Moral Powers, Fragile Beliefs

Essays in Moral and Religious Philosophy

Edited by

Joseph Carlisle
James Carter
Daniel Whistler

continuum

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS vii
CONTRIBUTORS viii
EDITORS' INTRODUCTION xi

CLUSTER 1: SELF/OTHER RELATIONS

1. MORALITY, METAPHYSICS AND RELIGION 3
Raimond Gaita

2. LOVE, HATE AND MORAL INCLUSION 29
Anca Gheaus

3. THE DISCIPLINE OF PIOUS REASON: GOETHE, HERDER, KANT 53
Daniel Whistler

CLUSTER 2: THE FRAGILITY OF LIFE

4. ON LOSS OF CONFIDENCE: DISSYMMETRY, DOUBT, DEPRIVATION IN THE POWER TO ACT AND (THE POWER) TO SUFFER 83
Pamela Sue Anderson

5. THE PASSIONATE LIFE: ON GRIEF AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE 109
James Carter

6. A RICOEURIAN HYMN TO HUMANITY: 'YOU ARE BETTER THAN YOUR ACTIONS' 131
Michele Kueter Petersen

CLUSTER 3: PHILOSOPHY VIA ART

7. LOVE AND TRANSCENDENCE 157
Martin Warner

8. PHILOSOPHY, MORALITY AND THE SELF: AGAINST THINNESS 184
Christopher Hamilton

9. THE HOLY DOUBT: JACK KEROUAC AND POSTMODERNISM 202
Joseph Carlisle

CLUSTER 4: THE VITALITY OF BELIEF

10. RELIGION IN ITS MATERIAL CONTEXT: SOME CONSIDERATIONS DRAWN FROM CONTEMPORARY PHILOSOPHIES OF PLACE 221
Mark Wynn

11. PLAY, PSYCHOANALYSIS AND FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION 243
Beverley Clack

12. RELIGIOUS BELIEF AND THE DISREGARD OF REALITY 261
Brian R. Clack

INDEX 289

CHAPTER 1

MORALITY, METAPHYSICS AND RELIGION

Raimond Gaita

In *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice*, I wrote about a nun I encountered when I worked as a student in a psychiatric hospital in the early 1960s (2000, pp. 17–28). I have spent much of my life thinking about how properly to describe that encounter and how to place it philosophically. I said that the nun behaved towards patients who were severely and ineradicably afflicted without a trace of condescension, that her behaviour was an example of saintly love, that it revealed, wondrously, that even such people are fully our equals, that they were inalienably precious. I said that I was bound in testimony to what she revealed, and that though it was mysterious, the purity of her love proved the reality of it. I insisted that although she would have believed that the patients are sacred, perhaps that they are children of God equally with all his other children, I need not share that belief to be certain of what she revealed.

Despite the obscurities in my account of the nun, many people responded sympathetically to it. They have been sceptical, however, of my claim that what I learnt from her does not need religious support. Some have claimed that my work is religious. I readily acknowledged that a sense of the inalienable preciousness of every human being, that every life is a miracle, had its deepest expression in religious traditions, and that had it not been for the language of saintly love, nourished by the works of saints, we would not have sense of what her love revealed. Without the language of saintly love, the nun's love would not have had the power of revelation that it did and there would not have been the same thing for it to reveal. That language of saintly love, I argued, is, like other forms of love, revelatory in the individual instance but constitutive of what is revealed because of the generality and historical depth of the language. But I have insisted, with increasing complacency I now believe, that what grew in one place could take roots elsewhere and flourish independently of its origins. But disavowals of a religious impulse in my writings have, as Stephen Mulhall observed, become less than full-hearted over time.[1]

Embarrassed about the expressions I used to characterize what bound me in testimony to what the nun revealed, I retracted many of them in my preface to the second edition of *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (2004). In *A Common Humanity* I had already admitted that if I were asked to explain what I meant when I said the nun revealed the patients in that hospital ward to be ‘fully our equals’, I could only say that she responded to them without a trace of condescension and that I could not doubt that she was right to do so. I would say much the same of my claim that she revealed the ‘full humanity’ of the patients. Furthermore, I was embarrassed to use in other contexts the expression I relied on most often to express the essence of what she revealed. Affirming, for example, that even the most radical and unrepentant evildoers are to be kept fully among us, I was disinclined to say that they too are inalienably precious, though I believed only the works of saintly love enabled one to find sense in such an affirmation. A religious person, I acknowledged, would not have such difficulties. She would say the nun revealed the patients to be sacred, and that the most terrible and unrepentant evildoers are also sacred as that idea has been conditioned, in considerable part, by the language of saintly love.

In this essay I want to reflect again on how to characterize the significance of the nun’s example, hoping that such reflection will be of more than biographical interest. To do that, however, I must again describe my encounter with her, and it is best to do it as I did originally. First, however, I want to discuss another example – that of my father – as I described him in *Romulus, My Father* and as he is depicted (to some degree) in the film based on the book.

*

My father was born in 1922 in a Romanian speaking part of Yugoslavia. When he was 13 he fled his home and trained to become a blacksmith. Just before World War II broke out he went to Germany where he believed he could best practise his trade. Trapped there by the war, he met and fell in love with my mother, Christine, at the time a girl of 16. After the war they emigrated in 1950 to Australia because they had been wrongly advised that the climate would relieve if not actually cure her severe asthma.

Already on board the ship and later in a migrant’s reception camp in northern Victoria, my mother had affairs with other men, in part at least because she was already suffering from a form of mental illness – manic depression – of which promiscuity is often a symptom. Because my father was told that I was running wild, he called for me to live with him in a migrant workers camp in central Victoria where he was working on a project to build a reservoir. There he met and befriended two brothers, Pantelimon and Mitru Hora. Pantelimon, whom I called Hora as my father always did, became my father’s dearest friend and a second father to me.

Mitru, of whom I was also very fond, became my mother's lover and the father of my two half sisters. He and my mother had a desperate relationship, which ended in his suicide in a small and sad Victorian town, in 1956 at the age of 27. Two years later my mother killed herself on the eve of her 30th birthday.

My father and I lived for 10 years together in Frogmore, a derelict farmhouse. It had no electricity or running water. For all the time we lived there, we cooked on one-burner paraffin stove and read by the light of a paraffin lamp. Rats lived under the house when we first moved there; not long after, long brown snakes, among the most poisonous in the world, ate the rats and lived under the house in their place. Only when my father started a poultry farm did the snakes leave, frightened off by our free-roaming hens. Most of the dramatic incidents in the book occurred when we lived there. Of those the most harrowing for me was my father's descent into insanity.

In the migrant workers camp, my father befriended a man whose name was Vacek Vilkovikas. Like my father, Vacek had come to Australia on an assisted passage that required him to work for 2 years in repayment. Soon after the work was finished Vacek lost his mind and he went to live between two large granite boulders on the side of a small mountain some 15 kilometres from where my father and I lived. To protect him from the weather he covered the boulders with whatever he could find and there he lived, contented I believe, for some years. His primitive home looked over one of the most beautiful vistas in the areas. Near to the boulders where he slept he built a small tin shed (I don't know why he didn't sleep in it), and there he kept various concoctions that he had pickled, sometimes in his urine. Visibly insane, he talked to himself, though never with the aggressive guttural explosions that mark some forms of insanity. He spoke as gently to himself as he did to others, sometimes barely audibly, furrowing his brow when he asked himself a question or extending his arm, palm upwards, to express helplessness or resignation.

