

Gaita On Recognizing The Human

(revised August 2010)

... morality and our inner lives, the meaning we attach to things, form a seamless web.

(Gaita 1999: 260)

... a situation, the issues which it raises and the kind of reason which is appropriate to a discussion of those issues, involve a certain perspective. If I had to say shortly how I take the agent in the situation to be related to such a perspective I should say ... that the agent *is* his perspective.

(Winch 1972: 178)

There is a conventional view of moral agency which might be described as follows: when a person comes to act in a situation, there are two separate matters to be considered: on the one hand the objective facts of the situation, and on the other hand what the agent brings to it: her attitudes, preferences or moral outlook. It has been a central concern of Raimond Gaita to bring this view into question. As I read him, he considers the question of what I take to be the case and the way I respond to be inseparable aspects of a situation. In other words, my description

of the world in which I act is in itself expressive of my engagement with it.

Through his criticism of the conventional view he has become a distinctive voice in current English-speaking moral philosophy.¹

In this essay, I will discuss Gaita's view of moral thought. While I endorse its main features, I will draw attention to some elements of his treatment that I find obscure. When it is recognized that moral demands are not imposed from outside but are internal to an agent's perception, the focus of reflection in moral philosophy will naturally be shifted from the traditional concern with discussing rules or standards of right action to the question how a failure to be morally responsive can be intelligible. This question is central for Gaita. In particular, he is focussing on cases in which some being is excluded from the consideration we owe her, or him (or it).

Gaita illustrates the way in which a moral perspective can be internal to the description of a situation by discussing a remark from Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. The remark occurs in connection with a discussion of the so-called other minds problem. Wittgenstein is discussing the idea that we cannot be sure whether the people (or should we say: the people-like figures?) around us are actually living human beings rather than automata. He sums up the discussion as follows, "My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the *opinion* that he has a soul" (Wittgenstein 1958: sec. 178).

Here, Wittgenstein is dismissing the traditional philosophical notion that the problem of other minds is an epistemic problem, that we must either establish ways of making sure that the beings around us are actual people, or, failing that, content ourselves that the matter will be forever uncertain. Gaita comments:

Wittgenstein's radical remark turns on its head the almost irresistibly natural thought that we react to others as to persons – as to 'other minds' – because we know, believe, or conjecture that they have psychological states more or less as we do. The fact that it is, in general, natural for us to look into a person's face while binding his wounds ... conditions our concept of pain, and inseparably from that, our sense of the object of our pity – a human-being-in-pain... We cannot ... detach our sense of what it is for someone to be in pain... from our ways of living with the language of sensation, without detaching ourselves from what makes our concept of pain what it is.

(Gaita 1999: 267)

Gaita goes on to say that '[p]ity is normative for our descriptions of the forms of our indifference to suffering, not because of moral beliefs we hold about how we should respond, but because pity is partly constitutive of our understanding of what it means to suffer', and he illustrates this by pointing out that someone who says 'What is it to me?' in the face of another's suffering will be described as callous (Gaita 1999: 267). We might add: the question whether a person is to be considered cruel or callous will normally be raised only with regard to someone

who is *capable* of seeing certain human forms of expression as calling for pity. In other words, a sharing of certain types of response is a condition not only for compassion but also for evil. The difference is that in the former case those responses are given authority, in the latter their authority is denied or defied.

I shall begin by discussing failures to be responsive to the humanity of another. I shall focus in particular on racism, arguing that the concept is less sharply delimited than Gaita assumes. After that, I address the question whether the use of the words ‘human being’ to make a moral appeal presupposes that the species *homo species* is granted a privileged position. I will claim that in many important cases in which these words are used, they do not depend on any such presupposition. I shall also argue that Gaita’s position on this issue in *A Common Humanity* is marred by some unclarities.

