

## Defending Gaita's Example of Sainly Behaviour

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**Abstract** Raimond Gaita's example of saintly love, in which the visit of a nun to psychiatric patients has profound effects on him, has been criticised for being an odd and unconvincing example of saintliness. I defend Gaita against four specific criticisms; firstly, that the nun achieves nothing spectacular, but merely adopts a certain attitude towards people; secondly, that Gaita must already have certain beliefs for the example to work; thirdly, that to be acclaimed a saint requires a saintly biography, not just an incidence of good behaviour; and finally, that there is something oppressive about saintly behaviour. I consider that Gaita does indeed leave himself open to criticism on this last point by claiming that saints love impartially. I argue that his description of the example suggests rather that the customs and practices of partial love are at the heart of saintliness and not some form of 'life-denying' impartiality. If I am right, then this has the twofold effect of making saintliness appear achievable by ordinary mortals and explaining our feelings of wonder in the face of such saintly behaviour.

**Keywords** Supererogation · Saints · Impartiality · Love · Emotions and cognition

In his famous paper, "Saints and Heroes", Urmson (1958) encouraged philosophers to make room for supererogatory behaviour in moral theory. Supererogatory acts are those which are beyond what is required by the obligations of the normal moral code and are regarded as optional, often comprising saintly and heroic acts where much good is done but at a high price for the moral agent.<sup>1</sup> Much has been written since Urmson's paper concerning supererogation. The most recent major topic in this area has been the problem of 'overdemandingness' in morality, which asks: why aren't we all obliged to be saints and do

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<sup>1</sup>This characterisation of a supererogatory act as optional is generally accepted in the modern philosophical literature. It is worth noting that sometimes the performer of a supererogatory act considers the act to be 'no more than his duty', even though third party observers consider it optional. Supererogatory acts may not always require the agent to suffer sacrifice or high cost either; small acts of generosity or benevolence may also be considered beyond duty.

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the very best we can at every opportunity, even if we have to suffer considerable cost in so doing? In the face of this question, moral philosophers have some difficulty in complying with Urmson's wish that they incorporate the concept of supererogation into a moral theory, because there is an underlying assumption behind many moral theories that if one act is 'better than' another possible act, then that act is morally obligatory, not optional. It is difficult therefore to establish the theoretical framework for optional, saintly acts and indeed some writers claim that it is impossible to do so. Shelly Kagan (1989), for example, argues that there are no limits to morality and that we are obliged to perform the act which brings about the greatest good overall, whatever effect that may have on us and our lives.

Raimond Gaita's work represents a different approach to sainthood from the traditional account of moral maximisation found in recent discussions. His famous example of witnessing a nun visiting psychiatric patients (Gaita 2000; 18–27) is quite different from the sort of examples which normally crop up in the philosophical discussion of supererogation. No major act or sacrifice is undertaken apparently—it seems to be a simple hospital visit—yet Gaita clearly wants us to think of the nun as a saint. He claims that through her behaviour toward the patients she demonstrates 'goodness with a capital G'. She is in some ways then a top moral performer, but the similarity with normal supererogatory examples ends there. Love is the key to her saintliness, rather than high moral achievement of a more concrete kind; love which Gaita describes as 'the impartial love of the saints'. Nor does the nun appear to make any major sacrifices to achieve her saintly behaviour. Her behaviour may well be described as 'praiseworthy', the normal epithet for supererogatory acts, but Gaita's reaction to her behaviour goes beyond that cool appraisal. He responds with wonder and he sees his own behaviour to the patients in a new light. She is an example to him. In this respect, Gaita's example succeeds in capturing the impact and the long lasting impression which saintly behaviour can have on the observer.

However, Gaita's nun example has been criticised for failing to meet certain criteria of saintliness. I respond to those criticisms by suggesting that they are framed in the light of the stereotypical saint of recent philosophical discussion. I suggest that the worth of Gaita's example lies in preserving certain aspects of saintly behaviour which are normally lost in the more common examples of supererogatory acts.