After I had written *Romulus, My Father*, a journalist asked me whether Vacek had seemed 'weird' to me when I was a boy. Without hesitation I answered sincerely that he had not. Later, my answer puzzled me. Why had he not? Objectively, after all, he was very strange. The answer that came to me was that my father and Hora behaved towards Vacek without condescension. Had they condescended to him – had it shown in their tone of voice or demeanour, in their body language as we say – the cruel sensitivity children often possess would have made me conclude that Vacek was not entirely 'one of us'. As it was, the contrary was true. That was not because I was particularly virtuous. It was because I saw Vacek in the light of my father's and Hora's behaviour towards him, which only later did I realize was something to wonder at.

Few people would deny that one should treat people the way Vacek was treated, that is, without condescension; but in my experience, hardly anyone is capable of it. In one way or another our condescension betrays itself in how we speak, in the tone of our voice, in the demeanours of our bodies – in what we call our body language. It is one thing to feel affection for such a man, even to esteem him for some important reasons. 'Vacek is a good man', Hora often told me. But to do it without condescension? From where would one get *even so much as the idea* that that makes sense? Aristotle, to whom many moral philosophers now turn for inspiration, would have thought it absurd, and in a way it is.

Earlier, I said that it was not my virtue that enabled me to respond to Vacek as I expressed it, without reflection, to the journalist who interviewed me. For different reasons, I would say something similar of my father's and Hora's attitude to him. They were morally extraordinary men, but their capacity to respond so remarkably to Vacek was not a moral feat – a feat of moral character, for example. Indeed, though I make much of the concept of character in *Romulus, My Father,* the concept of character cannot reach what is at issue here, not at any rate if it is interdependent with virtues of character. Not even charity would of itself distinguish between a kind, benign, condescension towards Vacek and the attitude my father and Hora showed towards him. If one is inclined to say their behaviour expressed the virtue of charity, then it would be a conception of charity already informed by a sense of Vacek as he was revealed by their behaviour towards him: it would not explain that sense of him. The nature of charity or compassion depends on the concepts under which one sees those towards whom one responds charitably or compassionately. The concepts under which my father and Hora saw Vacek were historically constituted, I believe, by the works of saintly love, by the language of love that formed and nourished those works and which was, in its turn, enriched by them. That was their cultural inheritance, although neither would have thought about it as I have just put it.

What I knew as a boy, revealed to me in the example of my father and Hora, deserted me when I was an adolescent at boarding school. This is how I put it in *Romulus, My Father:*

> My father and Vacek visited me at school in Ballarat. As soon as I saw him [my father] I knew that his illness had again overtaken him. He came dressed in a dishevelled navy pinstriped suit, with a dirty white shirt open at the neck, the collar partly covered by the collar of his jacket. He seemed shrunken, stooped, not with age (he was only thirty-nine), but with the burden of his

> affliction. Most startling was his face: thin, unshaven, his eyes, not dead as is often the case with depression, but burning with the terror of his visions, all made worse by the fact that his almost shaven head made him look as though he had come from a concentration camp.
>
> Vacek walked beside him in an equally shabby beige suit and an open dirty shirt, wearing, as ever, his beanie. He no longer had a beard, and his open, amiable, face was covered with stubble. His eyes focused on no one; his lips were hardly ever still, moving in sometimes silent, sometimes audible conversation with himself or imaginary partners. Afterwards a teacher asked me if one of the men had been my father. 'No', I replied. I was later tormented with guilt and shame for having denied my father, but I knew not quite why I was ashamed because I also knew that, terrible though it was, my denial was not prompted by cowardice. (Gaita, 1998)

In the German translation, I deleted the last clause of that last sentence – that 'my denial was not prompted by cowardice' – because the thought in it is too compressed. It depends among other things on a contrast between shame and guilt that is not explained in the book. Guilt (or remorse, which I take to be much the same thing) is for what we have done; shame is for what our deeds reveal about us – usually about our character. I felt guilty because I had denied my father, but I wasn't sure what failing of character that had revealed. When I came to write about it in the passage I have quoted, the obscurities in my account were not a function of my wish to deny failings in my character: I was trying to suggest that my denial of my father had a deeper cause than reference to failings in my character could convey, namely, that I was no longer able to see my father, so utterly degraded, under the concepts that as a boy had enabled me to respond to Vacek as I did, and under which my father still responded to him. I was not concerned that I lacked the virtues that would enable me to do what I knew in my heart I should do. Or, more precisely, that was not what was most seriously at issue.

Simone Weil says that 'compassion for the afflicted is more miraculous than walking on water, healing the sick or raising the dead'. Her point and mine, I am tempted to say, is not psychological: it is conceptual. The miracle Weil refers to is not that we are able to resist temptations that threaten the will in its execution of a clearly perceived duty. Nor is it that we are able to resist temptations that would obscure clear vision of our duty. The miracle is that we are able to believe, to retain a sense that it is even intelligible to believe, that even those who suffer the utmost degradation can be the intelligible objects of a compassion that is entirely without condescension. Weil did not think, as the great and noble Immanuel Kant did, that reason could reveal in a person who is physically and psychologically utterly degraded a dignity that is, as we now put it, inalienable. 'The supernatural virtue of justice', she writes, 'consists in behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the stronger in an unequal relationship. Exactly in every respect, including the slightest details of accent and attitude, for a detail may be enough to place the weaker party in the condition of matter which on this occasion naturally belongs to him, just as the slightest shock causes water which has remained liquid below freezing point to solidify' (Weil, 1977). The demeanour Weil describes cannot be a product of the will responding to Reason's revelation to it of the metaphysical properties of persons. Later, I hope to make clear why.

I am not religious, so I cannot speak as Weil does. But the divide she records when she calls justice a supernatural virtue – a virtue that, by the way, she believes should not be distinguished from charity – is real, I believe. It is between two conceptions of the ethical – one is overwhelmingly natural and the other is in some way mysterious, if not actually an offence to reason. Both go together – indeed, are interdependent – with a conception of what it is to be a human being and therefore with the kind of compassion that it is intelligible to show to a human being. One is an ethic of assertion or, at any rate, an ethic for the relatively fortunate. Its defining concepts vary culturally and historically, but they cluster around autonomy, integrity, courage, nobility, honour and flourishing – and when it is limited by these, the concept of character. Sometimes nobility is the focal concept, as it was for Aristotle, but autonomy seems now to be the prized virtue. The second kind of ethic is an ethic of renunciation. It was expressed first by Socrates when he said to his incredulous interlocutors that it is better to suffer evil than to do it, and later in our tradition it was deepened by an affirmation that every human life is sacred in a sense that implies that every human being is infinitely precious. Sometimes it was expressed in stories and parables that tell us that we are all, without exception, God's children, or that we are all created in God's image. Goodness rather than nobility is its focal concept – goodness as revealed in the lives of saints and which invites a capital 'G'. Only the latter ethic, I believe, can find words to keep fully among us those who suffer severe, ineradicable and degrading affliction, as the nun showed is possible and necessary.

