

# Raimond Gaita's Nun and Unconditional Love

Christopher Cordner

Ccordner[at]unimelb.edu.au

## **Abstract**

Raimond Gaita's witness of a nun engaging with patients in the psychiatric hospital where he worked as a student indelibly marked both his life and his philosophising. What he witnessed helped shape for him a conception of "absolute" value, linked to the power of love, which has animated nearly everything he has written in moral philosophy. Much in this conception I find compelling. But I also find some of the ways Gaita has undertaken to articulate the significance of his witness of the nun elusive and/or puzzling. In a spirit of critical collaboration, I revisit some of what Gaita says on that score. By slightly shifting the light at various points, I hope to let some aspects of the scene Gaita depicts show themselves a little differently. At the end I touch briefly on a difference that taking Gaita seriously arguably makes to the way one does moral philosophy.

## **1. Introduction**

Readers of Raimond Gaita's work will recall the nun he speaks of who visited patients in the psychiatric hospital where Gaita worked while a university student in the 1960s. Gaita says of the patients:

[They] were judged to be incurable and they appeared to have lost everything which gives meaning to our lives. They had no grounds for self-respect insofar as we connect that with self-esteem; or, none which 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 they were treated brutally by the psychiatrists and nurses. A small number of psychiatrists did, however, work devotedly to improve their condition. They spoke, against all appearances, of the inalienable *dignity* of even those patients. (1999: 17–18)

Gaita then speaks of the nun:

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, 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. (1999: 18–19)

Gaita recognises this episode as central to his philosophical work, as well as very important in his own life. A key theme of his ethical reflections is trying to “understand why ‘goodness’ (of a kind that invites a capital ‘G’), ‘love’ and ‘purity’ are words that seem to be indispensable to any attempt to characterise her demeanour”<sup>1</sup> (2004: xiii). I find Gaita’s recounting of his witness of the nun powerful and illuminating. I am also much taken by what Gaita suggests about the difference it makes to the way one “does” moral philosophy if one finds the episode to have that character; and at the end I will come back to that point. My initial aim, though, is to raise some questions about some of the terms in which Gaita represents the power of the episode. I find some of those terms either elusive or puzzling, in ways that I think at least risk getting in the way of fully recognising the episode’s import in his thinking.

I don’t mean to suggest that Gaita is blind to the sorts of questions I will raise. He does engage with them, but sometimes in ways that leave me, at least, with more to ask.

I should also say that my reflections will have little interest for you if you find the episode of the nun weak or somehow insubstantial. I am speaking to – or perhaps with – those who do not find it so.

One thing I find puzzling is the *range* of terms Gaita uses in speaking to his witness of the nun. Here are some of the things he says:

---

<sup>1</sup> In this connection, Lars Hertzberg says that “we need not assume that the nun never, say, showed anger or frustration with the patients”. Perhaps, indeed, her attitude towards them showed in part in her readiness to be “open about her feelings in a way the others were not” (2011: 9–10). While I do not talk about Lars in this essay, I think my discussion is very much in the spirit of his philosophising, and influenced by it too. His thinking takes place on the “rough ground” Wittgenstein urged philosophers to get back to, and in doing so it re-enlivens us to a richness and depth in whatever Lars is discussing that philosophy too often misses and sometimes even actively suppresses.

The wonder of the nun's behaviour [...] revealed [that] [...] even people like those patients, who appeared to have lost everything that gives sense to our lives, are fully our equals. (2004: xiii)

her behaviour [...] reveal[ed] the full humanity of those whose affliction had made their humanity invisible. (1999: 20)

the quality of her love proved that [those patients] are rightly the objects of our non-condescending treatment, that we should do all in our power to respond in that way. (1999: 21)

The wonder of the nun's behaviour [...] revealed what a human life could mean. (2004: xiii).

On the face of it, those four descriptions of what the nun's behaviour proved or revealed are rather different. Of course that need be no criticism, for each may be playing some distinctive role in what Gaita took to be the import of her behaviour. But Gaita says little to distinguish the contribution of each way of speaking, or to clarify the relations between them. Perhaps more needs to be said along those lines if we are to get as clear as possible about what Gaita found revealed by the nun's behaviour.

In the first half of what follows (Section 2) I'll reflect critically (but I hope constructively) on some of Gaita's descriptions of what he found revealed by the nun's engagement with those patients. In the second half (Section 3 and Conclusion) I'll branch out a little in engaging further with Gaita's themes.

## **2. The patients as “fully our equals”?**

In both of his books from which I have quoted, Gaita invokes the concept of equality. In *Good and Evil* he says that the “wonder” of the nun's behaviour is that it revealed to him that those patients “are fully our equals”. Who comes under his phrase ““our’ equals””? Well, the full sentence was: “Even people like those patients, who appear to have lost everything that gives sense to our lives, are fully our equals.” I take it that Gaita's pronoun “our” denotes *us*, who evidently *are* participants in those things that “give sense to our lives”,<sup>2</sup> by contrast with *the patients*, who “appear to have lost everything that gives sense to our lives”. The patients are then, despite that difference, revealed to be “fully the equals” of “us”.

