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Love, Goodness and Moral Understanding: Two Reflections

Salla Aldrin Salskov
salla.aldrinsalskov(at)abo.fi

Philip Strammer
philip.strammer(at)gmail.com

Abstract

The article examines the relation between love and moral understanding in the context of post-Wittgensteinian ethics via two examples, the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan and Raimond Gaita's autobiographical account of an encounter with a loving nun. The article suggests that the examples are best understood as teachings about love *as expressive of moral understanding* and speak of love thus understood in terms of a wholehearted responsiveness to others – as *wholeheartedness*. While both examples teach a similar lesson, they emphasise different aspects: whereas the discussion of the Biblical parable focuses on the moral understanding involved in *being* loving towards another, Gaita's anecdote foregrounds the question of what it is like to *witness* and *understand* such love. Our discussion shows that philosophy often overlooks the moral significance of love by rationalising morality. Whereas rational conceptions of morality overemphasise its practical and socio-cultural dimensions, the moral understanding that finds expression in love illustrates the radically personal nature of moral concerns. Thus, it is suggested that love is not merely an aspect of morality but lies at its very heart.

1. Introduction

The relation of love and moral philosophy is a key theme in post-Wittgensteinian moral philosophy. In this article, we discuss two examples of this theme that have been the object of much debate: the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan and Raimond Gaita's anecdote about a transformative encounter with a loving nun. The article suggests that the significance of the examples is revealed when read as teachings about love as expressive of moral understanding. Accordingly, we challenge philosophy's tendency to rationalise

morality in ways that fail to recognise the role love plays in it – and, thus, what it means to understand morally without recourse to rational criteria.

Though influential, Peter Winch's reading of the parable of the Good Samaritan has been criticised for failing to do justice to the complexity of human perception, thought, and action in morally charged situations. We respond to this criticism by reimagining the parable in a way that brings to light that the Samaritan's goodness does not lie in what he does but in how he does it – in the loving spirit of his response. In this way, it is shown that an acknowledgement of human complexity does not correspond to a deeper understanding of what lies at the heart of morality. We then examine Gaita's account of his encounter with the nun and critically reflect on his idea that the full depth of the moral meaning of love may be disclosed only from a socio-historically conditioned religious perspective. In both discussions, we thus show that belief and reason neither delimit nor condition the moral understanding that finds expression in love and, accordingly, that philosophical accounts seeking to explain this understanding in rational, religious, or socio-historical terms are bound to miss the mark. Indeed, our philosophical intuition is that beyond merely yielding mistaken conceptions, such accounts in fact tacitly suppress moral understanding.

2. Reading the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan: Winch and his successors

The moral significance of the Biblical parable of the Good Samaritan has been heatedly discussed among post-Wittgensteinian philosophers. In his 1987 essay "Who is my Neighbour?", Peter Winch, one of the most influential thinkers of the Swansea School of Wittgensteinian philosophy, develops the claim that the parable is tied to a particular understanding of what it means to relate to other human beings, namely as neighbours (Winch 1987: 163). The debate has since revolved around the questions of how to make sense of the Samaritan's neighbourly response towards the man who fell among thieves and how to understand this response as a challenge to established – i.e. reason – and action-centred – moral philosophy. Important contributions have been made, among others, by Elizabeth Wolgast (1986), D. Z. Phillips (1989), Lars Hertzberg (1990), Raimond Gaita (1994), Howard Mounce (2011), Martin Gustafsson

(2017). With some exceptions, the discussions reflect a shift away from mainstream moral thought, emphasising a different way of understanding morality, not as a question of rational deliberation and decision but as responsiveness to another person.

Our aim in the first part of this paper (sections 2–4) is to take this shift one step further. One of the few points on which there is some disagreement in the debate is that the Samaritan's love does not consist in his responding to the claims of *reason* – be it in terms of duty, utility, or some kind of external criteria – but simply to his *addressee*, i.e. the wounded man. Most contributions focus on the limitations of applying abstract ethical principles to particular cases and on the importance of compassion, personal engagement, and the recognition of others' humanity in moral life. What is discussed is, thus, how exactly to understand the nature of the Samaritan's response, specifically in order to elucidate the role morality plays in our lives. As an illustration of what it means to be "moved with compassion" in relation even to those who belong to hostile groups, the parable's moral significance is manifestly bound up with the Christian notion of *neighbourly* love. The parable thus invites reflection on how it should be read to best capture what we find most striking and morally relevant about the Samaritan's neighbourliness and, hence, how we are to account for the lesson it has to teach us. Accordingly, the question is of what relevance (neighbourly) love is to moral philosophy, and, as we shall show, to *moral understanding*.

In the following, we examine the Samaritan's neighbourly love as expressive of moral understanding in terms of what we call *wholeheartedness* – a relational "quality" that becomes compromised when rephrased in rational, psychological, or modal terms. The perspective that is closest to the present account is Lars Hertzberg's, who in "On Being Neighbourly" (2002) calls attention to the unmediatedness of the encounter with the other and of the moral understanding that manifests in it. Drawing on Hertzberg's claim that the moral meaning of the parable is not primarily about what the Levite and the Priest did, or what most people are likely to do, but about a question directed to each of us, i.e. "what *you'll* do the next time *you* are confronted with a human being in distress" (Hertzberg 2022: 34), we raise questions about the moral significance of a loving attitude in a way that does not remain detached from its subject matter but personally addresses the reader so as to draw on her own moral understanding. By turning our attention to the personal nature

of moral understanding, we reflect on what it is to be morally responsive to the reality of another person, and on how the notion of neighbourly love challenges the conceptual frameworks of moral necessity and action-centred moral philosophy more broadly, thus exposing approaches that tend to intellectualise and distort the moral significance of love. We thus suggest that the parable should be read as illustrating the "absolutely personal" (Hertzberg 2022) nature of moral understanding. We also hold that the personal nature of moral understanding does not lead to moral relativism or essentialism, but lies at the very roots of moral meaning.