My father understood the terror of mental illness long before he fell victim to it. One of the most vivid of my childhood memories is of the time he conveyed this to me. This is how I put it in *Romulus, My Father*.

> I have seldom seen such affliction as I saw my father suffer in those last years in Frogmore, and I saw it again only when I worked as a student in psychiatric hospitals. He understood it before he became its victim. Some years before, while we were travelling on the motorbike, he talked about Vacek and said,

> 'There is no sickness worse that mental sickness.' I remember his words clearly. I remember the exact point where we were on the road. Most of all, I remember his strong, bare, sun-darkened arms on either side of me as I sat on the petrol tank. For me to remember his words and our surroundings so vividly, the authority with which he spoke them must have impressed me deeply. The sight of his muscular arms protected me against their terrible meaning. (Gaita, 1998)

The authority of the words to which I refer in that passage was an expression of how deeply my father's life was shaped by what I call in the book his 'compassionate fatalism'. Metaphysical doctrines of determinism are far from my mind when I speak of my father's fatalism. I mean that for him the human condition was defined by our vulnerability to misfortune. Indeed his demeanour to the whole of life was shaped by something like the same attitude. Certainly it was to the animals he raised and cared for. He took great pleasure in them, but always his attitude to them was coloured by pity for their vulnerability and especially for their vulnerability to human cruelty. His pity extended to all of living nature, to the trees he cared for when they were stricken with disease, and even to the countryside when it was parched by drought, the grasses normally golden in summer, bleached white, and the earth with large cracks in it, some as wide as 6 inches and as deep as 10 feet.

It could hardly fail to show in his attitude towards my mother. His goodness showed in his compassionate responsiveness to her and to Mitru, to their need that was constant and to their desperate relationship for which he pitied them because he knew it would consume them. His compassion went deep. I have known no one who felt so visibly the pain of others. But it cost him. He was born into a culture in which honour was, at least for men, the focal ethical concept, the value under which other values were organized. For that reason, few of his compatriots had much sympathy for his attitude towards my mother and Mitru. Some despised it, though not him, I am glad to say. It was bad enough, they thought, that a good friend had cuckolded him, but it was shameless for him to compound the dishonour by paying their rent when they were threatened with eviction.

In my father, the two conceptions of the ethical I sketched earlier lived in considerable tension. That is partly why he was such a complex and interesting man. Though not at all a sensitive new age guy, he responded to his friend Mitru who had cuckolded him and to my mother who had many times betrayed him, with an open hearted, generous concern for their welfare. He even paid their rent when, as often happened, they were threatened with eviction because my mother was unable to control her spending – a symptom, like her promiscuity, commonly associated with her illness. His compassion, as I said, went deep but did not prevent the humiliation he felt because his friend had cuckolded him. Socrates would have said that my father should not have been humiliated by the wrong done to him by Mitru – that only wrongdoers are shamed. And a saint, exhibiting to a greater degree the kind of goodness that showed in my father, might say the same. But, although he was truly a man who, like Socrates, would rather suffer evil than do it, my father was not a saint. He suffered hurt and humiliation, but he was good to an astonishing degree and his goodness showed in how he treated my mother and Mitru.

When I reflect on the many comments I receive about the book and the film, I am struck by how often people praise my father's integrity, his courage in the face of much misfortune, his sense of honour and his nobility. These are heroic virtues. When people say that he was a *good* man, they usually explain what they mean by saying that he possessed those virtues to an exemplary degree. If these had been his only virtues, important though they are, I'm not sure whether I would have written the book. I wrote it to celebrate his goodness as that showed in his attitude to Vacek and to my mother. But his compassion for my mother and Mitru was of a kind that could exist in him only, I think, because he was someone for whom, at least much of the time, goodness rather than nobility or honour was the concept that determined his ethical perspective. Or, to put it another way, it was because he was a man whose understanding of integrity, courage, honour and nobility were transformed in the light of an ethical conception in which goodness is the focal concept.

Many people have written admiringly of my father as a man of strong, though sometimes rigid, principle. Perversely, it might seem, I resist such praise of him. It was not principle that informed his behaviour towards my mother and Mitru: he found it impossible to turn his back on their need. Hora was sometimes critical of his behaviour towards my mother and Mitru, but his reply was always (in effect) that there was nothing else for him to do. His compassion went deep, but one should not think of it as an emotion – the passion of compassion, Hannah Arendt once called it – that overwhelmed him with its force. If his compassion had been an emotional force that simply overwhelmed my father, then when he said to Hora that he could not deny my mother's need, Hora might have urged him to try. But Hora never did because he knew that to do so would be to betray a serious misunderstanding of the kind of impossibility my father had expressed.

An ethically necessitated responsiveness to his understanding of what it meant for my mother and Mitru to suffer as they did was essential to the nature of my father's compassion. That is a necessity different in kind from physical or psychological necessity. Indeed, it is a condition of saying truthfully of someone that she labours under psychological or physical necessity that she could not do or resist doing what is in question even if she tried. Sometimes, of course, when physical or psychological necessity is at issue, we know that a person could not do something even if they tried. At other times we are not sure, nor we might think, can she be. Then we might suggest that she try. But it would, as I have already suggested, betray serious misunderstanding of the necessity that governed my father's compassionate behaviour towards my mother and Mitru to suggest that he might try to overcome it, to do what he said he could not do, or to resist doing what he said he had to do. Only a jokester or someone who was tone deaf would say, 'Why not try. Give it a go. It might be easier than you think'.

*

Intrinsic to my father's compassion as I have just characterized it is a necessity of a kind that Hume cannot allow in his moral psychology and that Kant cannot allow to operate in the realm of inclination. Compassion, as it showed in my father's response to my mother and Mitru, is not, as Hume would have it, an emotional addition to his recognition of their suffering: it is a form of the recognition of their suffering. It is an ethically necessitated responsiveness to the perception of what it meant for them to suffer as they did.

In much of my work I have tried to dissuade my colleagues in moral philosophy from a preoccupation with principles of conduct – with trying to establish what they are or should be and their relation to reason – by showing the importance to moral philosophy of some of the ways we speak of the *meaning* of what we do, feel and think. I have in mind the kind of elaboration one would offer, or perhaps more often gesture towards, if one were to say, as my father did to Hora in response to Hora's criticism and his behaviour towards my mother and Mitru, 'Don't you understand what it means for them to suffer as they do?' Or if one were to say, 'Don't you understand what you are doing – the meaning of what it is to suffer the degradation you are causing this person'. Or, if one were remorseful, as I know Mitru was: 'What have I done? Only now do I fully understand its meaning'.