---

<sup>2</sup> I'll come back to just what these “things” are.

I doubt such talk of equality is the best way to put what Gaita was trying to get at. Indeed Gaita himself drew back from it. He does not say much about *why* he did so, but it is worth noting, as Lars Hertzberg does (2011: 9), that *the nun* does not seem to think in terms of the patients' equality with her or with "us" (if indeed she "thinks" in any terms at all). That is not because she sees them as *unequal* with her. Rather, the language of equality just seems out of place in speaking to how she relates to the patients. Of course even if that is so, it doesn't by itself show that talk of equality fails to catch *Gaita's* experience of the nun's interaction with the patients. But still I think it *does* fail to do that.

Why so? Such talk seems to imply that Gaita starts and ends with a settled sense of "our" value – a shared value which marks out "our" equality with one another – and then his witness of the nun (unexpectedly) reveals those patients as *measuring up* to that standard, and so as also being our equals.

But that does not seem to have been how things actually went. For one thing, his awareness of the nun's behaviour towards the patients does not seem to have prompted Gaita into *comparing* or *measuring* the patients against himself or "us" at all. If it had been like that, then the only change would have been in where he located the patients in relation to "us" as the fixed measure of comparison: they would have shifted from being not recognised to share "our" value, to being recognised as our equals in value. But it is clear enough that for him it *wasn't* like that. He speaks for instance of his witness of the nun as "for me [...] the most *transforming* encounter" (2004: xiii) with goodness. It is an encounter he finds transforming *of him* – of, one might say, *his deepest sense of himself*.<sup>3</sup> In that case there is not an unchanged sense of himself (or of "us") throughout the encounter for his sense of the patients then to be compared with. Gaita's talk of the patients' revealed equality with him and us I think obscures this very important point.

A related thought is that Gaita does not come to *form a different judgment* about the patients. One might instead speak of Gaita finding himself *newly placed by* what he witnesses. That comes much closer to allowing for the transforming of him by what he witnesses, than does talk of him making a judgment on the basis of it.

There is a second closely-related reason why his talk of equality seems awry here. When Gaita says that those patients "appear" to have lost everything that

---

<sup>3</sup> His deepest "sense of himself" might not be the right phrase, but I don't know how else to put the point.

gives sense to our lives, I don't think he means that despite how things appear, in reality they *haven't* lost all those things. To be sure, he is not flatly asserting that they *have* lost all those things either. He means, I think, that to him encountering them nothing at all of that is visible; and it is indeed perfectly possible they have "lost" it all. He doesn't mean, either, that the effect of the nun's treatment of them was to once again make those things visible in the patients. On the contrary, what was extraordinary to him was the revelatory power of the nun's treatment of the patients *despite* them appearing not to have any of what "gives sense to our lives" – and even if the patients were exactly as they "appeared" to be in that respect. But how could that be? Indeed, what could it even *mean* to say that? Let us see.<sup>4</sup>

Back again to that sentence of Gaita's: "Even people like those patients, *who appear to have lost everything that gives sense to our lives*, are fully our equals". It carries a suggestion that *our* already-established equality with one another is recognised against a background of our *having* those things which "give sense to our lives". Gaita does not specify those things, but he seems to have in mind such things as our capacities for work and play; for "flourishing" (and also for wilting) in everyday ways; for friendship (and also for enmity), as well as for any number of other "meaningful" relations with others; for "making our way" in the world, where this will involve both "success" and "failure" there; for enjoying and arguing and laughing and crying and loving and hating and grieving and delighting. Included too, therefore, is what Kant intends under the concept of our "unsocial sociability" – our "not at all amiable" competitiveness with others without which "all the excellent natural predispositions in humanity would eternally slumber undeveloped" (Kant 2013: 111–112). It also includes what Strawson (1962) meant by our "reactive attitudes" to one another: our resentment and gratitude, our recognition of the possibility of holding others to account and of being held to account by them. Gaita's suggestion seems to be that "our" sense of "our" equality with one another is backgrounded by our participation in *all of that*, and much more. We

---

<sup>4</sup> The patients Gaita speaks of may well have included not only those who, because of devastating life-experience or mental illness had *lost* a capacity they once had for participation in those things which give sense to our lives, but also those who, because for example they were born severely "retarded", never had such a capacity, or only a very limited one. At that time institutions like the one Gaita was working at did often accommodate people of both these "groups". Gaita doesn't seem to distinguish the two "groups". There might well sometimes be reason to distinguish them in this territory of discussion. But I do not see the need to do so here, and I am going to follow Gaita in not doing so.

are “equal” with one another as participants in all of that: not equal in *how well we do* when we so participate, but in so much as being participant therein. And *then*, against *that* background, Gaita's witness of the nun compels him to recognition of the patients' complete equality with him and “us”. But if those patients may well *lack* those things that “give sense to our lives”, then what binds them as equal with us *cannot* be sustained by “our” already-established sense of equality with one another. For that sense of our equal worth with one another was mediated through “what gives sense to our lives”; and nothing of that, says Gaita, is visible in many of those patients.