To buttress these claims, we develop a reading of the parable that takes as its starting point the problematisation of Winch's idea that the Samaritan responds to a perceived necessity, that is, "to what he [the Samaritan] sees as a necessity generated by the presence of the injured man" (Winch 1987: 157). When encountering the wounded man, so Winch's claim, the Samaritan sees that he cannot simply walk by but that he must help. By framing the response in modal terms, however, Winch makes himself vulnerable to criticisms of the kind put forward by Phillips, Mounce and Gustafsson, who, each in their own way, suggest that connecting perception and action through necessity in the way Winch does fails to do justice to the complexities involved in moral perception, thought, and action.

Taking issue with Winch's account, Howard Mounce holds that reference to the necessity which the Samaritan supposedly perceives is not enough to distinguish his response as a moral one. After all, we can imagine that the priest and the Levite who passed by the wounded man might also articulate their responses in terms of a perceived necessity: "I can't help him. I must get away" (Mounce 2011: 243). Mounce argues that in order for us to see not only the perceived necessity but also the rightness of the Samaritan's reaction, there must be an external, third-personally accessible criterion of some kind, in this case the divine law (Strammer 2025: 186). Martin Gustafsson suggests that Winch's emphasis on the straightforward connection between seeing and acting is stipulated and therefore questions the vocabulary of "perceived necessity" and "moral impossibility" Winch uses. Phillips again critiques Winch for missing the religious dimension of the parable, i.e. that the Samaritan's response was not necessary in the sense of a natural, primitive reaction but of a manifestation of supernatural virtue – something we are able to see because it was Jesus who showed it to us (Phillips 1989: 132–3). As Hertzberg notes,

Phillips criticises Winch for failing "to do justice to the actual variety of ways in which we may characteristically respond to other human beings" (Hertzberg 2002: 25), the fact that people often respond with hesitation or anxiety or indeed with indifference, callousness, irritation or embarrassment.

A pressing question that arises in the context of these criticisms is, as Gustafsson writes, whether taking the Samaritan's wholly spontaneous response to be "constitutive of seeing the wounded man as a fellow being [...] really provides us with the best way of understanding the case of the Samaritan, or whether it stands in the way of an appreciation of how complicated, arduous and full of insecurity human relations of compassion and care sometimes can be" (Gustafsson 2017: 205; see also Phillips 1989: 117). In other words: is it not possible to imagine the Samaritan's response to be good yet without the immediate, spontaneous transition from seeing to acting? And does not perhaps a richer, more human notion of goodness emerge once we imagine the Samaritan to face the kinds of complications, arduousness and insecurity that most of us would face under similar circumstances? Gustafsson suggests that we shift the focus to *action,* asking: "would anything be lost if we thought of the difference between the Samaritan and the others not in terms of what they saw or could conceive, but merely in terms of how they acted?" (Gustafsson 2017: 204; see also Strammer 2025: 191).

Gustafsson's discussion points to a more general difficulty of understanding the Samaritan's response as expressing "pure" love, in this case articulated as a suspicion towards conceiving of the Samaritan as illustrating neighbourly love as expressive of unblemished moral understanding and as elucidating the role it plays in our lives. To many, such a conception may seem moralistic, high-minded, naïve, or too idealistic. Perhaps the emphasis on goodness is taken to highlight a sense of perfection and the wonder at it – as Gaita perhaps would phrase it, a sense of saintliness – and, as such, a perspective on life and others distant from the complex and often quite ugly moral dramas of everyday life.

What becomes relevant especially concerning the criticisms of Gustafsson and Phillips, however, is the difference between emphasising the fact of empirical variety in human responses – the complexity, or "messiness" of our moral lives – and calling attention to meaning, to the moral understanding that finds expression in this variety. The question is then how the emphasis on

empirical variety, here invoked as a criticism against Winch, should be understood.

3. The Struggling Samaritan

In a recent attempt to synthesise Winch's agent-centred "first-personalism" and Mounce's law-centred "third-personalism", Martin Gustafsson can be taken to occupy the middle ground in the debate's spectrum. The picture he presents is a dialectic one (Gustafsson 2017: 209): thinking of the Samaritan's action neither in terms of "immediate" or "spontaneous" nor as "cold formal calculation" (2017: 206), Gustafsson argues that we need to attend to what it would "actually look like" for the Samaritan to engage in real-life deliberation. This undertaking, instead of being "merely" psychological and superficial, is supposed to represent more accurately the kinds of realistic moral challenges with which people are mostly confronted. Rewriting the parable to be more in accordance with the "goings-on in the mind of the Samaritan" whose encounter with the wounded man would be more akin to a complex real-life situation, Gustafsson suggests the following (2017: 206):

> Oh no, what's this now? Oh no, he seems really badly hurt, he might even be dying … but I need to get home, Sarah and the children will be so worried and upset if I'm late this night as well … and this is a really dangerous place … I don't need to help him … "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" … but this cannot be my responsibility … I'm no doctor … maybe I'll do more damage than good … and he seems like a really unpleasant guy … but isn't he my neighbor? OK, OK, OK! I'll do it, I'll do it! Damn it, it's my bad luck, it's always my bad luck, I really hate this …

The "Struggling Samaritan" is torn between whether he should or should not attend to the wounded man and tries to gauge what counts for deciding one way or another. That he finds he *must* help therefore comes in only in the form of the "moral colouring" with which he perceives the situation – a thought that echoes Hertzberg's likening of "the appeal to a moral necessity" to "a perceptual judgment" (Gustafsson 2017: 206).