Elaborations of the kind I just mentioned often impress – indeed they often move us – because of the form in which they are presented. Their authority for us almost always depends on their tone, taken broadly to include what people do as well as what they say. Often, we may appeal, directly or indirectly, to art that reveals more perspicuously what we are fumbling for, to film or poetry or novels perhaps or painting or sculpture. Think of how much of our sense of religious depth and authenticity is a function of our appeal to things in which we believe that form and content cannot be separated – art of course, but also prayers, hymns, religious rituals and so on. Appeals such as these and reflection upon them occur in what I have called 'the realm of meaning'. Understanding that is sought and achieved there is defined by the concepts to which we are answerable when we are moved by what others say and do whether in life or in art, when we are called to seriousness in conversation and so on. We are, of course, answerable for errors of fact, for muddle of one kind or another – for all those errors that science and philosophy, separately or together, are good at exposing. But it is important to note that we are often also answerable for our sentimentality, our vulnerability to pathos and our tendency to cliché, to deafness to tone and more. That is relatively uncontroversial, I think.

Writing about things that affected me profoundly – my mother's suicide and my father's madness, for example – I had to resist, as much as possible, all dispositions to pathos or to sentimentality. That's not a merely personal remark. Anybody in similar circumstances should do the same. But in resisting these, I was not trying to get feeling out of the writing. I don't think anybody who has read *Romulus* would say that it lacks feeling. I was trying to make the feeling true, though I don't mean that I wanted it to be sincere. Sentimentality is sincere more often than not. In resisting sentimentality I wasn't so much trying to feel right as trying to see things right, to understand things right. To help myself, I listened often to Bach. I need him to keep me truthful.

I can find no better way of putting this than to say: I was trying to see things as they were, rather than how, succumbing to various common human failings, they were constantly appearing to me. And what else are efforts to see things as they are rather than as they appear because one wishes them to appear thus, or because one's perspective is limited, or because one's judgement is distorted by, for example, vanity or sentimentality or because one is tone deaf to irony and so on – what else are such efforts if not efforts towards truth? That should not be controversial, I think. But now I will enter a controversial claim: it is a mistake to assume that when we struggle against dispositions to sentimentality or to pathos, for example, in order to see things as they are, that we must be struggling against them conceived as psychological *causes* of error and muddle. Sometimes we should think of them as *forms rather than causes* of falsehood. As concepts that mark forms rather than causes of the false, sentimentality, pathos and so on define a distinctive realm of understanding, one that is interdependent with notions of truth, truthfulness and the objectivity appropriate to it. That realm is what I have called the realm of meaning.

When sentimentality, pathos are causes of the false, they are psychological states that can cause thought to go astray more or less as tiredness, drunkenness, fearfulness or recklessness can. When the influence of sentimentality (to take only it as an example) is conceived like that, then it makes sense to wish – as philosophers so often have – that one were the kind of creature who could rid itself of those psychological states that disable our capacity for clear, true thought. Important to such an ideal is a conception of thought, of what makes it succeed or fail, that can be articulated without reference to sentimentality, or similar afflictions – a conception of the true, the false and the muddled, that we would have if we had never heard of sentimentality or similar states. Being the psychologically complex creatures we are (this thought continues), we must reluctantly acknowledge our vulnerability to such states and we must sometimes refer to them when we speculate about causes of human error. Considered merely as psychological causes of error and muddle – causes of the false, as I shall say, for the sake of simplicity – sentimentality and the other afflictions I have listed, are of no more intrinsic interest to philosophers thinking about the nature of thinking than headaches, tiredness, drunkenness, fearfulness, vanity, cowardice – the list, sadly, is very long. That is why philosophers have given almost no attention to these concepts outside of aesthetics. Attention to them has played no serious role in an account of what it means to try to think objectively, to try to see things as they are, in the philosophy of religion or in ethics more generally.

Sometimes, however, the idea that we should try to extract muddled or false cognitive content from the form that makes us suspect that sentimentality is the cause of the muddle or falsehood, seems to make no sense. Suppose someone says: ‘I don’t care whether some of the beatitudes are sentimental; all that matters to me is whether they are morally true or false’. Or, ‘I know the Job or the Jesus of this translation seems sometime to be sentimental or banal, but that does not matter. I’m interested in truth, not literature’. What, in such examples, does the demand that we should extract genuine cognitive content (truth assessable content) from misleading literary form, come to? In such examples, reference to sentimentality is not intended to appeal only to what we would call a merely ‘aesthetic’ sensibility: it refers to a form of the false. Taken as a form rather than cause of the false, reference to it and to the other failings I listed earlier – a vulnerability to pathos, a tin ear for irony and so on – mark out, as I suggested earlier, a distinctive cognitive realm. The effort to overcome them is an effort to see things as they are, an effort oriented to truth, but it is an effort in which feeling and thought, form and content are inseparable. When it is a form of the false, vulnerability to sentimentality is not a contingent obstacle to lucidity; it is intrinsic to the very content of our thought. In such a case, that we must make efforts to overcome sentimentality if we are to see things as they are is internal to our understanding of 'things being as they are or not being as they are' in a particular realm of reflection. Or to put it in another way: when sentimentality is a form of the false, then that we are creatures vulnerable to sentimentality is intrinsic to the cognitive character of the claim that is judged to be sentimental.

It is part of the very idea of religion, at least within the Judeo-Christian tradition I think, that someone who professes a religion, who bears witness to it, must believe that it deepens rather than cheapens what human beings care for, whether they are religious or not or whether they care a fig for religion. We may think they are wrong, of course, but they cannot say: 'I know this is sentimental, banal, tone deaf to irony, riddled with cliché, disdainful of the world, but there it is my religion. I'm not interested in aesthetics. I'm interested in truth'. If that is so, then we must find in philosophy space for a conception of the cognitive that enables us to understand what counts as depth and shallowness in the realm of the religious and, indeed, of the ethical more generally. We need it if we are to make sense of the distinction between the God of religion and the God of the philosophers. This is especially true of religions like Christianity, Judaism and Islam because they are religions in which reflection on the examples of people's lives, deeds and words deepens understanding of what is of religious significance and indeed of what it is for something to be of religious significance.

The omniscient God of religion knows all our sins and woes. The omniscient God of the philosophers knows them and also our email addresses. Whatever else may be said against the claim that if God is really to be omniscient, he must know our email addresses, it is the banality of it that compromises it fatally. To be able to tell what is banal, one must have, among other things, an ear for tone. But one way of identifying the God of the philosophers is that claims about him and his properties aspire to be made and assessed in an essentially tone-free zone. Prima facie, this implies that what it means to believe in God, to affirm his existence, will be different according to whether that affirmation is of the God of religion or of the God of the philosophers.

What I have said about the realm of meaning enables one to make more than merely metaphorical sense of talk of depth and shallowness in religious discourse. It is true that in the realm of meaning understanding is achieved by making one's thought answerable to a critical vocabulary that is much more like the vocabulary used in the critical appreciation of literature, though not in the denigratory sense in which the person in my example meant it when she said 'I'm interested in truth, not literature'. Reflecting on that critical vocabulary, it becomes evident that much of our moral thought is answerable to a set of critical concepts that define, for that kind of thinking, a distinctive kind of seriousness, and of course, distinctive failures of it. It becomes apparent that one's subject matter is of a kind whose description and reflective assessment must admit as indispensable, as intrinsic to its content, judgements that this or that is sentimental, or overtaken by pathos, or banal, deaf to irony and, perhaps, *in ways defined by those concepts*, shallow.