We can press the point further. Gaita's witness of the nun actually *displaces* his pre-existing sense of “our” equality with one another from the scene. Not only are the patients not (so-to-speak) “elevated” in worth “up to” the level of our equality-with-one-another. If there *is* any “assimilation” here, it would seem to be in something closer to the reverse direction: a matter of his pre-existing sense of our equality with one another – his sense of what *that* equality involves – being transformed by his new sense of those patients.<sup>5</sup> This formulation brings us back once again to talk of his witness of the nun as an encounter that was transforming of *him*, something that his talk of recognising the patients' equality with him (and us) does not seem to engage with.

Here is another of the passages I quoted from Gaita (1999: 20) at the outset: “[the nun's] behaviour [...] reveal[ed] the full humanity of those whose affliction had made their humanity invisible.” The “full humanity” of the patients is said to be revealed by the nun's love, despite their inability to participate in all those “things that give our lives sense”. This prompts a question akin to the one I asked about Gaita's talk of the patients revealed “equality” with us: why should revelation of *the patients'* full humanity, however remarkable that revelation is, be transformative of *Gaita*, of *his sense of himself*? The natural suggestion, surely, of the sentence I just quoted is that he and we were *already* aware of “the full humanity” of one another; and that his witness of the nun then enabled him to recognise the full humanity of those patients *as well*. As if: what he witnessed led him to “let in” additional “instances” of “full humanity”. But once again, that way of putting things does not answer to how Gaita found his witness of the nun to be transforming of *him*. His recognition of the patients' full humanity will be transforming of him only so

---

<sup>5</sup> Perhaps this point *can* still “formally” be put in terms of “revealed equality” – I'm not sure. But even if it can, I think that formulation is less illuminating than the way I now go on to speak.

far as it is a transforming revelation of “his” and “our” full humanity too – of what *that is* – in the light of how the patients are revealed to him. So if their “full humanity” is revealed to him as not dependent on their capacity for participation in all those “things that give sense to our lives”, since none of that is visible in them, then an element of what is transforming *of him* is the revelation of *his and our full humanity too* as not dependent on *our* capacity for participation in those things. His witness of the nun enlivened in him an utterly different sense of – as he also puts it in one of the other passages I quoted – “what a human life could mean”. And now the *generality* of that phrase “a human life” is crucial. An utterly different sense not just of the “life” of each of those patients – but of *any* human life, including his and “ours”.

*There* is the “transforming” dimension of the encounter for Gaita. We have come to it once again *via* words of Gaita’s, but only by partly working against the grain of his own ways of using them.

Perhaps the formulation of Gaita’s that best catches the import of his witness of the nun is this one:

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, that we should do all in our power to respond in that way. (21)

If this is better, that would seem to be (in part anyway) because it expressly concerns our *mode of relating* to these others, by contrast with speaking of a conclusion drawn from an act of measuring or judging them in relation to “us”.<sup>6</sup> In this connection I think it is important that crucial to Gaita’s witness of the nun is his sense of her *bodily-inflected presence* to the patients: “everything in her demeanour towards them – the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body”.

This way of speaking points towards a turning-around in “the direction of movement” of the responding spirit. Talk of recognizing “equality”, as I said, suggests that the other is so to speak let into my (our) circle, as now “one of us”. That movement of thinking – though “thinking” is an inadequate word –

---

<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the word “proved” in the passage I just quoted still tilts in a misleading direction – as if Gaita finds himself where he does *via* the drawing of a “theoretical” conclusion. Of course “prove” and “proof” are used more widely than that: someone’s response to danger can prove her courage, and “the proof of the pudding is in the eating”. But still, speaking of what the quality of her love “revealed” to him might better have avoided misunderstanding. (But see also note 7 below.)

is centripetal, with me/us at the centre and others then coming in to join us. By contrast, so far as he finds himself moved to do all he can to “*respond* in that way” – where “that way” is the nun’s way – the movement is *centrifugal*, *away* from him into the possible modes of his own embodied (including tender and gentle) *responses* to these and others like them. Perhaps we are back again at the difference, mentioned earlier, between on the one hand trying to elicit the import of his witness of the nun in terms of making a judgment on the basis of it; and on the other hand finding himself placed by what he witnesses, and having to *answer to it* anew, in a way that realises, enacts, a very different “sense” of himself.<sup>7</sup>

Of course before Gaita witnessed the nun he had, along with some of the psychiatrists at the hospital, insisted on the inalienable dignity of the patients despite their terrible circumstances. That might suggest that he already held to *some* idea of the patients’ worth as not fixed simply by their capacity to participate in those things that “give sense to our lives”. But his subsequent response to the nun shows that his earlier insistence reflected a more-or-less intellectual attachment to an *idea*, not a *living sense* of those others such as the nun enlivened in him.

