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Raimond Gaita on Saints, Love and Human Preciousness

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Abstract Raimond Gaita's work in moral philosophy is unusual and important in focusing on the concept of sainthood. Drawing partly on the work of George Orwell, and partly on the life and work of Simone Weil, as well as on further material, I argue that Gaita's use of this notion to help make sense of the concept of human preciousness is unconvincing, not least because he does not properly explore the figure and psychology of the saint in any detail. I relatedly argue that the notion of human preciousness in question is implausible and, in some ways, sentimental. I also explore Gaita's concept of "speaking personally" in moral philosophy, and suggest that matters here are a great deal more complicated than he supposes.

Keywords Christian metaphysics · Human preciousness · Life-denial · Love · Saints

1 Introduction

The concepts of sainthood and saintly behaviour are ones that, given our Christian inheritance in the West – and despite the increasing secularization of modern Western culture – might be expected to play a significant role in analytic moral philosophy, if only as a foil to, and to help illuminate, other important moral notions, such as that of duty or virtue. There have, of course, been important studies of saints in theology and, to a lesser extent, philosophy of religion, but, surprisingly enough, there has been little attention to sainthood in analytic ethics.[1] And this is all the more surprising given that, outside analytic moral philosophy, but in neighbouring areas, the concept of sainthood has been of importance – for example, in the work of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard. This lacuna has recently been addressed in the work of Raimond Gaita. That alone makes it worthwhile exploring what Gaita has to say on the subject. Moreover, Gaita's exploration of the notion

[1] One influential and important exception is Wolf 1982.

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of sainthood in his moral philosophy has allowed him to bring to the fore certain other topics which are unduly neglected or underexplored in contemporary moral philosophy. Two of these are love and the idea that all human beings are precious – itself a version of the notion that human beings are sacred, a claim that itself has been deeply influential on Western moral consciousness, whether or not we now accept the Christianity that gave it its most significant formulation. In this paper I intend, therefore, to explore the notions of sainthood, human preciousness and love as they are investigated in Gaita's work in the hope that this will help us to see something of the strengths and weaknesses of Gaita's own exploration of these ideas, but also to enable us to get more of a sense of what might be a stake for a moral philosophy – for moral philosophy – in paying more attention to them.[2]

2 Gaita's Central Claims

The saint gets into Gaita's thinking through discussion of a nun whose behaviour he witnessed whilst he worked, as a young man, in a psychiatric hospital (CH: xviii; 18–22). He says that the nun came into the hospital one day and showed in her behaviour that she really took the afflicted to be her equal. Her manner and tone towards them, as well as her behaviour more straightforwardly characterised, revealed their full humanity. It was the work of love – saintly love – to reveal this, says Gaita, and only in the light of this love can their full humanity be seen. Gaita also says that there was a kind of goodness in her behaviour, a goodness which merits a capital 'G.' He also speaks in this context of a kind of purity, for we have here, in a phrase he takes from Hannah Arendt, a goodness beyond virtue (CH: 17–27). This kind of love and goodness gives sense to the idea that human beings – *all* human beings – are precious. This thought may have once been expressed by the idea that all human beings are sacred, but Gaita eschews this way of speaking since he wishes to distance himself from Christian thought or belief, not believing that what he says needs such thought or belief to be accepted, or even grasped.

There are, Gaita argues, analogues to the love the nun showed in everyday life – the love of parents for their children, for example, which is unconditional (though not unconditioned). He further claims that on the basis of this love of saints we have built a more tractable conceptual structure of, for example, inalienable rights (CH: xix). We might speak in this connection of the inherent dignity of all human beings. Or we might, with Kant, speak here of human beings as ends in themselves. Gaita is critical of these ways of speaking. He rejects, for example, the vocabulary of rights – of natural or human rights, I take it, rather than legally accorded rights (PD: 200). This is not only an odd departure from his general Wittgensteinian aim to describe our form of life, but also makes it far from clear that we can take at face value his claim that the language of rights is more tractable than the language of love. At best, we shall have to say: more tractable in some ways or for some purposes. Gaita's reason for rejecting the vocabulary of rights is that

> [t]o say that an action is unjust because it violates someone's rights adds nothing...to saying that it is unjust, neither by way of explaining why it is unjust, nor by making it more objectively or stringently binding on the will (PD: 200).

[2] I shall be drawing here principally on two of Gaita's books: *Good and Evil: an Absolute Conception* (Gaita 2004) and *A Common Humanity: Thinking About Love and Truth and Justice* (Gaita 2000). I shall also refer to his *The Philosopher's Dog* (Gaita 2003). References to these texts are given in what follows as GE, CH and PD respectively, followed by chapter or page number.

Gaita's attitude at this point – or the spirit of his attitude – is influenced by Simone Weil (as is his attitude at many other points) when she remarks that it would be absurd to say of a young girl being forced into prostitution that her *rights* were being violated (Weil 1957). Rather, one might say, *she* is being violated. Gaita is also critical of a Kantian vocabulary in ethics, arguing that Kant's emphasis on our rationality as the mark, or foundation, of our moral worth undermines or ignores the notion of the value of our *humanity* as revealed in the nun's behaviour (GE: ch.3).