Gaita's example can be briefly described. As a young man, Gaita works on a psychiatric ward and sees a nun visiting some of the most severely ill patients. These patients are at rock bottom—family and friends have long since ceased to visit them and some of them have been incarcerated for as long as 30 years. Worse, the staff and even some of the psychiatrists treat them badly. Gaita and a small group of 'good' psychiatrists hold that these patients are the equals of them all and should be respected in virtue of their humanity. When Gaita sees the nun visit them, he realises that he and the others had only paid lip service to this belief; they did not believe in the patients' equality and humanity 'in their hearts'. Somehow, by her body language and general demeanour, the nun was able to act out this equality and humanity so that the truth of it struck Gaita forcibly and made him realise that he had not been living out his belief in his dealings with the patients.

Whilst Gaita claims this as an example of saintliness, it has been pointed out that it is a very odd example. Certainly it does not have the characteristics of the traditional supererogatory act in the recent philosophical literature. There are no obvious spectacular consequences, no sustained acts of beneficence. Although the nun's behaviour is exemplary, there is no suggestion that there are major demands on her such that an agent could opt out of her behaviour on the grounds that it would be too demanding. These

criticisms are elaborated on by Christopher Hamilton (2008) and I intend to deal with three main points which stem from his comments and also a further charge of subjectivism.

The first worry which Hamilton raises is what might be termed the 'consequentialist' problem. Hamilton asks: What did the nun actually *do* to warrant Gaita noting this as an example of extreme goodness? Secondly, Gaita is the only witness to the nun's behaviour and he already shares her belief in the value of the patients. Is this saintly performance merely a subjective assessment? I then deal with another concern of Hamilton's which is that there is a lack of biography and depth to the incident. The final criticism is drawn from Hamilton's general complaint about saints: that they are 'life-denying'. It is a complaint implicit in general criticisms of stereotypical saints and one to which I think Gaita is exposed, at least without some refinement of his thoughts on the nature of the love which the nun displays. I respond to these criticisms below.

## 1 The Consequentialist Problem

The first point of criticism asks whether the nun's behaviour can really be called saintly since it does not seem to achieve anything; what is at issue is merely the witnessing of a certain type of attitude toward someone else, claims Hamilton. He worries that the nun's love is ineffectual because, he says, Gaita tells us nothing about what she actually did to improve the lot of the patients. There is no description of practical love; did she wash and feed them, act as an advocate for them? We do not know, according to Hamilton. All that we have from Gaita is the impact that her attitude toward the patient had on him, the witness of her behaviour. In his criticism of Gaita, Hamilton is falling back here on a particular definition of a saint; what matters is what he or she does; it is the consequences of their actions which are to be judged and to be deemed saintly or not. Hamilton thereby seems to presuppose a certain type of theory to be the background to Gaita's description of saintly behaviour. I suggest that he has in mind a traditional consequentialist moral theory with its well attested modern accompaniment, the welfare of others, with this taking the place of the ultimate good which must be realised by moral agents, and supremely so in the case of saints.

Now this is a perfectly reasonable view of saints from a more general perspective. It fits well with the ancient Greek tradition of hero worship, for example, as well as the more recent religious tradition of the saints: a 'deeds-driven' view, we might call it. Look more closely at the description of the incident however, and Hamilton's criticism misfires. Gaita has made it clear that what he perceives as saintly is the revelation to him as an onlooker of the humanity of the afflicted patients, and this is achieved through the nun's attitude towards them. That is the consequence of her behaviour and it has as much right to be counted as saintly as any form of more conventional beneficent action towards them.

Indeed, one could argue that Gaita says quite a bit about the behaviour of the nun. He observes her as she talks to the patients, he comments on the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions and the inflexions of her body. In particular, he contrasts her behaviour with that of a particular group of psychiatrists who have the welfare of the mental patients very much in mind and with his own behaviour. These psychiatrists are a small group; the majority of those looking after the patients, including other psychiatrists and nurses, treat the patients 'brutishly' and cannot understand why anyone should want to do anything for them. Until the nun's arrival, Gaita had sided with the 'good' psychiatrists and assumed that they, and he, really had the patients' interests at heart. But the demeanour of the nun changed all that. He realised when he saw her with the patients that his behaviour and that

of the ‘good’ psychiatrists was condescending; ‘although they claimed that such patients were the equals of those who wanted to help them, she revealed that in their hearts we did not believe this’. (Gaita 2000: 9)