The realm of meaning conceived as a cognitive realm whose distinctiveness is marked by the fact that we are answerable for our sentimentality, pathos and so on as forms rather than as causes of the false offers, I believe, a richer conception of what it is to think well or badly about matters of religions than does the relatively thin conception that is often advocated by people who speak of reason supporting faith. But, as I have intimated, though I have not said it explicitly, there is no such thing as reason; there is only thinking well and thinking badly about this or that particular subject matter, and the concepts that tell us what it is to think well in one domain have no application in others. Propositions in physics or mathematics cannot be undermined by cliché, or because only someone tone deaf to irony or banality would advance them. When I speak of the God of the philosophers, therefore, I mean the God whose existence and properties are the subject of the kind of speculation that would, if only it could, retreat to a tone-free zone; one in which accusations of sentimentality, banality and so on, are as inappropriate, unsuitable to the subject matter, as they are in mathematics or physics. The language of love, reflection on it and on the God who informs it is, inescapably, in the realm of meaning.

Something similar is true of rationality: it is an indispensible intellectual virtue, but one with limited application. When one tries to be lucid about one's mortality or vulnerability to misfortune, for example, to achieve what we call an understanding of the heart rather than just of the head about them – to achieve the kind of understanding I claimed for my father when I was so struck by the authority of the words he spoke to me about Vacek – one must, of course, try to be rational. But one must also avoid sentimentality, a disposition to pathos and so on as forms of the false that, in this kind of case, constantly betray one's efforts to be lucid. This richer conception of what lucidity requires is not so much a richer conception of rationality, but rather one that marks the limits of the natural application of the concept of rationality. One can, of course, insist that anything that counts as an effort to see things as they are, as an effort to overcome sentimentality and so on, is an exercise of rationality, richly conceived. But that is as unhelpful as saying that when we try to see things as they are we always try to see what is the fact of the matter, albeit according to an enriched conception of the factual. Both rest on the assumption that to overcome sentimentality, pathos and so on is to eliminate them as causes of the false.

The concept of the realm of meaning that I have sketched here and developed elsewhere is intended to offer more than an account of the nature of practical thought in the domain of the ethical and the religious: it is intended to offer an account of a distinctive form of discursive thought. Philosophical and other kinds of reflection – theological reflection, for example – should, I believe, occur mostly in the realm of meaning.

Without the conception of discursive thought that is rendered distinctive by the way it is answerable to the critical concepts that define the realm of meaning, we will be bereft of an adequate sense of the subject matter of philosophical anthropology, conceived broadly to include the philosophy of religion and theology and of how to think about it. When I wrote about the nun I was therefore mistaken, as Stephen Mulhall has pointed out, to run together metaphysical thought about the God of the philosophers and reflection that informs what I called 'doctrine' (Mulhall, 2011).

One way to understand what I mean by the realm of meaning that bears on something I want to say later is to think of it as a cognitive realm that enables us to understand why people have sometimes said there is a form of understanding in which head and heart are inseparably combined. My father's necessitated responsiveness to my mother's and Mitru's need was the form in which he understood their need, a form of understanding with which the necessity that marked his response is interdependent. Clearly, that is neither a Kantian nor a Humean thought, but it acknowledges what is important to both of these traditional oppositions.

*

I come now to my other example, more dramatic, but continuous with what I have been saying about my father and Hora's response to Vacek.

It is the nun to whom I referred at the beginning of the essay. I will present her more or less as I did in *A Common Humanity.*

In the early 1960s when I was 17 years old, I worked as a ward-assistant in a psychiatric hospital. Some of the patients had been there for over 30 years. The ward was an old Victorian building surrounded by a high iron fence. White gravel lay on all sides between the fence and the building. There was no grass. One or two scraggy trees provided mean shade. It reminded me of some of the enclosures at Melbourne zoo. When patients soiled themselves, as some often did, they were ordered to undress and to step under a shower. The distance of a mop handle from them, we then mopped them down as zookeepers wash down elephants.

The patients were judged to be incurable and they appeared to have irretrievably lost everything that gives meaning to their lives. They had no grounds for self-respect insofar as we connect that with self-esteem; or, none that could be based on qualities or achievements for which we could admire or congratulate them without condescension. Friends, wives, children and even parents, if they were alive, had long ceased to visit them. Often the psychiatrists and nurses treated them brutishly. Vacek, when he was living among his boulders, was recognizably leading one kind of human life. He did not bear the marks of the incurably afflicted, nor was he constantly and visibly in torment. It would be hard for anyone to say that the men in the hospital were living a life of any kind. They were not suffering an affliction that they could overcome with help and courage. No edifying stories of adversity defeated would come from that place.

A small number of psychiatrists did, however, work devotedly to improve their conditions. One of them, I remember, spoke, against all appearances, of the *inalienable dignity* of even such patients. I admired those psychiatrists enormously. Most of their colleagues believed that they were naive, even fools. Some of the nurses despised them with a vehemence that was astonishing.

One day a nun came to the ward. In her middle years, only her vivacity made an impression on me until she talked to the patients. Then everything in her demeanour towards them – the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, and the inflexions of her body – contrasted with and showed up the behaviour of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been. She thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this. I wondered at her, but not at anything about her except that her behaviour should have, so wondrously, this power of revelation. She showed up the psychiatrists, but if I were asked how, exactly, then I would not elaborate on defects in their character, their imagination or in what would ordinarily be called their moral sensibility.

Of course her behaviour did not come from nowhere. Virtues of character, imagination and sensibility, given content and form by the disciplines of her vocation, were essential to her becoming the kind of person she was. But in another person such virtues and the behaviour that expressed them would have been the focus of my admiring attention. I admired the psychiatrists for their many virtues – for their wisdom, their compassion, their courage, their capacity for self-sacrificing hard work and sometimes for more besides. In the nun's case, her behaviour was striking not for the virtues it expressed, or even for the good it achieved, but for its power to reveal the full humanity of those whose affliction had made their humanity invisible. Love is the name we give to such behaviour.

The nun almost certainly believed that the patients with whom she dealt were all God's children and equally loved by Him. I need not share such a belief, or find it plausible, even intelligible. My commitment to what the nun in the hospital revealed is not conditional upon my believing something like she believed. My thought is not that it would be rational to respond without condescension to those patients if it is also true that they were God's children. Nor do I wish to say that the wondrousness of her behaviour gives strong *prima facie* grounds for believing in God or for attributing metaphysical properties to the patients or any other properties that could be specified independently of her behaviour and provide rational grounds for it. As someone who was witness to the nun's love and claimed in fidelity to it, I have no understanding of what it revealed independently of the quality of her love. If I am asked what I mean when I say that even such people as were patients in that ward are fully our equals, I can only say that the quality of her love proved that they are rightly the objects of our non-condescending treatment. But in response to someone who demands that I justify my affirmation that they 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 it revealed. I have to say, for me, because one must speak personally about such matters. That, after all, is the nature of witness. From the point of view of speculative intelligence, however, I am going around in ever darkening circles, because I allow for no independent justification of her attitude. Nothing I can say will diminish the affront to reason that her behaviour represents. Nothing I can say can justify the idea that the deeply compassionate behaviour of the psychiatrists was shown up because it betrayed condescension towards people who appeared to have nothing seriously to live for, whose affliction had rendered them incapable of being counted as peers to any of the psychiatrist or nurses, let alone counted as their friends.