3 The Loving Deeds of Saints

We can begin to explore Gaita's view of, indeed, his extremely positive evaluation of, the saint by setting it beside George Orwell's bracingly sceptical comment that "[s]aints should always be judged guilty until they are proved innocent" (Orwell 1984: 465). This comment of Orwell's comes in a series of reflections on the life of Gandhi. And that already distinguishes his thinking from Gaita's. This is because, although Gaita regularly appeals to the figure of the saint in his writing in the kind of way I have mentioned, he is, in general, very reluctant to discuss the details of the life, thinking and psychology of any specific, real saint. Saint Augustine is mentioned at points in Gaita's work, but only briefly, and not in a context that is relevant for my discussion here (GE: 29–31; CH: 106; 216–24, *passim*). Mother Teresa gets more thorough treatment, but we are given no details of her life, education or background, or of how she organised her order of nuns (GE: chh.11–12, *passim*; Mother Teresa, Gaita tells us [GE: xii–xiii], is here standing proxy for the nun). Gandhi is mentioned – indeed, Gaita refers to Orwell's essay on him – but the context in question is that of Orwell's praise of Gandhi as being unafraid to think anything, not anything to do with his revealing our humanity in the way Gaita says the nun did (GE: 308; 310). True, Gaita refers to Orwell's comment, when reflecting on Gandhi, that we have to choose between being a saint or a human being (GE: 192), but there is no extended discussion of this. And we are told next to nothing about the nun except her behaviour as witnessed – and interpreted – by Gaita. Yet it seems clear that he thinks of her as a saint since, as I have noted, she stands in for Mother Teresa in Gaita's work, whom he definitely *does* think of as a saint (CH: xiii), and because he speaks of her "saintly goodness" (CH: xiii).

This must already set us wondering about what is actually going on in Gaita's text. And there are, I think, two key issues here. The first is that the way Gaita presents things seems to license the ascription of sainthood to a person on the grounds of his or her manifesting some particular very brief sequence of behaviour. Consider the nun for example. We are told nothing about what she actually *did* while visiting the patients in the psychiatric hospital or thereafter. Did she remonstrate with the doctors in an attempt to get them to treat the patients better? Did she seek to get the institutional structures and organisation changed that the patients might be better cared for? Did she herself wash or feed or clothe them? Did she seek to raise money or other material assistance for the betterment of their life in the hospital? Did she seek to get any of them transferred to another, better institution (assuming such existed at that time and place)? Did she contact the parents or other relatives of any of the patients in order to stimulate them to do more to help? And so on. Perhaps she did do some of these things, or something of a similar order, but Gaita does not say that she did – indeed, he says that what was striking about the nun was not any good she achieved (CH: 20), which seems to make the good she achieved – or failed to achieve – irrelevant to Gaita's thoughts about, and response to, her. It thus seems clear that we are to infer that we can think of her as a saint simply in virtue of "her demeanour towards them [the patients] –

the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body" (CH: 18). But then we are dealing with a very odd notion of sainthood, one which, as I say, allows us to think of someone as being a saint who behaves in the minimalistically characterised way in which the nun did. This notion of sainthood does not seem to have much to do with what one normally supposes a saint to do and be. Indeed, it seems to allow the possibility that someone might see another behaving in some way and think of her as a saint because of what the viewer takes that person's behaviour to have revealed. It seems to have nothing much to do with the (putative) saint's inner life, biography, passage through life and so on. But someone may see another behaving in a certain way towards someone and take it that, as in Gaita's nun's case, the full humanity of the object of concern has been revealed, and yet the person whose behaviour is being witnessed might normally not behave in this way at all. We need not suppose that the rest of the time she is unpleasant or nasty; it will suffice to make the point simply that the rest of the time she does not treat people as the viewer takes her to have treated the object of concern in this case. That would make it absurd to think of her as a saint.

At this point it becomes clear, I think, that the notion of sainthood evaporates, leaving simply the idea of someone's having done something in a certain manner.

Gaita may, of course, say that none of this matters. He may say that it does not matter whether the nun is a saint or not. What matters is that she displayed a kind of love that is saintly. But one problem with this response is that it solves nothing since we are still left wondering what notion of the saint Gaita is working with: I shall return to this issue shortly. And a second problem concerns that of the notion of love in this context, for I think we have no clear reason to read the nun's behaviour as Gaita does, that is, as manifesting love; or, alternatively, we have no clear reason to be sure that we know what this love is that she expresses, supposing that that *is* what she expresses. For there is a real issue about what one understands love to be. And one might think that, if she did nothing to ameliorate the situation of the patients, then this was no love at all. Or one might think it love, but not really worth a lot: it is not at all obviously wrong to think that the patients could well do without such love, and would be far better off being the beneficiaries of a bit more down-to-earth practical help. In this context it is interesting to note that when Gaita gives an example of someone really doing something to help another with great tenderness (CH: xv–xviii) the language of saintly love seems especially inappropriate. The example is taken from Primo Levi. Levi, a prisoner in Auschwitz from 1943, had contracted scarlet fever towards the end of the war and had been transferred to the camp sanatorium. One of the prisoners in the sanatorium was Lakmaker, a Dutch Jew aged 17. He had been in the sanatorium for 3 months and had had typhus and scarlet fever with a serious cardiac illness. In addition, he was covered in bedsores so bad that he could only lie on his stomach. One night towards the end of the war, after the Germans had fled the camp, Lakmaker threw himself from his bed. Another prisoner, Charles, Levi writes