Gaita is clear that, in describing saintly behaviour, he is interested not so much in the intentions or consequences of moral acts but in the spirit in which someone acts and in what it reveals to other people (Gaita 2004: xvii). This may seem like a small matter; after all, the nun does not even change Gaita’s belief in the equality and humanity of the patients—he already held that belief—but there is a consequence to her actions. Through her behaviour, we must assume that the nun ‘activates’ Gaita’s belief in the patients’ equality and humanity, so that it becomes vivid, and it is reasonable to assume that any further actions Gaita may take in regard to the patients will be coloured and influenced by this vivid belief.

The example is therefore not one where sainthood evaporates as Hamilton suggests, ‘leaving simply the idea of someone’s having done something in a certain manner’. (Hamilton 2008:184) Rather, the effect is significant and may have consequences for Gaita’s future actions.

Gaita’s example, which does not feature obvious saintly deeds, is not as unusual as might be supposed. Although many religious saints do have deeds and sacrifice at the heart of their sainthood, there are also many others who act in another way, similar to that of Gaita’s nun. The recent beatification of John Henry Newman is an example, where Newman’s intellectual contribution to the life of the Church is the key to his path to sainthood and where many draw inspiration from his writings rather than his biography or major sacrificial or beneficent deeds.

## 2 The Subjectivist Challenge

In claiming that the nun brings alive an already existing belief, Gaita might be thought to be exposing himself to a charge of subjectivism. He is already of the mind that these patients are his equals and therefore could be considered predisposed to accept and interpret the nun’s behaviour in the way that he does. In that respect, he is in quite a different position from most of the staff at the hospital, who seem to regard the patients as subhuman. The nun’s behaviour shines a light on Gaita’s belief and clearly makes a great impression on him as he observes what he calls ‘the purity of her love’, but does the example rest too heavily on the fact that he already believes the patients are his equals? Gaita himself might seem to suggest this when he says:

‘If someone were to ask me what informs my sense that they [the patients] are *rightly* the objects of such treatment, I can appeal only to the purity of her love. For me, the purity of the love proved the reality of what is revealed. I have to say ‘for me’ because one must speak personally about such matters. That after all is the nature of witness.’ (Gaita 2000:21–22)

It is not a usual characteristic of a saintly act that observers give it a caveat of the form ‘it seemed saintly to me, but one must speak personally about such matters’. Saintry acts normally stand out as such to the majority of observers and might even result in someone changing their belief or priorities.<sup>2</sup> We do not know if the nun’s behaviour would have an impact on the other staff who do not share the belief in the equality of the patients.

<sup>2</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer of this paper for raising this point.

Undoubtedly it would have added to the credibility of the nun's behaviour as saintly if Gaita could have pointed to a conversion of such a member of staff to humane treatment of the patients as a result of her visit. To *demand* such evidence in order to be able to acclaim the nun's behaviour as saintly is against the spirit of what Gaita is describing, however, and I think he might be defended from a charge of subjectivism in two ways.

Firstly, we should stress the importance in his example of the language and gestures of the nun, the physical behaviour. It is reasonable of Gaita to assume that an observer must have some degree of formed moral perception to interpret them in the way that he does. Whilst we might imagine that the 'good' psychiatrists would also see the nun's behaviour in the same way as Gaita, the other members of staff would need some help to 'see' the behaviour in the right way, in the way demanded by certain strands of virtue ethics, which place an emphasis on moral training and education.

Secondly, Gaita believes that there is something to be seen or witnessed which is quite independent of him and his beliefs and that is the nun's pure love for the patients. The wonder he experiences during this incident is not wonder at the nun or her goodness, but at the love which she demonstrates. He claims:

'I felt irresistibly that her behaviour was directly shaped by the reality it revealed. I wondered at her, but not at anything about her except that her behaviour should have, so wondrously, this power of revelation.' (Gaita 2000:19)

In a tone of moral realism, he claims that there is 'no further metaphysical fact' beyond the love; it stands alone, illuminating the preciousness of every human being.