I have pointed to what strike me as limitations in some of the ways Gaita speaks to his witness of the nun. My aim has been to get clearer about just what (I believe) Gaita himself is trying to get at. Any way of summarising what that is will have its own limitations, but here is one way: what Gaita wonders at is the nun’s “proving” (“revealing”? – see note 6 above) to him that the deepest value of any human being is not dependent on his or her capacity for more-or-less-successful participation in those “things which give our life sense”. This value might be described as absolute or unconditional.

In the next section I want to speak to some aspects of the status, so it might be called, of that conviction of Gaita’s, as I do not always find Gaita’s own “take” on that status fully compelling.

---

<sup>7</sup> The second alternative in that sentence shows a limitation even in talk of the patients being “revealed” anew to Gaita. It still risks representing him as unduly inert in what “happens”. For a *re-orienting of him* in *responding* to the patients is a constituting condition of the revelation.



### 3. The “status”<sup>8</sup> of the nun’s love and what it revealed

My starting point here is provided by a connection Gaita himself makes between the love shown by the nun, and maternal love (at first he calls it “parental” love). He says that “sometimes parental love has powers of disclosure similar to the nun’s love.” (1999: 24) But he goes on to say that parental love’s power of such disclosure

depends [...] 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 love 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. (1999: 24)

To engage as I want to with this passage I first need to take quite a detour.

Erich Fromm said that a child experiencing what Fromm called “mother’s love” finds itself loved “because I am”. (1962: 34) To be the object of father’s love, by contrast, is to be loved because one has “fulfilled [...] specific conditions, or lived up to [...] specific expectations” (1962: 34), to be loved because “of one’s merit, because one deserves it” (35). Fromm did not think that only mothers could show mother’s love, nor that all mothers did so. For him the terms “mother’s love” and “father’s love” marked out different kinds or modes of loving, which can then be “received” differently by the children on whom they light.<sup>9</sup> The child experiencing mother’s love has a sense of being loved not because of “this” or “that” or anything *about* him or her, but simply “because I am”. Of course Fromm’s child will as a matter of fact usually have those capacities and “properties” which enable its progressively greater participation in those “things which give our lives sense”. And from that participation will come the fulfilled conditions and satisfied expectations that mediate father’s love to the child. The child’s sense of receiving mother’s love is, Fromm says, of being loved in a way that does not depend on its having any of that.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> I am uneasy about the word “status” here but I cannot think of a better one.

<sup>9</sup> Fromm does also think, though, that the different kinds of loving are characteristically “represented in the motherly and fatherly person” respectively (35). Here I leave open the question to what extent that gender difference in “representation” might be a function of cultural factors.

<sup>10</sup> Naturally enough for his time, Fromm refers to the child as “he” – as for simplicity’s sake I also sometimes will below –but the context makes it quite clear that Fromm’s point is not a gendered one.

My suggestion is that the reality of the love Fromm describes the child as experiencing seems to be very much the same as that of the love shown by the nun. Just as the child finds himself loved “because I am” and not because he has these or those properties or qualities or achievements, so the nun’s love, as not dependent on those patients’ capacity for participation in “those things that give our lives sense” can be regarded as love for them “because they are”. It is important to note that saying this does not in any way reduce the remarkableness of such love – whether the nun’s love or mother’s love – or of the beloved’s “sense” of it.

Rowan Williams speaks, in similar vein, of love as “delighting in *the simple actuality* of another” (2006: 151 [italics mine]). This is not love understood as “delighting” in another because of – or “on the basis of” or “in virtue of”<sup>11</sup> – the other’s possessing these or those capacities or properties. Delighting in his or her “simple actuality” is delighting, so one might put it, in his or her simply *being*.<sup>12</sup> Williams’ remark about love says much what Fromm says about mother’s love, though Williams’ remark is from the perspective of the loving, while Fromm’s is from the perspective of the one loved.

There is another shift in context, with Gaita and the nun. Gaita’s theme is not *the patients’* experience of the nun’s love – which would parallel the child’s experience of mother’s love – but the meaning of his (Gaita’s) *witness of* the nun. I am suggesting then that in experiencing being loved simply “because I am”, Fromm’s child experiences *being* loved in just the way Gaita witnesses the nun as lovingly engaging with those patients:<sup>13</sup> in a way, namely, that *does not depend at all* on the child’s, or those patients’, participation in those things that “give our life sense”.

Would Gaita agree? Perhaps the answer depends a bit on just how the “link” between Fromm and Gaita’s witness of the nun is teased out. I want to press what I have said on that score a bit further.

---

<sup>11</sup> Here I touch again on a vast philosophical literature on love that has, in my view, often got bogged down in these and related forms of words.

<sup>12</sup> It is of course important that love involves, here as anywhere, a readiness to answer “practically” to the actual needs of the one(s) loved. That readiness is just not my main concern here.

<sup>13</sup> Fromm’s different focus, on how the child experiences being loved, does leave space for a question that seems to have no parallel in the context of Gaita’s discussion: Can the child who takes himself to be loved “because I am” be mistaken about that? I think so, but I also think the question is more difficult than it may seem.