> climbed down from his bed and dressed in silence. While I held the lamp, he cut all the dirty patches from the straw mattress and the blankets with a knife. He lifted Lakmaker from the ground with the tenderness of a mother, cleaned him as best as possible with straw taken from the mattress and lifted him into the remade bed in the only position in which the unfortunate fellow could lie. He scraped the floor with a scrap of tinplate, diluted a little chloromine and finally spread disinfectant over everything, including himself.
>
> I judged his self-sacrifice by the tiredness which I would have had to overcome in myself to do what he had done. (Levi 1998: 173)

I am happy to agree with Gaita that Charles showed a special kind of goodness, a kind of goodness at which one can wonder. It may be, as Levi says, that Charles treated Lakmaker with the "tenderness of a mother." But this can only get us to any idea of saintly love if we assume two things. The first is that we know what this love consists in and what its worth is, as I have been arguing we do not, at least not from Gaita's work (and I shall deepen and develop this point as I continue my reflections). The second is that "the power of parental love to reveal that even this evil and foul character [or afflicted individual, as the case may be] is fully our fellow human being...depends...on the impartial love of saints" (CH: 24). But I cannot see we have any reason to accept that claim, and that for the same reason: it is unclear what this love is or what its worth is.

I said that Gaita's failure to give any details of the nun's behaviour raises two key issues. The second of these, connected with the first, which I have just discussed, concerns how it is that he supposes he can place such emphasis on the figure of the saint if he does not discuss at least a few real saints and something of their lives and thoughts. Otherwise put, we might wonder here about the notion of sainthood Gaita is invoking. For sure, we should not place inappropriate weight on the term 'saint' in the sense that Gaita is not only concerned with those canonized by the Church, and when he speaks of saints he may well have in mind some who have not been canonized but whom he might seek to think of as saints. However, even granting that, his use of the term 'saint' would clearly be quite out of place, indeed, absurd, if he did not have in mind at least some who are recognised to be such by the Church, so it is peculiar that he does not discuss them.

Of course, one reason why Gaita might be reluctant to discuss any real saints in detail, that is, their biography and psychology, is that they are very often, in many ways, pretty unpleasant and unattractive individuals. Saint Augustine was in many ways deeply self-chastising and self-loathing; Mother Teresa was, we know, imperious, demanding, uncompromising, and had all kinds of dealings with unscrupulous con men, including accepting large amounts of ill-gotten gains from them;[3] Saint Catherine of Sienna was not unusual for such persons in wearing a very rough hair-cloth, as well as a large iron girdle armed with sharp points, but may have been more unusual in drinking the pus issuing from the wounds of one her patients in order to subdue her flesh; as to Gandhi, I shall return to him shortly. The general point is that, unless and until Gaita tells us something of the details of the psychology of the saints, his reflections have a somewhat unreal or even, I would judge, sentimental quality to them since he omits discussion of the harsh reality of who and what these people often are.

It is clear that, at this point, Gaita has two options. Either he could say that he has in mind only such saints as do not manifest any of the unpleasant or distressing kinds of behaviour just mentioned. But at the very least this would render his choice of examples inapposite. I shall, in any case, return to this option below. Or he could just abandon all talk of saints at this point, and simply say that the nun behaved in a certain way on some occasion – and so did Augustine and Mother Teresa and Charles and the rest – and that this is what matters. They all of them, he might say, acted on occasion in such a way as to reveal the full humanity of the afflicted. There is some support for this line of reflection in Gaita's work in his quoting with approval Simone Weil's comment that if we want to know the power of a torch we must look at what it illuminates, rather than at the bulb itself (GE: 205). For this

[3] For a devastating critique of Mother Teresa see Hitchens 1995. The book is an unpleasant piece of muckraking, but, unfortunately, the muck is there to be raked. Gaita refers to this book in the preface to *Good and Evil* (GE: xiii), writing that many "may have been persuaded by Christopher Hitchens that she [Mother Teresa] was really no saint." He goes on: "Hitchens is wrong, I believe, but I will not argue that here."

might be taken to express the idea that what matters is not that someone or other is a saint, that is, that he has the biography and psychology of the saint, but that he acts in a specific way on specific occasions, that is, in such a way as to reveal another's full humanity. But then, on this line of reflection, Gaita would have no reason to speak in this context (or any other) of saintly love. And if he were to say that, then he would have no reason left to claim, as we have seen he does, that parental love depends on the impartial love of saints, or that from saintly love "we have built a more tractable structure of rights and obligations" (CH: xix). A key part of his thinking would have collapsed.