However, when one reads the parable as an illustration of the workings of moral-perceptual judgment and its practical implementation, envisaging the Samaritan's response to manifest the kind of purity in question will appear as problematic given that the moral messiness such workings tend to manifest stands in tension with said purity. Granted, such a reading is not in any way at

odds with the parable itself which, due to its sparseness, can be read one way or another and embellished as one sees fit, perhaps to fruitful effect. Yet the question is whether redescribing the parable will lead us to a deeper understanding of the *goodness* of the Samaritan's loving response. A greater complexity in the mental goings-on of the Samaritan would hardly equal greater goodness. It may be tempting to think that such complexity portrays the Samaritan (or anyone in his situation) as intellectually more refined or, as Gustafsson holds, as more "relatable" to some of us. Still, it is not clear how a more nuanced process of deliberation and judgment, or indeed the enactment of its deliveries, is supposed to reflect a greater or purer goodness. Likewise, it is not readily apparent how relatability is supposed to translate into goodness given that who finds what relatable differs – the neo-Nazi may find the racist musings in his grandfather's diary relatable, yet it seems that, at least unless we embrace a full-blown relativism, this does not make said grandfather *good*. Also, there is no guarantee that a more refined description will not lead to greater confusion or even self-deception, assuming that, as Backström aptly puts it, "in moral difficulties, we ourselves create the basic difficulty; we *are* the difficulty" (Backström 2023: 76). We suggest that emphasising the Samaritan's imagined psychological goings-on therefore rather points to a tendency in moral philosophy to intellectualise and generalise moral concerns rather than to clarify the moral stakes of the case at hand.

This is not to say that a Samaritan who, in encountering the wounded man, thinks a lot, cannot be good. Depending on how one appropriates the parable, his purity *may* – but need not! – be reflected in more complex and/or more relatable workings of the mind. But that is just to say that intellectual complexity and relatability are not what matters. Taking the parable to connect the Samaritan's goodness to his intellectual activity of deliberation, judgment, and practical implementation means to read it intellectually, namely by looking for *criteria* of goodness (such as good judgment, knowledge of the right thing to do, the willpower to overcome temptation, and so on). Gustafsson's reading, for instance, suggests that the Samaritan's goodness comes out particularly pronouncedly if it is assumed that he does the right thing because he knows it is the right thing and because this motivates him to override his temptations. Given that, according to Gustafsson, such a Samaritan – not "'pure' but 'sullied'" – is morally relatable and, thus, serves as a better illustration of neighbourliness, he suggests that, anyway, "one needs to explain why the envisaged purity would be so important to begin with" (Gustafsson 2017: 206).

As we see it, however, the importance of the Samaritan's purity pronounces itself precisely when one suspends an intellectualistic reading of the parable and instead "reads with one's heart" (see also Hertzberg 2022: 36). "Reading with one's heart" means taking the Samaritan's goodness to lie not in anything he *does* but in how he lets himself be moved by the wounded man. One is not seeking to pin down criteria for goodness but rather lets *oneself* be moved by what the parable depicts. Precisely this unreserved being-moved by the reality of the other is what we think is well-captured in terms of *wholeheartedness*: while a half-hearted Samaritan's response would be guided partly by other concerns – such as by reasons for helping (or for abstaining from doing so), or by a concern for his own virtue, or other factors – the wholehearted Samaritan's response is guided solely by the man's predicament. As such, it is precisely to the extent that we are such psychologically complex "real, struggling human being[s]" about whom Gustafsson speaks – i.e. those who, upon facing the wounded man, half-heartedly hesitate as to whether we should help or not and gauge their options and reasons – that the wholeheartedness of the Samaritan's neighbourly love may move us and, as Christopher Cordner puts it, "serve as a beacon" (Cordner 2011: 6) for how we go on engaging with other people.

In the Biblical parable, the Samaritan's encounter with the wounded man is directly translated into a course of action – tending to the man, bringing him to the nearest inn, and so on – without any word about him reflecting on what is to be done.[1] On Gustafsson's version, the Samaritan reflects, and in a twofold sense: firstly, he deliberates on whether he should do what he *understands* in his "heart of hearts" would be the neighbourly thing to do or whether he should rather do what *he feels like doing* – for instance, giving the man a wide berth because he is so disagreeable. In the kind of situation the parable sketches, such deliberation would thus amount to temptation. Importantly, even if the Samaritan thus tempted eventually ends up helping the wounded man, his action will not reflect the kind of wholeheartedness that distinguishes unblemished neighbourliness, precisely because it is rooted in a response into which a desire to do what one understands to be unneighbourly had already crept. Theories which frame goodness in terms of actions that, from the perspective of the agent, are experienced as morally necessary – be it

[1] Winch's text is ambiguous in this respect: on the one hand, he makes it clear that, as he reads the parable, "[n]othing intervenes" (1987: 156) between the Samaritan and the wounded man, so that his compassion directly translates into help; on the other hand, however, something does intervene, namely the perceived necessity to help.

in terms of Kantian duty, obligation, or the kind of perceived necessity that Winch has in mind – are thus intrinsically bound to the motif of temptation, accordingly failing to do justice to the kind of purity the Samaritan displays.