### 3 Lack of Biography

Hamilton suggests that the example of the nun is a strange one to claim as saintly because it is being attributed to an individual on the basis of a very brief sequence of behaviour. He says:

'This notion of sainthood does not seem to have much to do with what one normally supposes a saint to do and be.....It seems to have nothing much to do with the (putative) saint's inner life, biography, passage through life and so on'. (Hamilton 2008 p. 184)

Part of the stereotypical view of saints in modern moral philosophy is that they must have an immaculate curriculum vitae. It is view well expressed by Susan Wolf, who asserts that her type of moral saints are not supposed to get a break from their sainthood, but must be saintly all the time. (Wolf 1982) Hamilton seems to share something like that view when he says of the nun in Gaita's example:

'We need not suppose that the rest of the time she is unpleasant and 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'. (Hamilton 2008 p. 184)

So, according to Hamilton, the nun may not drop her standards. He seems to be saying that if she ever has the chance to behave in a similar way in similar circumstances and fails to do so, then we should not regard her as a saint. The test for sainthood for Hamilton, Wolf and so many others is typically scientific. Sainthood can be called into doubt by one counterexample of unsaintly behaviour, which may not necessarily be a bad act, but merely

a morally indifferent performance. Hamilton's suggestion is that Gaita has no way of knowing whether what he has witnessed is merely a one-off incident as far as the nun is concerned. Just as one swallow does not make a summer, so one incidence of apparently saintly behaviour does not make a saint. We must know more about her life and patterns of behaviour before we can attribute sainthood to her.

Hamilton then reveals that there is some tension in such a demand. If we reflect on the biographies of acknowledged saints, and Mother Teresa in particular, we will note her flaws or at least unsaintly behaviour, some of which is accepted as true even by believers in her sainthood.

'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'. (Hamilton 2008 p. 185)

If Gaita did delve more into the lives of real saints, Hamilton suggests, he would face the same issue which Susan Wolf (1982) highlights: in their attempt to pursue their high ideals, saints often, perhaps always, turn into disagreeable human beings, as in the example of Mother Teresa, and far from revealing the preciousness of humanity, they would succeed only in dissolving the notion of sainthood entirely.

Many people are happy to accept this tension between saintliness and unpleasant behaviour. Indeed, where there is knowledge of saints' lives, it is true that few if any saints can escape the occasional bad story or slur on their character. Taking Newman as an example again, his waspishness and occasional unpleasantness to his critics was noted not only by his critics but acknowledged by Newman himself. Mother Teresa's zeal to help the poor and homeless may have led to irascible outbursts, but so be it if it got the job done.

Wolf pushes the demands of sainthood too far; her moral saints appear to have adopted a rule which says that 'I must never offend anyone'. She is then able to draw the inference that her saints must be 'very, very nice to everyone' and, consequently we are to conclude that they will be 'very, very dull'. Hamilton appears milder in merely asking for more evidence and it would undoubtedly have made Gaita's case easier if there were more background about the nun.<sup>3</sup>

It is also worth noting that Gaita does not think biographies unimportant. The meaning of a life has relevance for Gaita, but not in the sense that Hamilton and Wolf have in mind. Bad behaviour is not irrelevant in a life for Gaita. Indeed, Gaita talks about the possibility of making moral mistakes and in so doing betraying one's past, so he certainly allows for a 'whole life' assessment of behaviour rather than a merely episodic one. I suggest that Gaita's defence against the criticism that his saint demonstrates merely episodic saintly behaviour and has no biography to back it up lies firstly in his view of the nature of morality and secondly in the nature of the saintly behaviour itself.

#### 4 Gaita's View of Morality

Gaita does not think that there are parts of life or episodes which are distinctively moral and other parts which are comfortably clear of any kind of ethical tinge. Instead, he sees the

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for making this point. Gaita gives a number of 'one-off' examples of this kind in his work where his emphasis is less on the person carrying out the good deed and more on the detail of the behaviour, the circumstances in which it is carried out and the effect on the observer.

ethical as pervading our lives, whether we are saints or not. His view of morality is part of that family of views which seeks to play down the dominant role within morality of moral obligation and with it a set of rules which determine obligation. On this view, agents have many opportunities to demonstrate moral understanding without necessarily following a pre-established rule.