4 Saintly Love and Human Achievement

The refusal to discuss the psychology and biography of 'saints' goes hand in hand in Gaita's writing with his claim that the purity of Mother Teresa's love is such that it makes no sense to think of it as a human achievement – not even an achievement at the limit of what is humanly possible (GE: 203–4). That is, this kind of love, he argues, is not an intelligible object of human effort, and it makes no sense for a person to wonder whether it might be possible for him, as one might wonder whether a certain feat of courage is possible for one if one has seen such a feat performed by someone else. But Gaita makes things too easy for himself here, I think. The truth is, someone like Saint Augustine did do exactly what Gaita says it makes no sense to do: he yearned for the kind of pure love, of which Gaita speaks, to fill his life, and his self-loathing was part of his attempt to achieve that very thing.[4] The same can be said of Simone Weil, who, amongst other things, was profoundly hostile to the body – to her body – and performed all kinds of cruelties, or, more generously, privations, on herself in an effort to discipline herself. Apart from her well-known refusal to eat adequately – a refusal which, it is generally agreed, expedited her early death – she also often deprived herself of a bed to sleep in, preferring the floor, and, on at least one occasion, almost certainly burnt the back of her hand with cigarettes, perhaps in order to test herself or to punish herself, as one of her biographers puts it (Du Plessix Grey 2003: 44), leaving a wound that took months to heal.

One could, of course, say that all this shows is that Augustine, Weil and a host of others did not see that the love they craved is not – as Gaita claims it is not – an intelligible object of human effort. But what, I think, Gaita overlooks, is that there can be something *deeply oppressive* in the figures of the nun, Mother Teresa and so on. There is a certain kind of temperament which, having been presented with the example of such figures, can never – or can only with difficulty – be the same again. For such a temperament, to have a living sense of what is presented – or, as Gaita himself might put it, *really* to have such a sense of things, to have such a sense "in one's heart" – will inevitably involve the pained longing to be filled with the kind of pure love in question. But, of course, in one sense, Gaita is right: it makes no sense to try to achieve such a thing. But that recognition, in the kind of temperament in question, does nothing much to cancel out the longing. Indeed, it can make the longing, and the struggle to achieve the goal, all the greater. And the impossibility at

[4] Of course, it is true that Augustine did not think he could achieve this pure love without God's grace; but that is obviously consistent with his seeking to be filled with the love in question to the extent that he could through his own disciplining of his mind and soul – even if, as may be the case, he thought that his capacity to go in for that kind of disciplining was itself a product of, or part of, God's grace to him. Otherwise, we would be stuck with the thought that, in any ordinary sense, Augustine *did* nothing towards his own purification. But that is clearly not so. So, even if we speak of grace in this context, my point about Augustine in the main body of the text stands.

issue means that this kind of longing will have a strong tendency in many ways to *spoil things* for the person in question. Pretty much everything will seem to that person compromised in an intolerable way precisely because nothing in his or her life will seem to have the kind of purity he or she craves. There is no doubt whatever that there are, and have been, many afflicted by such a sense of things. Amongst those are most certainly many of the saints, including Augustine.

Of course, I do not wish to claim that this pattern will inevitably be played out in anyone who is presented with such cases as the nun and Mother Teresa. Some will dismiss such cases from the start; others may think there is something in them but simply not be oppressed by them. But the refusal on Gaita's part to engage with psychology and biography is, I think, at least in part, a refusal to engage with the kind of possibility I have sketched. Or rather, one suspects that the failure to engage with these is motivated partly by the desire to avert one's eyes from such a possibility. It is a failure to see how deeply *life-denying* the saint can be.[5]

I should make clear at this stage that I am not attacking in my argument the notion of sainthood as such. I am not seeking to show that *all* saints are life-denying or objectionable in the kind of way that, for example, Mother Teresa was. What I am trying to do is something else. I am suggesting that at least *some* saints are life-denying or objectionable in other ways. And I am arguing that Gaita does not engage with such a possibility, and that therefore his reflections are open to the kinds of criticisms I have been offering. Of course, as I have suggested, Gaita's own use of the notion of sainthood is often terribly vague and seems to indicate little more than someone's having acted in some way on some specific occasion. If that is what he has in mind then, of course, one will be less inclined to see the individuals in question as life-denying, but, as I have already argued, it will be more or less wholly unclear why they are thought of as saints or why the notion of sainthood is relevant to the case.

Whether there are any saints who are not life-denying is, thus, a question left open by my discussion. Further, I do not wish to say that the notion of sainthood is unimportant for moral thought or moral philosophy. On the contrary, I am inclined to think that it is an important such concept, as I mentioned at the outset, one which needs to be explored in ways that Gaita does not. Yet Gaita, I am arguing, has not made it clear that there are life-affirming saints, not least on account of the fact that, as I have been arguing, his invocation of that notion is unclear in the extreme.[6]

5 Saints and "Transcendental Egoism"

There is another aspect of Gaita's failure to provide any concrete details of the lives of saints which is of great importance. This is that, because, as I have already said, we are provided merely with snapshots from the lives of such persons, moments detached from the narrative of their lives, we can easily be distracted from exploring what these individuals are like in their quotidian interactions with others. And what we find, I think, when we do consider this, is that they are sometimes or even often rather indifferent to the sufferings of, and may even engender suffering in, those immediately around them. In his memoir of Simone Weil Gustave Thibon speaks of the "transcendental egoism" (Thibon 2003, 111) of

[5] Wolf 1982 also argues, in a different way, that the saint is a life-denying figure.