The second way in which reflection may enter the Samaritan's response on Gustafsson's picture, on the other hand, is not as a *rational arbiter between* temptation and neighbourliness but rather as a *handmaiden to* neighbourliness. Imagine that the Samaritan has to think about how to give practical expression to his neighbourly love in the face of external obstacles – say, getting the unconscious man out of the blazing sun, how to dress his wounds, and so on. For such a Samaritan, it is out of the question whether he should reply lovingly or not; instead, the challenge with which he finds himself confronted is how to be there for his neighbour in the most prudent way.

4. The crip/incapacitated Samaritan

To bring out more clearly our argument about the moral nature of the Samaritan's loving response, let us imagine yet another version of the Samaritan, one who worries that his attempt to help will probably only make things worse for the wounded man. Let us assume his worry is rooted in personal experience – say, due to him having been in a similar situation before in which his attempts of helping resulted in the death of the other person. In this scenario, the Samaritan is torn between personally tending to the man and abstaining from doing so and, ultimately, he may decide for the latter because he feels that he cannot risk that another person will die by his hands. If his response would be as purely loving as that of the Samaritan in the Biblical original, however, even this fear-ridden Samaritan would still do *whatever was in his power* to alleviate the predicament of the wounded man. If that would not entail providing help first-hand, it may nonetheless show in all kinds of other ways – for instance by stopping and appealing to other travellers so as to try to make *them* help the man, by rushing to Jericho in order to organise help, or perhaps by spending a considerable amount of money to hire someone to do the job. Indeed, his neighbourliness may find expression in his desperate attempts to find out what, given his circumstances, he *could* do (Strammer 2025, 197).

But even if no alternatives are readily available to him – say, because he is not only fear-ridden but also poor and no other travellers are in sight – and he is unable to think of *anything* he could do, this fully incapacitated Samaritan may

relate just as lovingly as the Samaritan in the Bible. Even though it may not seem fitting to describe this alternative version of the Samaritan as *acting* out of compassion, the situation may still move him and touch his heart in a way that reflects that he relates to the man with the same wholeheartedness as the Samaritan in the parable. Such wholeheartedness may show in his concerned desperation, his commiseration. Realising the man will soon die, this utterly helpless, desperate crip Samaritan may be overcome with sadness and frustration while recognising that he, too, must turn his back or face the same fate. Until the end of his days, he will occasionally think of the man, each time gripped by sadness and grief. Regardless of the fact that it would not affect any changes, this crip Samaritan's response would manifest a love that is no less pure as the one depicted in the Biblical parable (Strammer 2025: 197–8).

In the light of these reflections, let us conclude by tying the discussion back to the Winchean notion of a perceived necessity. Thinking about the Samaritan as responding to a perceived necessity is problematic as it suggests a two-step picture, namely one in which (1) *what* the Samaritan perceives – including the various courses of action open to him – serves as (2) the ground on which he comes to see (and, as such, to understand) that he *must* do the one thing rather than another. On such accounts, propounded not only by Winch but also by Mounce, Gustafsson, and others, the Samaritan is thus primarily understood as a practical agent. Yet given the above explicated problems of this view, we hope it has become clear that it is not the Samaritan's *practical agency*, but rather his *compassionate response*, that should be taken as the locus of his goodness.

This being said, another way of speaking of moral necessity suggests itself when considering the – as Winch himself recognised – radically relational nature of the parable (Winch 1987: 155). The point is that irrespective of how the Samaritan may have understood the situation in which he found himself, it is we who, in light of the Samaritan's neighbourliness, are shown what it may mean for a response to be morally necessary. Being confronted with the Samaritan's wholeheartedness, in other words, we may come to understand more fully that, when finding ourselves under similar circumstances, it is undoubtedly clear that we have to help. Seeing the purity of the Samaritan's response, for instance, someone like the Struggling Samaritan pictured above might become clearer about what he has to do, thus helping him to partly disentangle him from the temptation in which he is caught up. (As long as he perceives of the situation in such modal terms, however, he will not altogether

overcome his temptation – for as just stated, finding oneself necessitated and finding oneself tempted go hand in hand. In order for someone inspired by the Samaritan's goodness to overcome temptation, they must come to be moved by the reality of others in a way similar to that of the Samaritan.) Here, it may be helpful to keep in mind Hertzberg's observation that Winch "consistently emphasized that our understanding of the situations to which we respond is itself morally conditioned" (Hertzberg 2022: 27; see also Gustafsson 2017: 212). As already pointed out above, we, the readers of the parable – whether as philosophers or simply as morally responsive individuals – are part of the overall picture, a picture of which our moral understanding is as much part as that of the Samaritan.