Fromm's child who finds himself loved simply "because I am" finds himself – his very be-ing – held dear, *cherished*. His mother's delight in him is not a propositional attitude, a delight *that* something "is the case". At the risk of overdoing it, let me note the grammatical peculiarity of the word "being" in this context. The word *can* be straightforwardly a noun operating like "animal" or "creature": "every being on this vessel, human and non-human, will be scrutinised." Or it can be paired with "is" or "are" to constitute a verb in the continuous present tense which takes an object: "you *are being* [...] difficult"; "he *is being* [...] friendly, just to curry favour with me". When I say that Fromm's child finds "his very being" cherished, the word "being" is operating in neither of those ways. It is operating, I think, as a gerund. (I wrote it as "be-ing" to bring this out.) Then it is not a general term having indefinitely many instantiations; and it is not the child's being "thus" or "so" that mother's love cherishes, but his – simply – be-ing. Of course the child Fred's be-ing is there given to mother's loving "sense" (inadequate word) of him in and through this or that "moment" of his "Fred-ish" embodiment – he is cartwheeling, or smiling cheekily, or just sitting there in that familiar way; and so him-cartwheeling or him-smiling or him-sitting-there is the form right-then taken by his be-ing as she attends to it. I think we can also speak of those things as modes of *Fred's being-present* to her; and so of her loving delight as delight in Fred-as-so-presenced.

Of course one whose love is as described by Fromm and Williams will very naturally *also* take pleasure in any number of "achievements" of her child, and in any number of aspects of how her child participates in others of those "things that give sense to our lives". (And the child can in turn enjoy that pleasure.) But, so far as her love has the character Fromm and Williams describe, those things are for her – to use a phrase of Wittgenstein's – so many "graces of fate" (1961: 81e). They are not themselves conditions of her love, but sources of further, and utterly natural, human pleasure – and often of pain and sorrow too, depending on how those things go.

It can be very hard for human beings to stay with this orientation, and so with such loving. Perhaps it is mostly close to impossible. Let me explain what I mean by that. Our loving of others can be challenged by how they get on in "those things that give sense to our lives", even as we may think, though often only obscurely or inchoately, that there is something amiss in our love being challengeable in that way. ("Falling out of [romantic] love" in such

circumstances though? That seems to happen readily enough.) As recipients of others' love, too, we are vulnerable to a similar uncertainty about it. One might say that much of human life is lived in a space marked out by the looming possibility of such uncertainty, even ambiguity, in our loving and our being loved. Fromm reminds us that at the heart of the child's experience of "mother's love" there is no such ambiguity. But that doesn't mean that the one who experiences that love is thereby freed from all effects of that uncertainty or ambiguity. He will still likely find himself subject to the anxiety attendant on his interactions with others being mediated by convictions, which he will share at least to some extent, of the human importance of having and cultivating those capacities that "give sense to our lives". Because of the role played in his sense of himself by the store he naturally comes to set on others' expectations of him, he will not be able to rest wholly secure in that love of him just "because he is".

*Our very humanity*, one might say, contributes to the rareness, or anyway the episodic nature, of our experience of such unambiguated love. Her spontaneous anticipation of her child's participation in what "gives sense to our lives" is after all the common context in which mother's love finds expression. She delightedly anticipates her child's coming into those things. And it is in just that context that others commonly witness her expression of that love. Hardly surprising, then, if mother's love often does *not* readily reveal to witnesses of it – and perhaps sometimes even to her child itself – a preciousness of the child that is not at all dependent on its actual or potential participation in those shared meaning-giving activities Gaita mentions. Even if those two elements remain "in principle" separable, they may be run together in a witness's actual experience of a mother's love for her child, when her child *is* robustly-enough participant in those shared meaning-giving activities. It is, after all, because those patients in the scene Gaita describes are so *visibly lacking* in capacity for all of that participation that the import of the nun's behaviour as Gaita speaks of it is so compellingly manifest to him. In that context the visible meaning of the nun's love is, we might say, free of the ambiguity imported by the context in which mother's love commonly finds expression.

That is also why, when he gives an example of parental love having powers of disclosure similar to the nun's love, Gaita's example is naturally enough of "parents who love a child that has become a vicious and vile adult" (1999: 24), and who may even be locked away in a maximum-security prison. For then *that*

context, in a way akin to the context in which Gaita witnessed the nun, helps disambiguate what those parents' love is responding to. For their love for their son is evident in the *absence* of their son's participation in much of the usual run of "things that give our lives sense".