[6] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* for drawing my attention to the need to make the clarificatory points in this and the previous paragraph.

people like Weil. He notes, and describes in some detail, the fact that "she...did not seem to realize the complications and even sufferings she caused in the lives of others as soon as there was a question of her vocation to self-effacement" (Thibon 2003, 110). And he goes on:

> I know also that this uncomfortable side of Simone Weil's character was not peculiar to her but is common to many heroic souls – who was that kindly bishop who wanted to add to the Litany of the Saints the invocation: "From living saints, Good Lord deliver us"? A Francis of Assisi or a Joan of Arc in responding to their distant vocation would never hesitate to make their immediate neighbour suffer (Thibon 2003, 111).

Now, I do not want to insist that there could be no saints who are possessed of what Thibon calls "the *reversed summit* of supreme humility...in which the saint no longer judges anything but bathes all in the unity of love" (Thibon 2003, 119). Perhaps there are. But, in truth, and judging by the historical record, it seems that many, perhaps most, saints are more like Weil.[7] In other words, we can, if we wish, take a snapshot moment from the life of a saint and draw attention to the way in which it shows the love (if that is what it is) that this person has, at this moment, in this context, for some other human being. But this distracts us from seeing that this love is often bought at the price of indifference to the sufferings of *others* immediately close by, or even the willingness to cause such sufferings. And what this shows, I think, is that there is a sentimental distortion in discussing saints as Gaita does, since he averts his eyes from the ways in which they (many of them, anyway) so readily inflict sufferings on those around them.

Of course – and here I return to an earlier thought – Gaita might insist that he only has in mind such saints as have reached that "reversed summit of supreme humility" of which Thibon speaks, only those saints, therefore, we are to suppose, who do not inflict sufferings on those around them. But then Gaita will no longer be able to speak so loosely about 'the saints': he will have to give us some examples, and do so in detail. But this, as we have seen, he does not do.

6 Saints and Human Preciousness

We can deepen the points made so far by turning more directly now to Orwell's reflections on Gandhi. I quote Orwell at length.

> [F]or the seeker after goodness there must be no close friendships and no exclusive loves whatever. Close friendships, Gandhi says, are dangerous, because 'friends react on one another' and through loyalty to a friend one can be led into wrongdoing. This is unquestionably true. Moreover, if one is to love God, or to love humanity as a whole, one cannot give one's preference to any individual person. This is again true, and marks the point at which the humanistic and the religious attitudes cease to be reconcilable. To an ordinary human being, love means nothing if it does not mean loving some people more than others...[O]n three occasions he [Gandhi] was willing to let his wife or child die rather than administer the animal food prescribed by the doctor. It is true that death never actually occurred, and also that Gandhi...always gave the patient the choice of staying alive at the price of committing a sin: still, if the

[7] See on this James 1971, lectures XI–XV.

> decision had been solely his own, he would have forbidden the animal food, whatever the risks might be. There must, he says, be some limit to what we will do to stay alive, and the limit is well on this side of chicken broth. This attitude is perhaps a noble one, but in the sense which – I think – most people would give to the word, it is inhuman. The essence of being human is that one does not seek perfection, that one *is* sometimes willing to commit sins for the sake of loyalty, that one does not push asceticism to the point where it makes friendly intercourse impossible, and that one is prepared in the end to be defeated and broken up by life, which is the inevitable price of fastening one's love upon other human individuals. No doubt alcohol, tobacco and so forth are things that a saint must avoid, but sainthood is also a thing that human beings must avoid. (Orwell 1984, 468–9)

One thing to notice straightaway is that Orwell sees clearly the way in which a human being can set himself the task that Gaita says makes no sense. Orwell also sees that the saint is likely to inflict suffering on those around him. But since I have already made these points, it is more important for now to notice the way in which Orwell suggests that there is a deep tension between the idea of possessing a commitment to individual human beings and the idea of a love for all human beings. Orwell is making a moral judgement – he is not making a straightforward conceptual point. And his point is a judgement to the effect that a person's claims to love all human beings is belied by his having attachments of love to specific individuals. And there is no doubt that many of the thinkers Gaita most admires in this context – the most prominent being Simone Weil – had a kind of horror of developing exclusive relationships, and they did so for the very reason that Orwell gives. Of course, Gaita does not directly argue that one ought to love all human beings. But he does argue that we are, in some sense, morally blind or obtuse if we do not see all human beings as precious. But is the difference really so great? I am not so sure. One can *say* that one thinks all human beings precious, but if this does not mean something pretty definite in terms of one's treatment of them then one's words are idling. I am not sure if Orwell is right that it must mean what he says it means, namely, a sense of the inadmissibility of exclusive attachments to specific individuals – perhaps it does not and, in any case, I am not claiming that Gaita is committed to the claim that Orwell makes here. But it surely will involve (a struggle to exercise) very profound patience, tolerance, care, forgiveness, gentleness, consideration, compassion and so on. It goes without saying that Gaita is not arguing that we should all become saints, but I find it hard to make sense of the thought that one might have witnessed the nun behaving as Gaita describes, and that one might have been impressed by her in the way he explores, and *not* feel that one is called to seek to be as she is. And that is likely to lead, amongst other things, to a deep sense of *guilt*. As the Austrian poet Georg Trakl said: "The feeling in the moments of deathlike existence: All human beings are worthy of love. Awakening, you feel the bitterness of the world; in this lies all your unabsolved guilt" (Trakl 1998, 255, my translation). For sure, things are complicated here, since one may recognise that one simply is not the kind of person who could be like this. But then that will show, I think, in all likelihood, that, if one is honest, one will have to admit that one's sense of the nun must be more complicated than Gaita allows. One may be, for example, ambitious, but not distortingly so, for worldly success, and possess the relevant virtues: drive, say, and a certain desire to dominate, impress or be in demand; or one may be devoted to learning and possess the virtues this demands, such as a certain indifference to the fate of those around one so that one can get on with the task in hand; and so on. This will show that, though there might be much in the nun and her way of life and dealing with others that one admires, there are other ways of being, such as one's own,