The much-discussed question about why the Samaritan does what he does thus reflects an attitude that differs from the goodness the parable conveys, namely, one in which *not* responding compassionately has already arisen as a possibility and, thus, into which temptation has already crept. One way in which to respond to someone tempted in this way is with the kind of incredulity we can imagine the Samaritan to display when asked why he does what he does. Such incredulity may take the form of a rhetorical question such as "How can you even consider any course of action other than helping?!" or "What do you mean, "why helping"?" Yet as it is clear to most of us where someone inquiring into the Samaritan's motives "is coming from" – for even if, on a particular occasion, we are beyond its call, we are all familiar with temptation – another way of responding to such discussion suggests itself: we may take up the interlocutor's language of practical reason and necessity, yet use it so as to do what Hertzberg calls "uttering a peculiar kind of appeal" (Hertzberg 2002: 36), namely, to make said interlocutor see the possibility of an entirely different way of relating to the wounded man. If successful, the interlocutor will become vividly aware of what she had suppressed yet understood in her "heart of hearts" all along, i.e. the other's unconditional moral significance. By rekindling her moral understanding in such a way, her "why"-question will not be answered but, in a Wittgensteinian sense, simply be *dissolved*. Perhaps that is what Winch tried to do when he lectured about neighbourly love to a room full of moral philosophers (Strammer 2025: 193–6).

5. Gaita as a witness to a nun's love: struggling to embrace love

The question of how to understand the relevance of (neighbourly) love to morality and, specifically, to moral understanding is also reflected in Raimond Gaita's story about a nun he encountered when he, as a teenager, worked as a ward-assistant in a psychiatric hospital. Gaita's discussion of the moral relevance this encounter had for him bears significant similarities to our discussion of the parable of the Good Samaritan. In both cases, the question arises how one should understand the example, the nature of responses depicted, and what these responses, as expressions of love, can teach us about morality. The nun is introduced by Gaita in *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice* (2000) in the chapter titled "Goodness beyond virtue", where he explores the nature of goodness through reflections on love and the sacredness of human life. The nun is also discussed in the second edition of *Good and Evil* (2006). While Gaita must be credited for connecting love and morality in fruitful ways, especially in arguing against a reason and action-centred moral philosophy, we nonetheless suggest that his discussion involves tensions regarding precisely how to conceive of this connection, in particular in the context of moral understanding. Our worries concern Gaita's claim that what the nun revealed through her love was the sacredness of every human being but that in order to speak morally seriously about someone's sacredness, one must be religious. The question is whether this makes sense from the perspective of love as a form of *moral* understanding as outlined in our discussion above.

6. The revelatory power of the nun's love

In recalling the encounter in *A Common Humanity*, Gaita describes how he witnessed the nun tending to patients who, he writes, "were judged to be incurable" and who appeared to "have irretrievably lost everything which gives meaning to our lives" (Gaita 2000: 18). "Any description of what life could mean to them invited the thought that it would have been better for them if they had never been born" (Gaita 2000: 19). Gaita describes how witnessing the nun had a decisive impact on his understanding of morality and love, how she revealed the patients to be "the equals of those who wanted to help them" (2000: 19). Most importantly, Gaita writes, the nun's behaviour "was striking not for the virtues it expressed, or even the good it achieved, but for its power to reveal the full humanity of those whose affliction had made their humanity

invisible" (Gaita 2000: 20). For Gaita, the unconditionality of the nun's love thus "proved that they [the patients] are rightly the objects of our non-condescending treatment" (2000: 21), and made him realise that he and the psychiatrists he admired at the hospital had, in speaking about the "inalienable dignity" of these patients, been, in fact "despite their best efforts, condescending" towards them (Gaita 2000: 18).

Gaita further notes that as "natural though it is to speak this way" (of dignity and respect), he sees it as "a sign of our conceptual desperation" and also "of our deep desire to ground in the very nature of things the requirement that we accord each human being unconditional respect" (Gaita 2000: 18). He thus points out both how our current ways of thinking and speaking about morality are to a large extent shaped by socio-historical discourses rooted in Enlightenment thought – in particular that of Kant – in which concepts such as rights, equality and respect are central. But he also shows that moral understanding has an irreducibly personal dimension, reflected in the fact that, in spite of the richness of our tradition, we still struggle to articulate what morality is, what role it has in a human life and how to articulate what can be characterised as absolute moral meaning.

Gaita's account of the impact the nun had on him, personally as well as philosophically, comes out particularly in his remark that "the purity of her compassion ruled out for me speculation about whether it [her love] was justified" (Gaita 2000: 20). In other words, he is critical towards attempts to try to intellectualise or rationalise the goodness of the love he witnessed in the nun's comportment. The point is: goodness, or love, does not have to satisfy an external criterion with recourse to which it can be justified; in its "purity", rather, it is, just as the goodness of the Samaritan, indubitable proof of itself. In our discussion of the parable of the Samaritan, we suggest that it should be read with the heart to have its moral meaning revealed, and Gaita's story can be read as an example of this: how the nun moved him and touched his heart when he bore witness to her love. In this way, Gaita's account illustrates how a personal experience – that is, witnessing with one's heart – can challenge tendencies to intellectualise or rationalise the moral meaning of love. Indeed, his emphasis on the moral motif of seeing the reality of another person invites his readers to take a perspective on love that starkly differs from the standard views found in the bulk of established moral philosophy. At the same time, however, he writes that "it would be no fault in any account of ethics if it failed

to find words to make fully intelligible what the nun revealed, for she revealed something *mysterious*" (19, emphasis added). It seems that Gaita too, despite his emphasis on the transformative role of love, tends to repress its true meaning.