Of course Fromm's child, who finds himself loved just "because I am", will mostly not be the "vicious and vile" person of Gaita's example. And he will be participant in many of those "things that give sense to our lives". Then the key point here is that *even when* the child *does* participate richly in all of that, Fromm-type mother's love is "of the child itself" independently of the child's participation in those things. That is to say, such mother's love "relates to" the child in exactly the way the nun's love "relates to" those patients.<sup>14</sup>

Appreciating *that* point, let us now go back to Gaita saying that the power of disclosure, "similar to the nun's love", that parental love can have, "depends [...] on the impartial love of saints."<sup>15</sup> Here is the full passage (earlier I quoted only the second sentence):

the power of parental love to reveal that even this evil and foul character is fully our fellow human being – **its having *that* to reveal** – depends 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 love 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. (1999: 24)  
[bolding mine]

There is an unresolved strain in this passage. In its second sentence Gaita seems to mean that without the love saints have shown for the most terrible criminals, the love of mothers for their criminal children would appear *to witnesses of that love* to be merely the understandable but limited love of mother. Perhaps there is something right about that. Perhaps – I am not sure – parental love's power to reveal *to a witness of it* the unconditional preciousness of a child is at least *increased by* that love being expressed in a cultural context informed by the "impartial love of saints". But look again at what Gaita says in the first sentence of the passage: "the power of parental [mother's] love to reveal that

---

<sup>14</sup> A rather different point is worth noting here. Suppose a mother has real difficulty relating to her child in a loving way after an illness has permanently severely incapacitated the child. That does not necessarily show that there never was any "mother's love" on her part. "Unconditional" love is not *essentially* love that will never fail. For some clarification of this rather cryptic suggestion see Cordner 2016a.

<sup>15</sup> While the nun is not actually a saint – she has not been canonized by the Church – Gaita's reference to "the impartial love of saints" is to the kind of love he has described her as showing.

even this evil and foul character is fully our fellow human being – **its having *that to reveal*** – depends [...] on the impartial love of saints.” The bolded phrase makes it clear that Gaita is not making a point only about what mother’s love has the power *to reveal to a witness*. Beyond that, he is entering a claim about *a condition of the very reality* of what is thus revealed. Here he puts the point in terms of the criminal son *being our fellow human being*. But he might also have put it, as he does in other places, in terms of the criminal son being revealed as “fully our equal”, or as “unconditionally valuable” as (he says) we take ourselves and our “normal” fellows to be. Gaita seems then to be saying that the unconditional value of children that he acknowledges can be revealed by mother’s love is only *there* at all, only “exists” to be revealable in that way, because of the role played by saintly love in our culture. Without that role having been played, there would not *be* that – the unconditional value of children – for mother’s love to reveal.

I do not think Gaita has given us a convincing reason to accept this claim. Even let it be granted that only against a cultural “background” of saintly love does a mother’s love for her criminal child have the power to *reveal to a witness* his unconditional value. It does not follow that in a cultural context without saintly love children could not experience such love in the way Fromm describes. Of course it does not follow that they *could* do so either. But I do not see that Gaita has given us a good reason for denying this possibility. Pointing out, as Gaita does, that unconditional parental love has not “universally [been] an ideal among the peoples of the earth” does not show, or as far as I can see even provide any support for saying, that it was the practice of saintly love with its complex background that enabled an unconditional form of mother’s love to arise in “our” culture.

At least there is a plausible, different way of seeing things here. I have taken some pains to explain how there could be mother’s love with the meaning for a recipient of it that Fromm describes – affirming his unconditional value as one loved simply “because I am” – without expressions or receptions of that love having the same power of *revelation to others* as the nun’s love had for Gaita. The main point there was what I called the ambiguating effect of the context in which mother’s love is commonly both given and received. More generally, for just that reason the unconditional “meaning” of mother’s love that Fromm describes may very often remain more or less subterranean, never clearly

expressed or thematised in a culture's artistic or religious expressions and self-reflections. But that need not cancel its reality.

If that is how things are, then it would not be the case that the meaning of mother's love as "unconditional" depends on saintly love. Indeed, the reverse might then seem closer to the truth: that saintly love is dependent on the underlying, even if often half-buried, truth of what Fromm says about mother's love.

To repeat: what Fromm says about mother's love is compatible with recognising that cultures can easily develop in such a way as to leach out of the culture, rather than to thematize and strengthen within it, an appreciation of the relatively inchoate childhood experience he describes. Our immersion in those things Gaita says "give sense to our lives" can readily conspire against our "staying with" the profound affirmation of unconditional value that is mediated by mother's love.

I do not think I have *proven* that Gaita is wrong to hold that parental love's having the character Fromm ascribes to it is "dependent on the love of saints". I say, though, that he has not given us a good reason to accept that claim; and that it is possible to view the scene of Gaita's concerns in the rather different way I have described.

It is only a "rather" different way. The space I have devoted to what Gaita says about the "status" of the nun's love risks exaggerating the importance of my difference from him here. In my view, it remains relatively small, certainly by comparison with the difference between both views and some "mainstream" views that Gaita finds inadequate. I will end with some remarks on one aspect of that difference. But before that I want to add one more thing here.