which, for all the mistakes and forms of foolishness and failure that attach to them, have a distinct value that cannot be accommodated by the moral possibilities that reflection on the nun's way of life can acknowledge. But, as I say, to be impressed by the nun in the kind of way Gaita describes will involve something like a sense that *this* is the way to be, and, to the extent that this is not possible – and to the extent, therefore, that one will be haunted by such a life – one is likely, as I mentioned earlier, to find the image of the nun oppressive. Yet Gaita does not, so far as I can see, acknowledge this. It is as if Gaita wants us to share with the saints the sense of the preciousness of all human beings, yet would like, as it were, to relieve us from the burden of actually living as if we truly believed this, that is, in accord with that belief.

It might be objected[8] to this that there is no reason why someone who is impressed by the example of the nun is bound to think that he or she must seek to be like this person. There is, it might be said, no clear reason why one's being impressed by such a person should mean that she has exclusive claim on one's attention. My reply is that, in fact, this objection is surely correct. That is, the objection is, in essence, I think, another way of expressing my basic point. For when Gaita talks of the preciousness of human beings he does nothing to bring out the ways in which such a notion is only *one* way of seeing other human beings and therefore that there are other, equally (morally) appealing ways of seeing human beings. He writes as if seeing human beings in any other way is to fail to see what they really are. And my reason for saying this is that he clearly thinks that, if we are to see human beings as they *really* are – if we are to be in touch with moral reality here – then we must attend to them with the kind of love Gaita takes the nun to have manifested, and thus see them as precious (CH: 22). This, he thinks, is the *true* way to see them (CH: 21–22). He *never* says that there are ways of seeing human beings as they *really* are that would *not* involve thinking of them as precious in his sense, and he repeatedly says that seeing the full humanity of a human being requires viewing him or her as precious (e.g., GE: xv; xix), which clearly implies that one cannot see his or her full humanity otherwise. So, in fact, I am arguing that one might be impressed by the nun and yet *also* think that there are ways *other* than hers (as interpreted by Gaita) of seeing human beings as they really are. Yet Gaita does not acknowledge this point in his writings, which means that he does in fact write in such a way as to suggest that to be impressed by the nun (again, as he understands her) *is* to think that her kind of way of seeing human beings has exclusive claim on one – assuming, of course, as it is reasonable for him to do, that he, and his readers, have an interest in being responsive to, in touch with, moral reality. I elaborate a little more below on these points about Gaita's 'monolithic' view of things.

I said earlier that Gaita wants us to believe that all human beings are precious and yet relieve us of the burden of living in accord with this belief – really believing it "in our hearts." This is, in my view, why Gaita's thinking here collapses into sentimentality or sickliness: it wants to possess a certain outlook, but does not wish to pay the price that possessing such an outlook demands. Indeed, there is a clear point of fracture in Gaita's work on this issue. It comes in his discussion of Adolf Eichmann. Moreover, Gaita himself sees the point, for he grants that it seems sickly to say of Eichmann that he is precious – unless one is a saint (CH: xix). But what that comes to, so far as I can see, amongst other things, is that no one – apart from saints – can actually *believe* that he is precious. Of course, one can believe all kinds of other things about him, including that he is owed a trial and should not, to use Gaita's phrase, be shot in the street like vermin. But there is clearly a

[8] I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal for making me see the need to answer this objection.

huge gap – a conceptual gap, and a gap in human sentiment – between these. Gaita attempts to close that gap by claiming, as I have already noted, that we have built out of the language, and experience, of love as it plays a role, in Gaita's view, in the sense of the preciousness of human beings, the more tractable vocabulary of rights and justice owed to each human being. So the claim that justice is owed to Eichmann as a human being turns out to be something whose conceptual weight is carried by the sense of his preciousness, or, more exactly, the sense of the preciousness of all human beings. It is as if Gaita were telling us that we really all do think Eichmann precious when we speak of his being owed justice for his own sake, and that what Gaita is doing for us is to lay bare this sense of things. But Gaita's argument here is inadequate. His claim about building out of a sense of the preciousness of human beings a more tractable structure of rights and justice looks like an historical claim, but, if it is, it is woefully underexplored in Gaita's work and almost certainly deeply misleading. Indeed, he gives nothing like an argument for it. At the very least, what he says – or, rather, what he fails to say – will have to be supplemented, on the one hand, by some hard reflection on the relation between rights and natural law, a concept which goes back, at least in one form or another, to Sophocles, and, on the other, by an exploration of the growth of the concept of rights out of Roman law. There is a peculiar unreality in Gaita's claims here.