Gaita's view of morality does indeed embody Wolf's fear that for saints morality is everywhere, but not in the way in which Wolf imagines: not in the sense of there being a rule which dominates and applies to every action or which demands maximisation of a particular good, typically the welfare of others. Instead, Gaita's view of an all-pervasive morality is liberating rather than constraining to the moral agent. He believes we have to 'discover what, in our circumstances, must be *our way* of being true to the task of living a properly human life'. (Gaita 2004: 135, my italics). Susan Wolf imagines her moral saints avoiding all trivial pleasures in their quest for moral top performance, but Gaita's saints may well be free to play the oboe, watch funny films and enjoy a hot fudge sundae, to take Wolf's examples, because morality cannot be detached from ordinary human activities and thus the opportunity for sainthood may present itself anywhere, even in the ice-cream parlour.

Secondly, Gaita employs a different concept of saintly behaviour from the one that Wolf has in mind, and it is related to the point above concerning their different views on how moral agents behave. Susan Wolf envisages a saint as a top performer according to some moral theory, and this has implications not just for the scope of morality but also for the type of behaviour displayed by the saint. Wolf's saints are consciously following rules and taking care not to infringe them. Instead of referencing saintly behaviour to rules of moral obligation, what seems to define such behaviour for Gaita is the nature of the love which the saint shows. Gaita is at pains to explain that the love has no further metaphysical fact behind it; it is a brute moral fact. This saintly love has an epistemological role; it reveals to onlookers the humanity and preciousness of the individual who is the recipient. The impact on the third party, the observer of the flow of love from the saint to the one who is loved, is the critical part of saintly behaviour for Gaita, and this can easily be expressed in an episode of behaviour, as in the example of the nun, without being concerned about the story of the rest of her life.

Newman too reflects on this contrast between the actions and the words of the saints and their biographies. When he reads the writings of the saints, their own words, he is influenced by 'their grace-illuminated soul', but when reading the story of a saint's life he claims he is 'wandering in a labyrinth of which I cannot find the centre and the heart.' (Newman 2009: p.38). Biography is not the key to sainthood, but the saint must have some significant effect on the beliefs of others, and this may be in a short piece of writing or behaviour, as in the case of the nun.

## 5 Saints are 'Life-Denying'—the Problem of Impartial Love

I turn now to the final criticism of Gaita. Hamilton suggests that there is something in the character of the nun and of saints in general that many people may find 'deeply oppressive'. How can this be? The train of thought is as follows: firstly, some will be attracted by the power of the love which the nun and other saints demonstrate; then they will be tempted to emulate this, which they think can best be done by ignoring certain aspects of life and concentrating on a self-sacrificing type of behaviour. In particular, they will be driven to avoid particular relationships and concentrate on spreading their love to all people.

Hamilton's view of saints as 'life-denying' is similar to Wolf's. She claims that those tempted down this route will stop loving the things of this world in an attempt to achieve the universal love of the saints and end up as unattractive people. Hamilton draws the stronger conclusion that they may end up hurting people who are close to them by their insensitivity to these partial relationships.

I think that Gaita is vulnerable to criticism in this area. Love is the key to the understanding of his example of the nun. It is through her love that Gaita perceives the preciousness, the 'sacredness' as he sometimes terms it, of the patients. He claims that all talk of dignity, rights, equality and humanity is meaningless unless based on the fact of this love and therefore, for the reader, understanding the nature of that love is important. If it turns out to be *impartial* love, as he claims, then he does indeed leave himself open to the sorts of criticism made by Hamilton and others that those who love 'impartially' may be 'deeply oppressive' characters. I suggest that Gaita is wrong to term the nun's love impartial, but first I examine why he thinks it is indeed so.