The *immediate* theme of Gaita's recounting of his witness of the nun is: his wonder at *the patients*, specifically, being revealed as unconditionally precious. In Section One, I said that despite some ways he expresses himself, Gaita does not mean that he comes to recognise that the patients too are precious in a way he *already* knew "us" to be. No: the revelation to him of the patients' absolute preciousness transforms his sense of "our" preciousness, discloses *that too* as not dependent on our participation in "those things that give sense to our lives". Our deepest value, too, lies in *our* "simply being", just as it is with the patients' reality as revealed by the nun's love. But one who fully appreciates that will realise that there is nothing *more* wonderful in the patients being thus

precious – having that absolute value – than in anyone else being so. To be sure, from the perspective of life lived under the governance of “all those things that give sense to our lives” it will hardly cease to be a matter of wonder that any life, or any human being, could have an unconditional value not dependent on any of that. But notice here that this does not seem to be a matter of wonder *to the nun*. For her, this is so to speak “just how things are”.

In that case, we might say that Gaita will not fully find himself where his witness of the nun summons him to, until it is no longer a matter of wonder to him, either, that there is no difference between the patients' deepest reality and our own. Putting that in terms closer to some of Gaita's: he will not be able to relate wholly without condescension to the patients until he has got beyond “wonder” at how they have been revealed to him by the nun's behaviour.

This may be somewhere that – again putting the point in Gaita's terms – only a saint ever reaches. To say that is not at all, I must emphasise, to undermine or query Gaita's response of wonder *per se*. But it is to suggest a wider context for it than he explicitly provides. Gaita's responding to those patients in the way his witness of the nun led him to do, happened against the background of his (and “our”) ensconcement in shared participation in those “things that give sense to our lives”. The “wonder” he speaks of is a jolting, even a dislodging, of that background. It is the mode of a constant reminder to him of how what is revealed in that witness profoundly challenges, and sometimes displaces, many of the “norms” under which we otherwise enact the living of our natural human lives. In Gaita's terms, only a “saint” is free of the constant need for such reminders.

This adds a nuance to Gaita's talk of his witness of the nun as a “transforming encounter”: in creatures like us, this transforming is never either completed or wholly stable.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Finally, I return to a difference I will comment on between Gaita's view and a certain “mainstream” view of some of the matters he is concerned with.

Near the end of trenchant criticism of Gaita, Jeff McMahan quotes this sentence from Gaita's book, *The Philosopher's Dog*:



My claim is that at the deepest point in our ethics there is a conception of individuality that is groundless, formed from our attachments, justified neither by reason nor merit, deepened in love, and made to seem more tractable in a language of rights and obligations. (Gaita 2002: 206–7; quoted by McMahan 2005: 378)

McMahan then comments that on this view of Gaita's, "our [moral] status seems to be formed or created, conferred on us by ourselves, by our own acts of caring, rather than being inherent in any objective feature of our nature" (379).

I think Gaita speaks rather loosely in the passage quoted by McMahan.<sup>16</sup> His words risk inviting the "merely subjectivist" interpretation of his view that McMahan fastens on. As I hope is evident from my discussion above, that interpretation is mistaken: Gaita does *not* think that "our [moral] status [is] formed or created, conferred on us by ourselves, by our own acts of caring". But that is not because he *instead* thinks – what McMahan, in a longstanding philosophical tradition, supposes to be the only alternative – that our moral status is "inherent in [...] objective features(s) of our nature". Gaita thinks *neither* of these things, and not because he affirms some combination of them. He thinks that *dichotomy* simply distorts the scene it purports to represent.

Consider how McMahan's dichotomy will represent the situation of Fromm's child who finds himself loved "because I am". On McMahan's picture, *either* one or more of the child's "objective features" mediates the loving and so the valuing of him, *or* the child's value "status" is somehow "formed or created" by the lover's "caring". Well, both options simply miss the child's experience of finding himself loved, and so valued, *because I am*. The child finds that to be a genuine *affirming* of his value – which is therefore neither "formed or created" by the lover's love or caring, nor anchored in or justified by the child's "objective properties". Neither side of McMahan's dichotomy fits the bill, nor does some combination of them.

Perhaps I should add, just to be clear on the point, that the child's be-ing as I called it is not *itself* some further objective feature of the child.<sup>17</sup> Neither is the be-ing of the child the existence of a propertyless substratum – a further

---

<sup>16</sup> *The Philosopher's Dog* is a quasi-"popular" work of Gaita's. While that shouldn't spare it from all critical scrutiny by philosophers, perhaps it also needn't be asked to carry the weight that McMahan makes it bear here.

<sup>17</sup> Recall Immanuel Kant's famous dictum that "'being' is obviously not a real predicate" (Kant 1976: B626).

“thing” beyond or behind any and all of its objective properties.<sup>18</sup> As I put it earlier, Fred is cartwheeling, or smiling cheekily, or just sitting there in that familiar way; and so him-cartwheeling or him-smiling or him-sitting-there is the form right-then taken by the Fred-presencing in which her love delights.