I could put my point by saying that there seems to be in Gaita's approach here what Wittgenstein called the philosopher's craving for generality. One might be moved by the example of the nun, or Mother Teresa, or one of the other examples he gives – that, already mentioned, of Charles helping Lakmaker in the concentration camp, for instance. One could say that in such cases one has a sense of the preciousness of the object of such concern. That is, one has a sense of the preciousness of this human being, here and now. Why not leave it at that? Is that not enough? I take it that Orwell's point about the difference between the saint's view of human beings and the view that the rest of us have is that we are, the rest of us, much less psychologically and emotionally of a piece than the saint is, or aspires to be. What most us think – I mean, really think, what we think in our hearts – is something like this: that we find some human beings precious, or find some human beings precious some of the time; others we think of in all kinds of other ways, ways which depend on our sense of their character, their behaviour, of how these impact on our life, on what they mean to us as friends, acquaintances, strangers, colleagues and so on. Most people, most of the time, we simply want to leave us alone, although that desire can perfectly well coexist with an idea of sharing with them in one of its many forms a sense of common fellowship or humanity. And there are, indeed, many forms that can take: there can be a sense of human fellowship which really does not care much for others' suffering; or a sense that we all of us have lives that are in varying degrees marked by pain and suffering and that it is for each of us, as it were, to seek to make the best of a bad job; or a sense that, as Conrad thought, we are all brothers but "brothers on the lowest side of our intellect and in the instability of our feelings," a sense that, according to Tony Tanner, coexisted with Conrad's having an "austere and pessimistic view of life" according to which "there were basically two types of people in the world – convicts and idiots" (Tanner 1969, 25; 27); or a sense of the kind Gaita describes which finds its root in ideas of love and preciousness; and there are no doubt others.[9] Furthermore, these senses can, and for many of us do, jostle with each other, ceding place to each other as they go in and out of focus, or become more or less salient under the impact of our various experiences, and sometimes are altogether eclipsed. Yet Gaita does not give a voice to these ways of seeing human beings, since, as I have already

[9] Cf. here my comments in Hamilton 2007.

suggested, he talks as if the only way to see human beings as they really are is to see them as the nun does – on his 'reading' of her, to use a Weilian idiom.

Of course, none of this is to claim that the concept of human preciousness is irrelevant to moral thought. On the contrary, what I have been saying depends on the thought that it is. But I have been suggesting that Gaita's way of understanding it in terms of the claim that *all* human beings are precious is an implausible way of seeing why that concept is, indeed, important in moral thought. Obviously enough, I do not have the space to pursue that issue further here. Suffice it to say that, in my rejecting Gaita's use and invocation of the notion, I do not mean to be saying that it is unimportant in moral thought – and, indeed, we are in Gaita's debt for insisting on its importance, however much one may object to his specific understanding of it.

7 Gaita's Debt to Arendt

Gaita's thoughts in this area are deeply coloured by his reading of Hannah Arendt, whose own reflections owe a great deal to the thought of Simone Weil, whom Gaita, of course, often quotes. But one thing that Gaita overlooks or, I think, fails to see the import, and importance, of is Arendt's point that no one can actually *be* good in the sense in question (Arendt 1958, 74–8). Of course, Gaita may say that he has, in fact, taken this fully into account, which is why he insists that the good is not an intelligible object of pursuit. I have already criticised this thought. But, in any case, Arendt's claim goes beyond anything that could be captured by Gaita's understanding of the unintelligibility of striving to achieve the good. Her point is, if I understand her correctly, that this notion of the good is deeply *destructive* of the worldliness of human life. This is why she says that it can find no place in a political realm because it abolishes the distance between human beings. It is this that Gaita does not fully acknowledge (though he grants that the kind of ethic he supports is alienated from the political realm). And this is in part the point I have already made concerning the way in which life can be spoilt for someone if he really does believe that, as Gaita puts it when speaking of the "absolute value of purity" in the experience of goodness, "[w]e are inescapably judged in it light" (GE: 204). The truth is, we are *not* so inescapably judged. If we are judged in this way, it is we who do the judging – of ourselves or others – and nothing forces us to do that. I shall return to this point shortly.

8 The Metaphysical Status of Gaita's Claims and Speech in a Personal Voice

The problems in this area partly depend on the *weight* that Gaita wishes to place on such examples as Mother Teresa, the nun and so on. He grants that they could not be metaphysically foundational for his, or anyone else's, view of things (CH: 21–2). In this sense, he is bearing witness to certain examples – "encounters," he says – that have struck him forcibly (GE: xii). He is, he says, speaking personally. But not everyone has had such experiences, and there is thus a serious question about what weight those persons can attach to them. Further, one may have had other experiences which carry one in a different direction from the point of view of one's understanding of morality. What one might have expected from Gaita, then, is a deepened sense of the utter contingency of his having had the experiences he has had, a sense that would lead him to place them in a context that would, if not reduce their force, then at least allow them to be placed alongside other experiences that cut in different – not necessarily opposing – directions. But this is not at all

what we get. Rather, Gaita presents us with a vision of the moral world whose tone is one of absolute conviction. There is no sense in the manner in which he writes that he might have got it all wrong or even that he has a sense of irony about his claims. His work does not "mitigate the constraints of the categorical," to borrow a marvellous phrase of Lionel Trilling's (Trilling 1972, 79).