That more or less is how I first described my encounter with the nun. Now, I would say that I was foolish to say that her demeanour proved something to me – *something about those patients* – for that seems to be implicit in my claim that her love proved the reality it revealed. I said that because I had not fully escaped from the idea that I had to specify what it was about the patients that could, independently of metaphysical or religious commitment, render her behaviour right or even appropriate rather than merely explicable in the light of her beliefs. Had I said that the patients possessed, each of them, the property of inalienable dignity, a metaphysical property accessible to reason, then I would have given the kind of answer for which one part of me was still hankering. To say, however, that her behaviour proved to me the reality of what it revealed, but that I had to speak personally, is to give with one hand while taking with the other and to render the concept of a 'proof' vacuous.

Perhaps therefore, rather than saying that I am certain that her behaviour to those patients was right or was appropriate, I should simply say that I cannot doubt the wondrous goodness of it. Wittgenstein was right to say that in philosophy, one of the hardest things is to know when to stop. My affirmation is as firm and unreserved as it is rationally groundless. And as fragile as testimony is.

The difficulty I had in saying what the nun revealed should have alerted me to the fact that I ought not to have said that she revealed that the psychiatrists did not believe in their hearts what they had sincerely professed – namely, that the patients were fully their equals.

Characteristically, when we say that a person knows something in her head but not in her heart, we have no difficulty in specifying what she believes only in her head. Young people, we often say, know in their heads but not in their hearts that they are mortal. Or, to take another example: we all know in our heads that at any moment misfortune could deprive us of everything that gives sense to our lives, leaving us as severely afflicted as the patients in that hospital were, or worse. It is true that when we do come to say what we think we now know in our hearts, we often find it hard to find the right words. Even so, it is fundamental to cases of this kind that we are able to say that, for example, until we were such and such an age we did not know in our hearts what it is to be mortal. Simone Weil, it is true, says that compassion for the afflicted is a miracle because we can acknowledge their condition, see it for what it is, only when we are able to know fully (in one's heart) that at any moment we can also be in that condition. But such knowledge alone cannot, I think, take us further than the calm pity tragedy shows for the affliction it depicts, which is, of course, a long way indeed. My father understood our vulnerability to affliction in this way. Weil does number some Greek tragedies among the handful of works in Western culture that have (miraculously) been truthful to the reality of affliction, but she also takes them to be intimations of Christianity. It is therefore natural to read her as saying that knowing in one's heart that one is radically vulnerable to misfortune is a necessary, but not a sufficient, condition of acknowledging that even those who are utterly wretched and despised are sacred.

*

Recall that one of the psychiatrists spoke of the inalienable dignity of the patients in his care. The dignity to which such ways of speaking refer is not the dignity people seek to retain when they ask to die with dignity, spared the humiliations that attend some illnesses. That dignity is alienable because it depends essentially upon a person's demeanour in the face of suffering. The connection between dignity and a person's demeanour can, of course, carry over to situations in which a person no longer has a demeanour, when he is dead or in a coma, for example, and in which we are concerned that nothing should be done that would in the ordinary circumstances of living constitute a humiliation for him. It is not always that way, of course. It is one thing to be careful to cover a person's genitals when he is washed, though he is in a coma, or even when he is dead. It is another to condemn people who dance on the corpses of slain enemy soldiers. We will strike the wrong tone if we try to capture the revulsion that the second case provokes by appeal to the concept of a dignity that preserves its ties to dignity that is essentially alienable. So at any rate it seems to my ear. For that reason, people often speak of a dignity that is inherit in every human being, or of inalienable dignity, to which we owe, not esteem, but respect that is unconditional.

Talk of inalienable dignity, but more often of 'inherent dignity' has played an important part in Judeo-Christian, especially Catholic, thought. The role it plays varies, but I think it is true to say that the idea generally is that all human beings possess inherent dignity because, as Pope Benedict put it in a Message for the Celebration of World Peace Day, 'as one created in the image of God, each individual human being has the dignity of a person'. Often the idea is that because human beings or persons possess inherent dignity on account of their relation to God, they constitute a distinctive kind of limit to the will of others and, very importantly, to themselves.

The conceptual structure of the point becomes clearer if we think about the claim that all human beings are sacred. Someone who believe this will think that it plays an indispensable role in forming his sense of the terribleness – the kind of terribleness – of the evils that are done to human beings, including of course those evils that alienate them from their alienable dignity. It is far from clear, however, why people so often think that the concept of dignity should always appear when we elaborate on what someone has done when he has seriously wronged someone. 'How could you do this? Did you not understand, could you not see, what you were doing?' The incredulity that such tones express relies on the thought that the wrongdoer did not see his victim as a limit to his will, of the kind we mark when we say that this or that is morally impossible. But, if as seems plausible, that modality is interdependent with a full elaboration of what he has done, and so of what his victim has suffered, then it is by no means obvious that dignity should figure saliently, or at all, in that elaboration. Sometimes it will, sometimes it will not. It may not do so even when the idea of violation is the first to come to mind when we are struck by serious wrongdoing, not even when we are inclined to speak of an ultimate violation, as we are when we try to express the evil done to victims of torture. Indeed, paradoxical though it might at first seem, it is often (not always) in just those cases where we are tempted to speak of an ultimate violation, that reflection will reveal that what has been violated is something precious, and precious in a way that the concept of dignity is too shallow to reach. That, I think, is the case when people say that the foetus possesses dignity from the moment of conception. It seems like a parody of a mother's tender love for what she is carrying when she is pregnant – a love that might reveal to an observer that she carries something precious – to say that it is informed by her sense of the dignity of her unborn child.

The patients in the hospital had lost much of their alienable dignity. But that is exactly why the expression 'inalienable dignity', as it was used by one of the psychiatrists in the hospital, can appear to work so powerfully to tell us how we should behave towards them. Like the expression 'unconditional respect', it seems, as I remarked earlier, to break yet to retain its essential connection with esteem. Though it is often invoked when a person has lost or is threatened with the loss of all visible dignity, it seems to keep that person in the same conceptual and moral space as the concept that marks what he has lost – for it is, as I said, an expression in the key of the noble, of the heroic. That being so, it is easy to see why it is often deployed in discussion of radical affliction, either when it has natural causes or when it is the result of oppression.

As a student, it was the expression 'inalienable dignity', as used by one of the psychiatrists, that impressed me, but it is striking, I now realize, that I did not use it to characterize what I took the nun to have revealed. In the preface to *A Common Humanity* I say that the nun's behaviour gave living meaning to words I had heard often enough, but which I had thought could never refer to anything real – 'goodness' – of a kind that invites a capital G, 'love', 'beauty' and 'purity'. Instinctively, but not at all clearly, when I wrote about the nun, I realized that to say that the nun had revealed their inalienable dignity was to speak in the wrong key – to oversimplify a little, it would have made her seem like a Kantian heroine, a doer of such superlatively supererogatory deeds that even the psychiatrists seemed like mere foot soldiers in service to her noble cause.