The “merely subjectivist” reading of Gaita’s view does not misrepresent or distort only what Fromm describes as the child’s experience of mother’s love. It also distorts both how the nun’s love affirms the “be-ing” of each of those patients, and also what Gaita says about his *witness* of the nun.<sup>19</sup> Gaita finds himself ineluctably led to see those patients in the light of the nun’s love for them. He then does not think that the patients’ “status” – their value or worth – is *created by* the love of the nun in whose light he sees them. He finds *them* – their reality – to have been *revealed more fully, more vividly*, in that light; and their being so revealed is inseparable from his finding himself wholly claimed by the need to respond to them “without condescension”.

Gaita’s view is that his witness of the nun enlivened him to the simple actuality (Williams’ phrase) of those patients – it made him *more receptive* to that. The “happening” of this *cannot* be understood in the terms of McMahan’s account of what constitutes “moral status”.

If a broader framing is sought for Gaita’s very different “take”, perhaps some words of Cora Diamond’s come close to providing it. Of some views she has just been discussing Diamond writes: “What is characteristic of [...] these views [...] is that they take as the root of morality in human nature a capacity for [...] loving and respectful attention.” (Diamond 1995: 306)

Such attention involves presence-to: opening onto, and being receptive to, the reality of what is attended-to. Such attention is not essentially a matter of gleaning, or trying to get, more *knowledge about* who or what is attended to – a grasp of more of her or its “objective properties” (although it *can* issue in more knowledge of that kind). It is much closer to the mark to say that it involves *knowing another*, where this is a kind of knowing that can deepen indefinitely.<sup>20</sup> It remains important to note that Diamond calls “loving and respectful

---

<sup>18</sup> I do recognise, all the same, that a lot of recent discussion on or around some of this essay’s themes remains more or less in the grip of one or other or both of the convictions I have just denied.

<sup>19</sup> How fully conscious or aware any one of those patients is of that affirmation is a further question.

<sup>20</sup> Here, too, is the real meaning of Iris Murdoch’s remark that “the central concept of morality is ‘the individual’ thought of as knowable by love”, (Murdoch 1997: 323) although not only many of Murdoch’s commentators but sometimes even Murdoch herself did not see this clearly. See Cordner 2016b and Cordner 2022. Also see Chappell 2012 for relevant discussion of “objectual” knowledge.

attention” the “root of morality”. The “root” is not “the whole plant”. But the plant has to be nourished by what comes through the root if it is not to wither.

I do not claim to have proven that Gaita’s view must be accepted, or even that McMahan’s must be rejected. My more modest aim has been only, by shifting just a little the light in which Gaita presents his view, to help let the view show itself a little more clearly.

## References

- Chappell, S.-G., 2012. “Varieties of Knowledge in Plato and Aristotle”. *Topoi* 31, 175–90.
- Cordner, C., 2016a. “Unconditional Love?”. *Cogent Arts and Humanities* 3, no. 1, 1–12.
- Cordner, C., 2016b. “Lessons of Murdochian Attention”. *Sophia* 55, 197–213.
- Cordner, C., 2022. “Love”. In: M. Hopwood, S. Panizza, ed., *The Murdochian Mind*. London: Routledge, 169–182.
- Diamond, C., 1995. *The Realistic Spirit*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Fromm, E., 1962. *The Art of Loving*. London: Unwin Books.
- Gaita, R., 1999. *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love & Truth & Justice*. London: Routledge.
- Gaita, R., 2002. *The Philosopher’s Dog: Friendship with Animals*. New York: Random House.
- Gaita, R., 2004. *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London: Routledge.
- Hertzberg, L., 2011. “Gaita on Recognizing the Human”. In: C. Cordner, ed., *Philosophy, Ethics and a Common Humanity*. London: Routledge, 7–20.
- Kant, I., 1976. *Critique of Pure Reason*, transl. N. Kemp Smith. Houndmills: Macmillan.
- Kant, I., 2013. “Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim”, transl. A. Wood. In: *Anthropology, History and Education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 108–120.
- McMahan, J., 2005. “Our Fellow Creatures”. *Journal of Ethics* 9, no. 3–4, 354–380.
- Murdoch, I., 1997. *Existentialists and Mystics*. London: Chatto and Windus.
- Strawson, P., 1962. “Freedom and Resentment”. *Proceedings of the British Academy* 48, 187–211.
- Williams, R., 2006. *Grace and Necessity*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Wittgenstein, L., 1961. *Notebooks 1914–1916*, transl. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

## ***Biographical Note***

Christopher Cordner is Honorary Principal Fellow in the School of Historical and Philosophical Studies at the University of Melbourne. His main area of philosophical interest is ethics, including both its ancient Greek and its Christian tributaries, and the intertwining of ethics and aesthetics. Cordner has also had a long involvement in health ethics, which included his serving for 10 years on the Australian Health Ethics Committee, advising the Federal Health Minister on various aspects of government health policy. He is currently completing a book entitled *Out of Goodness*, highlighting both the profound importance of something he calls 'simple' goodness, and also the ways philosophy has often missed or distorted that importance, at real cost to our human self-understanding.