

A COMMON HUMANITY: THINKING ABOUT LOVE AND TRUTH AND JUSTICE, by Raimond Gaita, *Routledge*, London, 2000. Pp. 328; £17.99 hbk.

'The best lack all conviction': W.B. Yeats' words could be taken as a summary of English-speaking thought about ethics for much of the twentieth century. Even now, fifty years after the holocaust, it is still rare to find a philosopher prepared to engage deeply with the question of serious evil, and indeed of serious goodness. The first striking thing about this book, then, is the issues that Gaita chooses to explore.

He begins with goodness, and with the moving story of a nun he once encountered in a hospital for long-term psychiatric patients. Her undiluted love for the most afflicted showed up even the high-minded among the professionals: she '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'.

The nun revealed the possibility of truly believing each individual to be precious, and in doing so revealed to Gaita, at least, that her love was grounded in truth. Gaita goes on to argue that the other side of the coin of the nun's love is remorse, for example that of Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, who comes to recognise the 'unconditional preciousness' even of the despised money-lender whom he had killed in cold blood. He quotes more than once Hannah Arendt's words 'the men of the eighteenth century did not know that there exists goodness beyond virtue and evil beyond vice.' He finds the key to understanding such good and evil in this idea of the preciousness of each individual, and his ethical and political explorations throughout the book are informed by reflection on what it means to attend precisely to this.

Take, for example, the Australians' treatment of the Aborigines. In 1992, in a case now known as 'Mabo', the Australian High Court granted Australian Aborigines native title to some of the land taken from them by the settlers. Gaita is particularly interested in the ethical basis of the decision, that 'many of the applications of the principle of *terra nullius*' had been 'expressions of a racist blindness to the depth of the indigenous people's relationship to the land'. He argues that what is at stake is more than fairness; to appeal to fairness assumes the full humanity of those you are defending. Mabo 'brought indigenous Australians into the constituency within which they could intelligibly press claims about unfair treatment'. Just intuitions matter in part because they allow us to recognise the full humanity of our fellow human beings.

Gaita builds on this point in discussing the report *Bringing them Home*. This tells the terrible story of the forcible removal of Aboriginal children from their families, which continued, as part of a government policy of racial absorption, from the late nineteenth century to the 1960s.

In particular, he illustrates the way in which Australians connived at, supported, or indeed executed, this policy through a failure to understand the full humanity of the Aborigines: it was as if the grief of the mothers whose children were stolen did not somehow count as genuine grief of the sort that you or I might feel. Once again, injustice was grounded in a failure of imagination, and ultimately in a failure of love.

How, though, ought we to respond to those whose arguments are shaped by quite different imaginations? What, for example, of David Irving? Ought we seriously to entertain the thought that his industrious and learned revisionist history should be believed? Gaita offers a radical challenge to the common type of lazy liberalism that fosters a complacent, but entirely theoretical, moral scepticism: there are thoughts that we should be afraid of seriously entertaining; for people who genuinely believe such thoughts are cranks or insane or wicked, and it is appropriate to fear being any of these. For this reason Peter Singer's arguments for the acceptability of infanticide mark a fundamental shift in our culture: even twenty years ago his conclusions could only have been used to defeat his premises by *reductio ad absurdum*. Now, however, many are prepared to find his arguments not unthinkable, but persuasive.

There is too much else in this rich book to discuss in detail, for example: an exploration of the distinctive nature of the evil of the holocaust, and of why even Eichmann was owed a fair trial; reflection on the role and public responsibilities of academics; a careful analysis of the way in which understanding is constituted in part by love and pity.

Gaita's philosophical mentors are Plato and Wittgenstein, Simone Weil and Iris Murdoch. His style is correspondingly leisurely and meditative: he takes a handful of striking examples and ponders them from a variety of angles; he teases out the implications of the way that we use terms such as 'remorse' and 'sentiment', 'justice' and 'genocide'. A fine instance of this is his discussion of the distinction between 'guilt' and 'shame': remorse for guilt is 'radically individualising', so that I cannot appropriately be consoled by the thought that my guilt is shared; shame, however, is intrinsically collective.

Gaita relies, then, on ordinary language to provide an account of good and evil that does not depend upon faith, not in order to undermine religion, but to uphold ethics in what he sees as a post-religious age. A Christian thinker might wonder, in the manner of Alastair MacIntyre, how far the rich meaning he draws out of our moral concepts depends upon their rootedness in Catholic tradition. Can the vocabulary of 'soul', of 'sanctity' and of the 'gift' of creation lucidly be used by non-believers except insofar as they smuggle in assumptions from our collective religious history? Relatedly, it would have been instructive to see how a philosopher so respectful of Plato, yet mistrustful of Aristotle, would respond to Aquinas' synthesis. For example, Thomas' account of love as the 'form of the virtues' might provide the link between holiness and

ordinary virtues without which Gaita's account of goodness seems curiously dislocated. But if from a Thomist viewpoint this book preserves the relics of a tradition, they are not the shattered and crudely reassembled relics of, say, utilitarianism. Rather, they are large and elegant constructions, relatively undamaged by their isolation, illuminated by a sensitive and patient scrutiny, and inspired by a passionate intensity. Moral philosophy is at last beginning to recover its centre.

MARGARET ATKINS

THE SPIRITUALITY OF CELTIC SAINTS by Richard J. Woods **OP**
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Fortunately, much of this book takes the form of small, narrative sections, about the saints of early Britain, Ireland, Scotland, Wales, Brittany and beyond on the Continent and about the religious societies they set up. It was fortunate for me, because I found the narrative sections its easiest items to read. I have no training in theology and was not looking forward to the author's explanation of what he meant by 'spirituality', especially as he said that 'after three decades of study, reading, discussion, and teaching in the field, I have come to think of spirituality as a set of related meanings rather than a single notion'. Oh dear.

But mercifully Woods settles for the old Biblical/Hebrew idea of spirituality as that in the personality which is open to God and responds to His grace. Once Woods has then explained which group of gathered personalities he means when talking about 'the Celts', his subjects in this book are defined. Chapter 1 does the defining in detail, copious notes leaving no doubt en route that it is the work of a loyal Catholic and an American. Some of the spellings are American, and if Woods wants to speed the read, he starts some sentences with 'And', a transatlantic habit I find more distracting than engaging. But these are only mannerisms. I did my best to ignore them and follow Woods's evident delight in various aspects of the subject which I had not considered before.

His chapter on 'The Blessing and the Curse' explains the importance of these features in a society where he 'would emphasize, first of all, the Word (and the word)'. The great early gospel books such as those of Kells and Lindisfarne were what Woods calls 'Shrines of the Word', gazed at in admiration, not read, because hardly anyone could read the written word. In his later chapter 'The Struggle for Justice', Woods simply says of Matt Talbot, born in poor, 19th-century Dublin: 'Though barely literate, Talbot read church history, the spiritual writings of the saints, and radical Catholic social teaching'. It has always been a vexed question exactly who could read what and Woods obviously reckons it was still an unmeasurable one at a late date. Perhaps he is wise to