The mainstream of the philosophical tradition brings saints and heroes together, interchangeably indeed for the most part, under the concept of a supererogatory act. But the deeds of saints should be characterized in the light of a conception of the ethical that has goodness rather than nobility as its focal concept. My point, as it was when I discussed my father, is not that a conception of value that has goodness, rather than, say, nobility, as its focus is unable to appreciate the heroic. It is that within that conception what we make of the heroic, the noble, the honourable, the value of autonomy and so on, is transformed by the light that saintly deeds have cast on what it means to be a human being.

I have called these expressions like 'inherent dignity', 'inalienable dignity', the 'unconditional respect' that is owed to it, or to people as 'ends in themselves' – terms of the middle ground, or, for short, middle terms. On the one side are ways of speaking which are steeped in a sense of the importance of our humanity to our moral and political thought, and of different forms of human fellowship – as when we speak of a common humanity, or say that to do such and such would be to treat someone as less than fully human, as when we speak of the human family, or when, in political contexts, we speak of brotherhood or sisterhood and so on. These are ways of speaking whose resonances and tones derive from the riches of a natural language and the art made possible by it, language shaped by and shaping the lives of peoples. Their use and reflection on their use is necessarily in media res, because they are in the realm of meaning. The middle terms mingle well with ways of speaking that draw more obviously on the importance of the concept of the human to our moral thought, as will be evident to anyone who has read the preambles to the Declaration of Human Rights and other instruments of international law like the Convention on

Torture. But not only do they mingle well. There is reason to think that the fact that they mingle so well is a significant part of the reason why they have acquired their undeniable power.

On the other side of the middle terms are the expression that aspire to their philosophical elaboration, elaboration intended to make their real content, and therefore the proper basis of their authority, perspicuous to reason. In the Kantian tradition the elaborations refer to rational agency and the kind of respect that is owed to it. That tradition looks with suspicion, if not actual hostility, on the power the middle terms have achieved on account of their engagement with ways of speaking that express and celebrate human fellowship. From the perspective of that tradition, that power looks like rhetorical power in the pejorative sense of that phrase. Deep though that thought goes in philosophy, it misrepresents things. Our use of the expressions in our natural language from which, I believe, the middle terms gain their power, is subject to the discipline achieved by the application of a range of concepts that tell us, in the realm of meaning, when we can trust the ways we are moved by them. They are the concepts that define thought in the realm of meaning.

Alan Donagan says, in his interesting book *The Theory of Morality* (1977), that Kant's most famous formulation of the Categorical Imperative – that one should never treat persons merely as means to our ends, but always as ends in themselves – is an attempt to render perspicuous to reason the basis of the biblical injunction to love one's neighbour. Donagan argues that the philosophically correct form of the imperative requires that we treat every human being, oneself included, with the respect owed to a rational creature. It is a profound question whether Kant succeeded or was even on the right track, or whether, as I have suggested – in this essay and in much of my work – that this great philosopher got things quite backwards. Perhaps it is the biblical injunction, stories and parables that enable us to make sense of the idea of a person as an end in herself. Indeed, I think it is so. Or at least that it is so in contexts where the word neighbour carries resonances that derive from the belief that all human beings are sacred, insofar as that belief has been nourished by the works of saintly love.

Earlier I drew attention to the importance of the concept of the human to our moral and political thought, as that shows itself in, for example, the Declaration of Human Rights and other instruments of international law like the Convention on Torture. The moral work done by appeal to the concept of humanity (as when I said that the nun saw the patients as fully human) will often be different according to whether it is essentially connected with Kantian notions of respect or with a compassionate responsiveness to the sacred, to the inalienable preciousness of every human being, according to whether, indeed, it is embedded in one or the other of the two conceptions of the ethical that I sketched earlier.

The works of saintly love, I claimed, have, historically, created a language of love that yields to us a sense of what those works reveal in any individual instance, in, for example, the demeanour of the nun towards the patients in the hospital. But because the power of Kantian rhetoric is characteristically in an heroic key, it belongs more properly to the first of the conceptions of value that I sketched earlier – the one that I claimed does not have the conceptual resources to keep among us, fully among us, people who are degraded by radical affliction. Yet that is exactly what that noble psychiatrist who spoke of the inalienable dignity of even those patients tried to do: instinctively he found the phrase that, if Donagan is right, was designed to render perspicuous to reason what saintly love revealed but also distorted. He and his colleagues were conceptually estranged from – and perhaps, as the secular humanists that I know some of them were, actually hostile to – the language of saintly love in whose absence, I believe, we would never have had so much as even the idea that people who are degraded, who suffer severe and ineradicable affliction, might intelligibly be the recipients of anything more than a benign, but condescending, compassion.

I have acknowledged a number of times that to say that all human beings are sacred is better, often less embarrassing, than saying that they are inalienably precious. It may also be revealing how often in this essay I have appealed to the word when illustrating a point. It can apply to the severely afflicted as the nun revealed them to be and also to Adolf Eichmann and Saddam Hussein. But note that I said, 'to the patients as the nun revealed them to be'. Is there something like that to be said about how people like Eichmann and Hussein have been revealed to be? Someone who finds unsatisfactory, for reasons I have discussed, the Kantian answer that reason revealed them to be owed unconditional respect, may believe that we have only the reply that, historically, the love of saints has revealed even such people to be as the nun revealed the patients to be. But the affirmation that those patients were inalienably precious is, I believe, internal to her sense that they are God's children and therefore (or perhaps, in that way) sacred. If that is so, it cannot be detached from an account of what she revealed them to be. That is why I say in the preface to the second edition of *Good and Evil*: 'It is clear, I think, why one turns naturally to Kantian idioms when one speaks of what is owed to Eichmann – when one says that even he is owed unconditional respect, for example. It sounds grotesque to say that Eichmann is infinitely precious (though a saint might say just that)' (Gaita, 2004, p. iv). And in *A Common Humanity*, I say that though Kant is right to insist that we have obligations to those whom we do not, and perhaps could not, love, it does not follow that we would find them to be the intelligible objects of even the kind of obligation he speaks of if we did not see them as the intelligible objects of someone's love (2000, p. 26). In the case of radical and unrepentant evildoers that is the love of saints. In the more ordinary, and in the saintly, cases, we have tried to render the works – especially the constitutive works – of love more tractable to reason and more congenial to the first of the two ethical perspectives, in part, as I shall suggest, because we are fearful of, and sometimes find distasteful, the otherworldly implications of an ethics of renunciation.