Gaita is advocating a perspective on moral philosophy that transcends abstract or detached reasoning, discourses on moral rights, duties, rationality, or autonomy. Not unlike our discussion of the Samaritan, his work assigns a central role to moral understanding in connection to love. However, although love is central to Gaita's philosophy, we suggest that his discussion of it reflects difficulties similar to those we addressed in our reflections on the parable of the Good Samaritan, such as a tendency to rationalise meanings of morality by speaking of it in terms of justification, or to view the nun's behaviour as extraordinary and love as something mysterious.

By describing love as something mysterious, Gaita seems to elevate love of the kind he witnessed in the nun to the level of the supernatural, something beyond the everyday, indeed beyond the world of natural phenomena.[2] This elevation, however, becomes problematic insofar as it seems to function precisely as the kind of justification Gaita otherwise critiques, here dressed up in a religious, metaphysical way of speaking.

The nun's way of engaging with the patients, it can be argued, reflects a wholehearted responsiveness to them. In tending to them, she is not concerned with anything about or "beyond" them, such as with their dignity, the respect she owes them, or the love that their creatureliness calls for, but simply with them. In this sense, one may argue, her love is not something mysterious at all, but rather expressive of a loving attention (to speak with Iris Murdoch), of something that we all have the possibility to open ourselves to in the context of our everyday lives. The main problem we see is that despite Gaita's otherwise important and well formulated criticism of standard ideas in moral philosophy, forms of rationalisation at times tacitly inform Gaita's reasoning, which stand in tension with some of his most powerful claims about the moral meaning of love.

[2] This can be read as a kind of temptation and repression; see Nykänen in this special issue.

7. Sacred or precious, ordinary or saintly: some remarks on the grammar of love

One such tension concerns how one should describe what the nun revealed to him. Gaita writes: "The claim that all human beings are sacred is the one that bears most directly on the question of how to characterise the nun's behaviour" (2000: 23), but adds: "only someone who is religious can speak seriously of the sacred." Similar comments are to be found in the preface to the second edition of Good and Evil. "A religious person might say that the love [of the nun] revealed what it means for a human being to be sacred", Gaita writes (2004: xxiii), later adding: "I am not religious, however, so I cannot use it [the word 'sacred']" (2004: xxvi). He offers a list of secular stand-ins for sacredness (Gaita 2000: 23): "we may say that all human beings are inestimably precious, that they are ends in themselves, that they are owed unconditional respect, that they possess inalienable rights, and, of course, that they possess inalienable dignity." But Gaita points out that all these stand-ins fail to capture the richness or moral depth of religious expressions: "Not one of them has the simple power of the religious ways of speaking" (Gaita 2000: 23).

According to Gaita, then, how one articulates one's understanding of love, and of the moral significance of others, depends on whether one is religious or not. Thus, the meaning of articulating the moral significance of others seems to only be possible in a real or deep moral sense by those who speak in a religious way. This distinction raises questions of how precisely to understand Gaita's claim about his encounter with the nun and its moral implications. On the one hand, Gaita thinks that morality is concerned with what concerns us in our *common* humanity, that we are *all* sacred, while, on the other hand, he presupposes certain limits to our moral understanding, suggesting it depends on the availability of (socio-historically conditioned) concepts such as that of the sacred (or its impoverished secular substitutes).[3]

But the very fact that Gaita can compare different words and find "sacred" to be a more powerful one means that its moral meaning is already accessible to him, no matter his engagement in or lack of religious belief. And when it comes to understanding morally what the nun saw in the patients, this

[3] Furthermore, Gaita seems to take for granted that it is clear what "believer" or "religious person" as well as "non-believer" mean. However, this is of course also up for grabs, especially in relation to how one's belief or lack thereof is expressed in one's life and especially how it is expressed in one's moral understanding.

understanding ultimately consists in seeing them in the light of her love: seeing them in that way is to find whatever deeper meaning there is in any word used to articulate that understanding. As Gaita himself writes (Gaita 2000: 21): "I have no understanding of what it [the nun's love] revealed independently of the quality of her love." In order for the nun's action or behaviour or attitude to be intelligibly described as love or loving, in this sense, it cannot simultaneously be dependent on a particular word or any other external criteria.

However, in a sense, it is understandable that Gaita feels he cannot use expressions that he does not feel at home in. When speaking of the sacred, Gaita seems to want to articulate a profound truth about what it means to be human: that even our secular notions of common humanity, unconditional worth, and respect are rooted in, and conditioned by, a more profound concept, that of the sacred. If his claim is, thus, that non-believers are cut off from using and, indeed, fully fathoming the meaning of the concept of the sacred, then this would mean that they would be debarred from the most profound sense of the moral salience of individuals. Or, differently put: only believers could have a truly deep understanding of the moral significance of other people. If, or to the extent that, this is what Gaita seems to suggest, we find it problematic as it suggests a constitutive difference between people (in this case between the religious and nonreligious) and their capability to fully grasp the moral meaning of love, or the nature of morality as such. This problem can also be understood as a struggle on Gaita's part of coming to terms with the difference between the nun's purely loving response and what he experienced as his own insurmountable lack of purity.

