

On the chaste world of Milan Kundera*

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Abstract. Milan Kundera is now perhaps the greatest living philosopher, but he suffers from logical problems. One might propose that since he is a person who works primarily in the medium of fiction, one should not be too harsh on him, rather find ways to make him more logical. The result may be rather chaste.

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*“What ontological category shall we put this in
—Surely ‘the novel’ is not the dustbin?”*

Today Milan Kundera is perhaps the greatest living philosopher, certainly a candidate from the perspective of audiences who do not professionalize in the discipline. But he is primarily known for using a medium which is less used by philosophers in the analytic tradition, namely the medium of the novel. How can we evaluate him then? If we say, “This is illogical and that is illogical,” then we will surely be told, “It’s a novel; don’t be too strict on these things,” though perhaps by someone who secretly desires to know what all the logical weaknesses are. (“I wish to enter that house, leave, and then demolish it before anyone else can.”)

Kundera himself tells us that this is a novel in his *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1996: 227), as do two distinguished novelists quoted on the back cover of my copy. So what does “not being too strict” mean? I presume it means “Work with sensible intuitions about Kundera’s intentions and try to remove logical problems, at the level of

non-interventionist interpretation or by textual surgery, while remaining faithful to the more basic intentions.” That seems easier said than done. Kundera is known for his theorization of the erotic. But in the book referred to he tells us about knowledge possessed by one of his fictional characters:

For he was aware of the great secret of life: Women don't look for handsome men. Women look for men who have had beautiful women. (1996: 16)

Even if we grant certain assumptions to Kundera – there are beautiful and not beautiful women; all women “look” for men – we are left with a problem of how the relations Kundera is interested in can ever get going. Taken quite literally, we are stuck with this combination:

- (i) Kundera intends for his novels to convey knowledge of the erotic.
- (ii) He is committed to the proposition: for any man, a necessary condition for a woman having sexual relations with that man is that he has had such relations with a beautiful woman.

Given the condition specified in (ii), the natural worry is that no sexual relations ever occur. And it is by no means clear how to keep (i) and revise (ii) somewhat. Given Kundera's overall style, I personally think it is easier to just abandon (i), as suggested by my various imitations of the iconic author.

Reference

Kundera, M. (translated from French by A. Asher) 1996. *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. London: Faber and Faber.