*

In the preface to the second edition of *Good and Evil*, I discuss a question put to me by Stanley Hauerwas. Stephen Mulhall has argued, rightly, I think, that I perversely misunderstood Hauerwas's question as a demand for a rational justification for what the nun had revealed, rather than as an invitation to look more attentively to the language of love as it exists in the religious life of people like the nun, actually to be patiently attentive to that language, as I had said one should be (Mulhall, 2011). Hauerwas has responded to my discussion of the nun and the question I put to him. I shall quote him at length because he elaborates on the question and, in doing so, writes in the language to which he had invited me to attend.

> Gaita acknowledges that religious traditions have spoken most simply and deeply about such a view by declaring all human beings sacred. But he contends that the language of love nourished by the love of saints can stand independently of speculation about supernatural entities. What grew in one place can flourish elsewhere. He reports, however, that there is one question put to him by a theologian whose answer he is not sure of. The theologian asked him whether the kind of love shown by the nun could exist in the prolonged absence of the kind of practices that were part of her religious vocation. In response Gaita says:
>
> 'Iris Murdoch said that attention to something absolutely pure is the essence of prayer and is a form of love. If she is right, then the answer to Hauerwas' question will depend on whether with the demise of religion, we can find objects of attention that can sustain that love, or whether they will always fail us. I don't know the answer.'
>
> Nor do I know the answer. I certainly have no reason to suggest that Gaita's account of goodness as non-condescending love is unintelligible if God does not exist. But then the question has never been about God's existence – but ours. Gaita is quite right to think that if Mother Teresa and

> the nun he encountered at seventeen did not exist we quite literally would be less human. They did exist, however, and it at least makes sense to ask if and how they and the goodness they reveal makes sense if the God they worship does not exist.
>
> That may well be a far too abstract way to put the question. For the God they worship is not some abstraction but rather a reality known though participation in a community across time and space. What I suspect Gaita misses is the role that friendship plays in lives like that of Mother Teresa and the nun he so admires. In particular, Mother Teresa and the nun Gaita admired were not afraid to be befriended by those they served. To suggest why friendship is so important for the development of such goodness I want to introduce another life that exhibits the kind of love Gaita thinks so defining of goodness. The name of that life is Jean Vanier.
>
> Jean Vanier is the founder of the movement known as L'Arche . . . in which people who are called mentally handicapped live with those who are not. L'Arche home is first and foremost just that, a home. The core members of the home are the mentally handicapped. Those who are not mentally handicapped are called assistants. Assistants do not live in the home to care for the mentally handicapped. Rather they are there to learn to be with the core members in the hope that they can learn to be friends.
>
> The wonder Gaita suggests Mother Teresa should elicit in us is not to be directed at her but rather is the wonder that human life could be as her love reveals it. Jean Vanier would not wish that we wonder or react with awe in response to his life. Any wonder would rightly be in response to the humanity revealed through those who have befriended him. He and his friends reveal our humanity, a goodness, that we could not have known possible without their showing.
>
> Jesus did not answer the young man's question concerning what deed he must do to inherit eternal life. Instead he commanded him to sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and follow him. To learn to follow Jesus is the training necessary to become a human being. To be a human being is not a natural condition, but requires training. The kind of training required, moreover, has everything to do with death. To follow Jesus is to go with him to Jerusalem where he will be crucified. To follow Jesus, therefore, is to undergo a training that refuses to let death, even death at the hands of enemies, determine the shape of our living.
>
> To learn to live without protection is to learn to live without possessions. To be dispossessed, however, cannot be willed. To try to be dispossessed is to be possessed by the will to be dispossessed. Rather, as Jean Vanier's life reveals, to be dispossessed comes by being made a friend of those who have no possessions. They have had to learn to live without possessions. Jean Vanier had to learn from them how to live without the protections we think possessions provide. (Hauerwas, 2010)

I hope that it will now be clear why I began my discussion with the example of my father. He was, as I said, not a saint, but he befriended Vacek. No doubt that is the fuller reason why, as a boy, I accepted Vacek so readily and in such a way that I was able to say sincerely and spontaneously to the person who interviewed me that Vacek had not seemed weird to me. Now, having read Hauerwas, I am sure that his capacity to do that was inseparable from the role that the ethic of renunciation played in his life. It showed in his preparedness to suffer the humiliations of his compatriots who thought his compassion towards my mother and Mitru was shameful because it was unmanly. It was possible for him, I think, only because he was the kind of man who could respond as he did to Vacek, which was, in turn, possible only because he was prepared to suffer the humiliations that he did. In what I hope is not an intrusively didactic moment in *Romulus, My Father*, I say: ‘I have never known anybody who lived so passionately as did these two friends (my father and Hora) the belief that nothing matters so much in life as to live it decently. Nor have I known anyone so resistant and contemptuous of the external signs of status and prestige’ (Gaita, 1998).

Though I have here and elsewhere emphasized that the ethic that made possible my father’s response to Vacek is an ethic of renunciation, until I read Hauerwas’s writing on Varnier, I did not realize how different that ethic is even from its Socratic form when it is transformed by lives like Varnier’s and by the language that developed from such lives – the language of saintly love. In *Good and Evil* I marked the kind of gap that exists between the limits to which a non-reductionist humanism (non-reductionist versions of the first ethical conception) can go towards valuing compassion for the afflicted, and the love shown to the afflicted by someone like the nun, by calling the latter an expression of ‘ethical-otherworldliness’. In the preface to the second edition I retreated from that expression. Mulhall says that was a mistake. He is right.

*

When *Romulus, My Father* was first published I read from it at a refuge for homeless people, reluctantly for I was aware that they came there for lunch, not for literature. At one stage a man, obviously mentally ill, called for me to stop. He raised his head, which he had held in his hands, and exclaimed ‘God is in this book!’ I remembered the times when, as a student, I worked in mental hospitals, and was anxious about what he would do next. ‘I mean’, he explained, ‘that it’s filled with love’.

On that same day, five or six girls, prostitutes in the area, not one of them yet 20, asked me to read, again and again, about my mother. I read to them passages I had not read before or have since in public because it pains me to do so. In my mother’s troubled life they saw something of their own and, I think, they saw her suffering, and what she shared with them, in the light of the love that the man who spoke before them said filled the book. I am certain they would not repeatedly have asked me to read about my mother if they had detected in my portrayal of her what one critic called 'a morally bankrupt woman'. The spiritual hunger that showed in their recognition that my mother was, like them, a deeply troubled soul, and the tribute by a man destitute of all worldly goods and achievements, bereft of all status and quite mad, moved and gratified me more than all the accolades the book and the film have received.

Note

1. See Mulhall, 2011.

Bibliography

Donagan, A. (1977), *The Theory of Morality*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Gaita, R. (1998), *Romulus, My Father*. Melbourne: Text Publishing.

Gaita, R. (2000), *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice*. London: Routledge.

Gaita, R. (2004), *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (second edn). London: Routledge.

Hauerwas, S. (2011), 'God and goodness: A theological exploration', in R. Grant (ed.), *In Search of Goodness*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Mulhall, S. (2011), 'The work of saintly love: The religious impulse in Gaita's writing', in C. Cordner (ed.), *Philosophy, Ethics and A Common Humanity: Essays in Honour of Raimond Gaita*. London: Routledge.

Weil, S. (1977), *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. G. A. Panichas. New York: David McKay.