For while he describes her response as manifesting a love of saintly purity, he at the same time appears reluctant to describe his own responsiveness in the light of the nun's love, in even vaguely similar terms. In other words, Gaita's way of describing his own response in comparison to that of the nun suggests that they are of categorically different kinds. However, this again is in tension with other claims of Gaita's. After all, the story of the nun he met suggests that her loving attitude towards the patients in the psychiatric hospital was not conditional upon her religiousness or faith as he insists that: "The purity of her loving behaviour proves something, but not any particular doctrine or faith" (Gaita 2004: 21). And when Gaita speaks of the "purity of her compassion," he states that it "ruled out for me speculation about whether it was justified. […] My assent to what her love revealed did not, therefore, depend on my

acceptance of a hypothesis about the grounds of that love" (Gaita 2000: 20). Here, Gaita's point seems to be that the nun's goodness is not conditional upon her familiarity with a concept (the concept of the sacred), but, rather, that it is through the kind of goodness that she manifests in her response (and that of other "saintly" individuals) that the sacredness – or preciousness – of others, even those who may be deemed unlovable, becomes intelligible.

So, we are left with a strange picture according to which the saintly nun's moral understanding does *not* depend on her faith or any other kind of external form of justification (and, accordingly, on her being in the position of having "access" to concepts such as the sacred), while the moral understanding of other – morally less consummate? – persons apparently *does* depend on an external form of justification, namely their faith (or the lack thereof). In other words, although the nun's love may not be "justified", to describe her love as saintly, Gaita seems to be saying, it requires a justification in terms of religious belief. But what would it mean to claim that saintly love is something one can understand but not engage in, or engage in but not understand fully? Such a claim would exclude the possibility that all of us, regardless of who we are, are in the position to open our hearts, both in the sense of engagement and understanding. In fact, Gaita points out (2000: 21) that *if* the nun's love and purity "depended upon her belief in a metaphysical fact […], in something that could, quite independently of her love, become a focus for speculation", her love would not have the power it has. If that were the case, it would not be expressive of loving understanding.

A criticism one could direct here – similar to the one Gustafsson puts forward in his criticism of the debate on the Samaritan – is that the nun's love may be spoken of in terms of "exceptionality" or "extraordinariness", in empirical terms, as something we *de facto* encounter rarely. But to speak or to think of love as having two different forms – extraordinary and ordinary love – is problematic in the light of the point that the wondrousness of love consists in the fact that *anyone* can love and *anyone* can be loved – which is a conceptual point, and Gaita's point about love, not an empirical fact.

8. Seeing someone as sacred

The distinction between ordinary and saintly forms of love becomes salient in Gaita's discussion of the sense of individuality that he sees as closely tied to seeing others as sacred.

Another example that Gaita takes up in his discussion of love and sacredness is the importance of treating someone like Eichmann with justice. Gaita notes that speaking of Eichmann as sacred or precious "makes one squirm" and "sounds a bit sickly" (2000: xix). In *Good and Evil*, he writes: "It sounds grotesque to say that Eichmann is infinitely precious (though a saint might say just that)" (2006: xv). But if we are to take Gaita seriously in his emphasis on the sacredness of every human being, speaking of Eichmann as precious or sacred must be taken as seriously as speaking of *anyone* as sacred (regardless of what he has done – as that would again constitute the kind of external criteria Gaita seems critical of). The sacredness of human beings in moral terms cannot be excluding X or conditional on Y, or it isn't what Gaita suggests it is. Another aspect of the grammar of love is that while we may psychologically "squirm" at someone like Eichmann, acknowledging the sacredness of everyone (including him) is the precondition for being able to judge and critique someone like Eichmann. In moral terms, Eichmann's sacredness is internal to understanding the evil he committed and was part of. To speak of Eichmann's sacredness as something only visible through the eyes of a saint seems, again, to imply a moral hierarchy of different forms of love, ordinary and saintly. Which also means that from the point of view of such a hierarchy it is difficult to make sense of the justice owed to someone like Eichmann, or to anyone of us for that matter. Here the distinction between love as a form of moral understanding and as an empirical reality becomes central. Where empirically our realities, actions, ways of thinking and speaking can be messy and full of conflict, attending to the meaning of love – love in terms of goodness – is precisely what reveals the contrasts one can make between what is loving and unloving: "For love is not an 'attitude' which is possible to take up towards some 'objects' and not others; drawing a boundary for whom I will be loving towards is a threat also to those within it, and therefore unloving *tout court*" (Strandberg 2019: 137–138).

A somewhat different, but related matter concerns the moral meaning of good and evil. In discussing the parable of the Samaritan, Gaita notes that, unlike the Samaritan's compassionate love, responses that are indifferent or

callous demand explanation, otherwise we judge them as morally corrupted (Gaita quoted in Gustafsson 2017: 212). We hold people accountable for their evildoings, and we can judge them for failing to "do the right thing." Love, however, instead of being a mere contrast to and negation of evil, is what conditions the very possibilities of such critique. Here Gaita pays attention to the fact that the (moral) meaning of good and evil is not symmetrical. And while (for Gaita: saintly) love is "pure" in its goodness, "evil" – callousness, indifference, egoism, etc. – becomes not only destructive in relation to others but is ultimately also destructive to oneself. As Gaita often quotes Plato as famously having said: it is better to suffer evil than to do it.