In the context of the nun example, Gaita talks of partial love such as parental love depending on the 'impartial love of the saints', so he certainly regards the love she demonstrates as impartial in some way or other. It is such a natural way of thinking about the relationship between the nun and the patients; so much so that Gaita hardly stops to question his characterisation. Here are two reasons why it does not seem absurd of Gaita to classify her love as impartial:

Firstly, we are to understand that she did not have a personal relationship with any of them before their illness took such a hold over them; in any event, it is her behaviour to all of them rather than any one of them individually which is in question. There is nothing partial in her love borne out of a special relationship with any one of the patients as there might be if one of them had been a friend or relative. This immediately shifts the description of the love on to the territory of the impartial.

Secondly, the nun is assumed by her behaviour to ignore the point that she is in a position of good fortune and that the patients are in a terrible condition. This is what frees her from the condescending behaviour of the 'good' psychiatrists and Gaita himself; although they are full of good will to the patients, we assume that they are painfully aware of the different set of circumstances which they inhabit, and this awareness seeps into the way they behave toward the patients. Indeed, in the case of the psychiatrists, the fact that they stand in a professional relationship to the patients will only exaggerate the point that the patients are in a deplorable condition relative to those who wish to treat them. Again, it is natural to categorise the nun's indifference to the differing fortunes of herself and the patients being explained as an impartial standpoint, from whence she rids herself of all notions of differences of fortune between herself and others. Yet she is presumably not consciously making the effort to reflect this impartial standpoint in her relationship with the patients as this would have the unfortunate effect of reinforcing the point she wants precisely to ignore: that she is forced to take up this impartial standpoint because there is such a discrepancy between her fortunes and those of the patients.

Is Gaita right then to claim that the nun's love is impartial? It is important for him that it is shown to be impartial because he has a strong thesis in which what he calls the 'generalising authority' of impartial love grounds other types of love, particularly love which we show to certain individuals. Impartial love possesses a special kind of authority which partial love does not, according to Gaita.



Gaita's argument for the authority of impartial love begins with a description of his example of partial love, parental love. Parental love can sometimes have the same effect as the nun's love, he claims:

'Sometimes parental love has the powers of disclosure similar to the nun's love. When their love is pure, parents who love a child who has become a vicious and vile adult remind us that this person, whose deeds are evil and whose character appears irredeemably foul, is fully our fellow human being.' (Gaita 2000: 24)

The nun's love reveals the preciousness of those who have lost everything and who may appear subhuman, and parental love in this case reveals the humanity of someone evil. Gaita goes on to explain how he believes that the impartial love of saints grounds parental love such as this and why, in turn, this impartial love underpins some of the most important concepts in morality:

'But the power of parental love to reveal that even this evil and foul character [their child] is fully our human being—its having *that* to reveal—depends, I think, on the impartial love of saints. Were it not for the love saints have shown for the most terrible criminals, were it not for the generalising authority of such which we take to apply to all human beings, the love of mothers for their criminal children would appear to be merely the understandable but limited love of mothers. Because of the place the impartial love of saints has occupied in our culture there has developed a language of love whose grammar has transformed our understanding of what it is for a human being to be a unique kind of limit to our will. We express our sense of that limit when we say that human beings are owed unconditional respect, or that they have inalienable rights, and similar things. These ways of speaking express a disposition to find a basis for what love has revealed which is more steadfast than love itself is believed to be and which will make the fruits of love's work more secure to reason' . (Gaita 2000: 24–25)

Impartial love such as that of the nun's turns out to be vital in Gaita's view of morality, grounding many of the concepts related to justice and our treatment of others generally as well as shoring up the authority of partial love, such as parental love.

Yet Gaita's thinking seems confused concerning the relationship between impartial and partial love. At one point he says that the partial and impartial types of love are interdependent. When comparing the nun's love with parental love, he says this:

'Both forms of love are unconditional, but they are not unconditioned. Their existence depends upon certain practices and customs as much as it informs them, and also upon certain facts of the human condition....They are, I believe, dependent on one another. I doubt that the love expressed in the nun's demeanour would have been possible for her were it not for the place which the language of parental love had in her prayers.' (Gaita 2000:22)

Indeed, if the nun were asked to explain her behaviour, Gaita suggests that she would couch her explanation in terms of partial rather than impartial love. (Perhaps by reference to the fact that we are all God's children, for example, and that by extension these patients are her brothers and sisters). Now this points to the nun regarding her love not as impartial, but instead having the role of imbuing her behaviour toward the patients with all the qualities of partial love. Indeed, one could argue that that is precisely what makes her attitude toward the patients so striking. Although she does not stand in a special relationship towards them, she *behaves* as though she does, and sees herself as doing so.