Gaita wants to secure his points just as any old-fashioned metaphysician did, yet he wants to do this whilst saying that he is speaking in a personal voice and that he eschews metaphysics. But to do this would be to acknowledge that one *could* look at the world as Gaita does, but does not have to. This is why Mark Wynn may well be right to say that Gaita's work invites completion by Christian metaphysics (Wynn 2005, *passim*). Perhaps, more strongly, Gaita's reflections stand in need of something like a Christian metaphysic if they are to carry the weight he wants them to bear. Or, to be more exact, they invite or require completion by a *certain conception* of Christian thought. Perhaps there are versions of Christianity that could be or would be suspicious of Gaita's claims and view of such figures as the nun.[10] But I leave this question open here.

We can put this point by thinking about what the example of the nun can mean to those of us who did not witness her behaviour. Gaita may say that all that is necessary is that we be made familiar with it. After all, he gives as a further example the case of the treatment of Eichmann at his trial by Judge Landau, who said that the trial had only one purpose, and that was to achieve justice – that is, as Gaita reads this, that justice was owed to Eichmann for his, Eichmann's, own sake. And Gaita himself was not, of course, at the trial itself. But I am not convinced this really settles anything. Gaita says, as I noted earlier, that we are inescapably judged in the light of the absolute purity of goodness. I said that this is not so: nothing *forces* us to judge ourselves in this way. If one sees it is as inescapable that one judge oneself, and others, in this light, this is not simply because some example has been made available to one, either through direct personal experience or not. Rather, one's temperament will deeply colour how one interprets the example and what its lessons are supposed to be. This gives a deeper sense of Gaita's speaking personally than his own repeated invocation of this idea suggests. It erases the 'we' in "we are inescapably judged in the light of the absolutely pure" and replaces it with something more like: 'I, given the kind of person I am, cannot help thinking that I and the rest of you ought to be judged in the light of the absolutely pure'; or perhaps: 'I *want* to judge myself and everyone else in this light.' But who is this 'I'? It may be the man, Raimond Gaita – "the man," as Graham Bradshaw memorably put such a thought, "with laundry bills." It may be the authorial voice – "the disposing, directing intelligence at work within the works," to borrow Bradshaw's words again (Bradshaw 1990, 3). Or it may be the authorial voice he adopted in this book or in this part of this book (he might adopt other such voices in other books or in other parts of this book). To say that one speaks personally is not yet, as such, to settle anything about who is speaking. Rather, it marks out a terrain for further exploration. Probably what Gaita means, at least in part, is that he is speaking out of his deepest sense of things, out of his all-things-considered, best judgements, and that others may not share this way of looking at things. But even this settles nothing. For we will need some reason why any given person identifies these and these thoughts as his best or deepest or whatever. So once one enters on such a line of reflection, one is likely soon, I think, to grasp how little is said when one speaks of speaking personally. In sum, I do not think that the notion of speaking personally avoids – indeed, as I have tried to suggest, it opens up – the possibility of a kind of vertiginous free-fall in which nothing is really made clear save the fact that nothing is made clear. The net

[10] Once again, I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for this journal who suggested this thought to me.

result of that is likely to be a kind of scepticism, rather than confidence in one's own judgements.

9 Concluding Remarks

This brings me to the last point I would like to make, by way of a general comment on Gaita's work. I hope that my reflections in this paper have helped to bring out what one might call a one-sidedness in Gaita's position. For there is a strange way in which, despite his attempts to do so, Gaita does not manage to incorporate into his work a plurality of voices (CH: xxix). Certainly he writes with great elegance, and has a keen ear for turns of natural language that can resonate deeply with the reader, and to that extent his work does, as he claims, celebrate "the importance of literary art to the understanding of the human condition" (CH: xxix). But for all that he is, in Isaiah Berlin's famous terms, much more of a hedgehog than a fox (Berlin 1993). That is, the landscape of his philosophy is illuminated by a few ideas to which ultimately the rest of his thinking is related and from which it draws its meaning. This is not at all meant as a criticism: as Berlin points out, some of the greatest thinkers have been hedgehogs in this sense. Indeed, I take it that Gaita's work is amongst the most important and imaginative in contemporary moral philosophy, and it has opened up areas that would have been unthinkable in the subject only 25 years ago. To that extent we are all in his debt. It is just meant to record a sense that, whilst Gaita's work illuminates a great part of our moral experience, it leaves large elements of that experience in the dark. And what is principally lacking, I think, is what one might call an understanding of modern scepticism. By this I mean that it has no real understanding of the way in which the modern consciousness, when it looks out into the world, often sees, not a world that is ordered and intelligible, but a heap of broken rubble, of old certainties decayed or destroyed, of broken lights and faded dreams, where morality is fractured, spirituality hijacked by shallowness and emotion desiccated and feeding on itself. The odd moments of such a recognition in Gaita's work exist, as it were, in order to show that we need not worry about the decay of old certainties, for their demise leaves things pretty much where they were (CH: xxx). And his work can often *seem* to carry off the trick of making this appear plausible because it is deeply edifying. Unfortunately, as I have given some reasons to think, that does not make it true.

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