9. Some concluding remarks

The responses of the nun and the Samaritan can be read as illustrating a point Simone Weil makes in her essay "Human Personality", that there is something sacred in every one of us, and that it is not our personalities but who we are (Weil 2015: 70–71). In a Wittgensteinian vein, she expresses that our sacredness, who we are, is grammatically prior to what we are in identitarian terms (lovable, unlovable, black, white, men, women, Jews, Palestinians, "Hitlers", or nuns). For those who take neighbourly love to be a real possibility, it is not possible for someone to decide whether one relates to another as sacred or not, the other's sacredness being intrinsic to what it means to relate to her at all. Importantly, this does not mean that one cannot turn away from, repress, or deny this sacredness in various ways.[4] The question about which words one feels one can, or should, use, or which words are appropriate for one to use, is in a sense an open one, and not something we can lay down criteria for once and for all. Certainly, the nun Gaita met and whose love he is trying to describe can be done justice to in many ways, through many different descriptions, not just in terms of sacredness. The point is not that anyone who does or does not use a particular word or feels unease at the prospect of using it must be confused. That would be another way in which too much weight would be attributed to a mere word, such as "sacred." The question is rather what is at stake for one in choosing one word instead of the other, and as Stanley Cavell and many others have reminded us, we may not always mean what we say, and we may not always say or use the most suitable words to

[4] On the dialectic between love and openness, and our fear or repression of it, see Nykänen 2002, and his contribution to this special issue, and also Backström 2007.

express what we mean. What is key and important here is the spirit in which we relate to someone – the spirit in which our moral understanding shows itself.

The question of the moral meaning of love in our lives can thus also be seen as a question about who we are and of how we make sense of our lives, a question that is deeply personal, as no one else can provide the answers to these kinds of questions for us. Moral understanding, however, should not be understood in terms of individuality, as it also comprises a perspective that is not only about the single individual, but about what love means in human life. It is thus at the same time both personal and imbued with a particular generality: while it is absolutely personal (Gaita 1989, Hertzberg 2022) in that it involves a *responsibility* for one's thinking, it is general in that we all bear this responsibility. Yet in spite of this generality, this responsibility cannot be externalised. As Gaita aptly puts it: "I cannot pass my problem over to someone else […] there can be no manual of morals […] no Nobel Laureates in Morality" (Gaita 1989: 128–29). This, however, should not be confused with the claim that people have different views or tend to act in different ways when faced with a similar situation or problem (the empirical reality). The point is that morality's claim on you is absolute in that *you* are inescapably faced with having to come to terms with what you do. *You* are the only person who is responsible – and, as such, can *take* responsibility – for your relations to other people and your outlook on life, regardless of, say, how you were raised or the circumstances of your upbringing or personal history. Therefore, speaking in terms of "variety" or "differences" empirically only gives us a picture of people and their tendencies while saying little about the moral meaning of those tendencies. If we only note that there are different people and different views, the question still remains what it means to have "a view", to think and to mean something, to stand behind it, or to change one's view, etc.

It may be true that acts of love of the kind the nun and the Samaritan displayed are rare empirically. What is of importance for us, however, is that they constitute a possibility in human life. Therefore, the moral meaning of love goes deeper than, and is not dependent on, its varying occurrence across time and place. Still, we can read about (and, if we are lucky, witness first-hand) responses of the kind displayed by the Samaritan or the nun, that is, responses whose lovingness is unmediated by convention or doctrine. Such responses illustrate two inseparable possibilities: that anyone, *regardless of who they are*, can

relate lovingly to others and, conversely, that others can be related to lovingly, *regardless of who they are*.

To talk about love in the spirit we tried to capture in this paper is, to paraphrase Wittgenstein, an attempt to illuminate "the grammar" of love. This relates to our attempt to try to capture the moral meaning of good and evil, not as empirically determined questions about what people think or do, but as a question of the meaning, of how to understand what people think, say and do.

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Biographical Notes

Salla Aldrin Salskov holds a PhD in philosophy from Åbo Akademi University (2022). Her dissertation discussed the relevance of Wittgenstein's philosophy for feminist philosophy and queer studies. Her research focuses on Wittgensteinian philosophy, ethics, feminist and queer studies, critical studies of whiteness and racism, dialogical philosophy, and the challenges of polarization. She is co-editor of *Ethical Inquiries After Wittgenstein* (Springer 2022), and work has been published in *Social Epistemology: A Journal of Knowledge*, *Culture and Policy*, *Sexualities*, *NORA – Nordic Journal of Feminist and Gender Research*, *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, *Policy Futures in Education,* and other places. Salla holds the title of docent in gender studies at Åbo Akademi University, where she is a postdoctoral researcher in minority studies.

Philip Strammer holds a PhD from the Centre for Ethics in Human Value, University of Pardubice (2023). His dissertation *Togetherness as a Moral Notion* focused on love, the complexity of care, and togetherness. His earlier studies include philosophy (and ethics) at the University of Stuttgart and philosophy and psychology at the University of Vienna. Strammer's research interests are moral philosophy and ethics, dialogical philosophy, moral phenomenology, social and political philosophy, and the philosophy of love. A key theme in his work is the "second-personal" or "I–You" relation — drawing on dialogical traditions (e.g. Martin Buber, Emmanuel Lévinas) and late-Wittgensteinian moral thought. His work has been published in *De Ethica, Philosophical Investigations* and other places. His monograph *An Ethics of the Second Person: Love, Goodness, and Relationality* (Palgrave 2025) reimagines the foundations of moral philosophy by centring on the ethical significance of second-personal experience—our direct, lived responsiveness to others.