As Gaita notes, her behaviour is in sharp contrast to the ‘good’ psychiatrists and Gaita himself. They are effectively following a rule which says that it is morally good to show love and beneficence towards such people, but the very fact of following that rule or acknowledging that rule in their behaviour distances them from the people who are the object of their attention. The patients are effectively objectified as suitable recipients of this special type of attention, which is the result both of the ‘good’ psychiatrists realising that they ought to do something for these people and of the fact that the patients are in a lamentably worse position than either Gaita or their doctors. The type of attention which Gaita and the doctors direct towards the patient might indeed be termed impartial in the sense that they presumably do not favour any one patient over another. We can scarcely call this type of attention love in Gaita’s sense of the word, however, because of the predominant and distorting thought in the minds of Gaita and the doctors of the difference in their respective fortunes.

The nun’s love is impartial in the sense that it is not directed towards someone with whom she has a special relationship, but it differs from that of Gaita and the doctors in that it does not reflect any disparity in the fortunes of herself and the recipient, even though such a disparity exists. I suggest that this is not an aspect of impartiality, as it might seem at first, but instead is founded in the traditions and language of partial love. In the example of the respectable parent with the child who is now an adult criminal, precisely this sort of disparity of fortune exists, and yet the parent ignores it.

This capacity to ignore difference in fortune is not achieved by stripping away all particularities of the individual who is receiving the attention and the attention giver and reducing each to a featureless atom. Rather, the partial love which the nun has experienced in her life grounds this love which she is able to show towards the mentally ill; it gives her the language, attitude and behaviour with which to demonstrate the love which Gaita witnesses and which so forcibly impresses him. It seems that what is impressive about the nun’s behaviour is that she treats each patient individually, and gives them the importance and particularity which a parent gives a child.

There is another feature of partial love which sits well with the effect that the nun’s behaviour has on observers. This is the idea that an individual is irreplaceable, and irreplaceability is something which is born in the atmosphere surrounding partial love. If we lose a child, we are not consoled by the thought that we may have another. It is that particular child’s loss which is important and devastating to us. Although Gaita comments only generally on this feature of irreplaceability as such, it would seem to be a further point of description of the nun’s behaviour that she treats each individual patient as irreplaceable, which would confirm their preciousness.

Thus, I would argue that partial love is at the heart of Gaita’s nun example, rather than impartial love. The direction of travel is from partial love to impartial love rather than the opposite way, as Gaita asserts. If this is so, his example of the nun would avoid the criticisms of ‘life-defying’ and ‘deeply oppressive’ raised by Hamilton and others.

To add to my argument that partial rather than impartial love is at the heart of Gaita’s characterisation of saintliness, I now consider in more detail the emotional response of Gaita to the nun’s behaviour, drawing on some reflections of Martha Nussbaum (2001).

## 6 The Nature of Gaita’s Emotional Response to the Nun

Gaita’s emotional response has two main elements, wonder at the nun’s goodness and the recognition that the belief he holds about the humanity, equality and preciousness of the

patients has come alive and is now 'in his heart'; a felt belief, rather than something to which he assents merely intellectually. Gaita is attracted by the idea of wonder involving a distancing and *diminishing* of the self in the face of an impersonal sacredness. This is evidenced by his appeal to Simone Weil, who frequently pursues this theme, accompanying it with a downplaying of particular, personal relationships in order to attain it—just the sort of inclinations which have made stereotypical saints so unpopular. Nussbaum at first pursues a similar line when she considers that an agent experiencing wonder is 'maximally aware of the value of the object, and only minimally aware, if at all, of its relationship to her own plans'. (Nussbaum 2001: 54). However, she goes on to contrast wonder with awe, and here Nussbaum claims that there is an important difference in emotional response:

'Wonder and awe are akin, but distinct: wonder is outward-moving, exuberant, whereas awe is linked with bending, or making oneself feel small. In wonder, I want to leap or run, in awe to kneel.' (Nussbaum 2001:54)

If we accept Nussbaum's characterisation, Gaita is not obliterated or overwhelmed by the nun's goodness when he experiences wonder at what she reveals. He may feel distanced from the immediate concerns of his self, but he is not diminished by the experience. He does not fall into a 'life-denying' attitude. On the contrary, I assume we are to imagine that the wonder links with the second element in Gaita's response, the enlivening of his belief in the humanity of the patients such that he will feel encouraged to behave toward them differently in the light of his new experience. Wonder, as Nussbaum says, helps move distant objects within the circle of a person's scheme of ends. (Nussbaum 2001:55). After seeing the nun, it seems to Gaita that he now sees how to act out his belief in the preciousness of the patients. Their humanity and equality are no longer distant from him, theoretical constructs as it were, but can be incorporated in how he behaves towards them. Wynn (2009) says that Gaita comes to learn from nun's example that it is possible for the patients to figure in 'an embodied, enacted relationship of genuine equality' and that he comes to an understanding of 'what is required, in terms of bodily demeanour, for such a relationship'.<sup>4</sup>

This aspect of Gaita's emotional response owes more to his attraction to the Wittgenstinian emphasis on the centrality of customs, practices and the language of love in our moral behaviour than to the diminished self of Simone Weil. His wonder will translate into action. It is this theme which I conclude lies at the heart of his experience of the nun's behaviour, rather than the impartial nature of the nun's love. The nun appears to have succeeded in extending the customs, practices and behaviour of partial love to those with whom she has no special relationship. Indeed, the result of her demonstrating such love to the patients is to engender in Gaita a vivid belief in the preciousness of the patients, as was noted above. Vivid belief about the preciousness of someone is a characteristic of partial love and particular relationships; it often prompts us to act heroically to save those close to us in ways which we would not normally consider. Sometimes this can happen in rescue situations where there is no previous connection between the person in danger and the rescuer.<sup>5</sup> By a sort of moral contagion, and especially through causing Gaita to 'wonder', the nun has transmitted the feelings that accompany partial love to Gaita, and I suggest that this transformation of his belief into one activated by such feelings is what he considers to be saintly and what prompts his feeling of admiration.

<sup>4</sup> Thanks to Fergus Kerr OP for pointing out Wynn's discussion to me.

<sup>5</sup> Charities frequently try to engender this feeling in would-be donors by giving stories of particular individuals rather than a general description of the help needed.

## 7 Conclusion

The idea that to be saintly is to reject all close friendships and to concentrate on loving everyone without fear or favour is popular and it is the very view which Wolf, and indeed Hamilton, criticise. It is similar to the non-religious goal of the stereotypical top moral performer who is a maximising consequentialist with welfarism as the chief good and who sees morality as all-pervasive. Just as these types of saints are heavily criticised, so is the type of relentless top moral performer who must maximise the impartial good: and for the same reason, that both seem inhuman. Gaita's picture of saintliness has the virtue of recovering the possibility of saintliness for ordinary humans and reminding us why we feel admiration and inspiration in the face of some people's behaviour.

Gaita's example of saintliness does not therefore rest on the type of whole-life approach to sainthood which is rule-dominated; his saints do not have to be seen to be promoting the overall good at all times; they simply have to be seen on some occasions to be responding to the value of human preciousness with a special kind of love which makes itself known to onlookers. Whilst this love is impartial in the sense that it is often shown to those who do not stand in a special relationship to the saint, and may well prompt feelings of wonder in the onlooker, it is conditioned by the customs and practices of partial love—love which the saint has seen and practised in special relationships. In contrast to the view of Susan Wolf, saints should not be inhuman rule-followers; on the contrary, in recognising the preciousness of other human beings, as the nun does in Gaita's example, they show themselves to be fully human. If we accept this picture of sainthood, we can appreciate the qualities of saintly love without fearing that we have witnessed the behaviour of a freak.

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