply felt (if not often voiced) political commitments into action; while she didn't talk about this work often, at least at social gatherings, the work was essential and potentially dangerous. In more recent years, she was involved in helping new immigrants and refugees get settled in Canada, steering them through the formidable

bureaucracy involved in finding adequate housing, language classes, training and jobs. She was also eventually persuaded to share her culinary expertise with circles outside the guests at her house. For years she taught cooking classes, and she set up and ran her own catering business. She wrote a cookery book (which is partly responsible for the difficulty one of the editors has in keeping his weight under control). She wrote poetry and painted, including work that found its way into exhibitions. All this in addition to raising the Bells' son, Alex, and doing the bulk of the work keeping a frenetic household running.

We cannot, sadly, dedicate this book to Mimi, as John so often did with his own books. Instead, we dedicate it to her memory, with wonderfully fond recollection.

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