Belittling the Human

Gaita provides several examples of individuals being mindful or forgetful of the humanity of other human beings. Two of these cases form a kind of *leitmotif* of *A Common Humanity*. On the one hand, there is the nun he met as a young man when working in a psychiatric ward. In the way she spoke to the patients, in her facial expressions, we are told, she revealed that for her the patients were the equals of the people working in the ward, thereby showing up even those among the doctors who would speak about the inalienable dignity of the patients (and who were heartily despised for this by some of the nurses) (Gaita 1999: 18f.).

Second, there is M, a woman who has recently lost a child. Watching a television documentary about Vietnamese women whose children have been killed by bombs, her first reaction is to feel that she and they share a common affliction, but then she turns around and says, 'But it is different for them. They can simply have more.' Gaita comments, 'Coming from her I knew it to be a racist remark... She meant that they could replace their dead children more or less as we replace dead pets' (Gaita 1999: 57f.). A third type of example is George Orwell's account of how he was unable to shoot a fascist soldier who was running holding up his pants during the Spanish Civil War (Gaita 1999: 48).

One point that strikes me in reflecting on these examples is that my ability to identify with them is wholly different. In one case, recognizing the humanity of the other comes across as a rare gift, in another the failure to do so appears to be an expression of blatant racism. The shift described in the example from Orwell is the one I find it the easiest to identify with. Even if I have never been involved in an armed conflict, the case bears a resemblance to other types of situation in which the circumstances suddenly quicken me to the reality of another person, either temporarily or for good.

The nun, obviously, is someone most of us would greatly admire if we were to meet her. In my case, this admiration would be coloured by the recognition that her compassion is on a level totally beyond my capacity. An important aspect of this is that her ways of dealing with the patients is apparently effortless: in contrast, perhaps, to that of the doctors, it is not driven by the thought that she

ought to ‘treat them as equals’; rather, one might imagine, the idea that they might be anything but her equals seems never to enter her mind. (In fact, the very phrase ‘treat someone *as* an equal’ carries a hint that the person in question may not quite *be* an equal.) I am sure that I, on the other hand, would at the very least have to make an effort – and the fact that my response was strained would in itself mean that it was different from hers. (As I understand this example, we need not assume that the nun never, say, showed anger or frustration with the patients; on the contrary, I would imagine that her attitude towards them showed itself precisely in her daring to be open about her feelings in a way the others were not. We should not take it for granted that saints are what we are used to thinking of as ‘saintlike’.)

Nor are we supposed to identify with M. We are clearly meant to see her as someone who is (partly) blind to the humanity of people of, as she might put it, a different race. The reader is not expected to share her blindness.

Let us call what these cases bring out – being condescending to the patients in a psychiatric ward, shooting a defenceless enemy soldier without compunction, thinking that Vietnamese women, in contrast to oneself, can replace their dead children by having more – a ‘belittling of the human’. Now, the difference between these examples, to my mind, shows certain important things, although once again these points are not made explicit by Gaita. They show how varied are the ways in which someone may recognize or fail to recognize the humanity of another. It is not a matter in which criteria can be laid down once and for all. As

the case of the psychiatric doctors shows, even one and the same way of dealing with a person may come to be seen both as a recognition of his humanity and as a belittling of it, depending on the frame of comparison. The temptation to belittle the human is omnipresent, and often we are not ourselves in a good position to recognize our failure to resist it.

In fact, Gaita appears to be ambivalent with regard to the notion that recognizing the humanity of the other involves a degree of variation or of indeterminacy. He does come out explicitly on the side of indeterminacy in remarks like,

Even when a full understanding [of the ethical] is attained ... it waxes and wanes...

The bewilderment characteristic of remorse – What have I done? How could I have done it? – gives some support to the idea that we are often only partially aware of the nature of good and evil and its proper place in our lives.

(Gaita 1999: 43)

At other times, though, he expresses himself as though there were a clear distinction between those who are fully cognizant of the reality of other human beings and those who are not. Thus, he distinguishes between those who do and those who do not ‘have serious use for a conception of the individual as unconditionally precious’ (Gaita 1999: 53). (He does not make it clear which of

these he considers the more common, ‘normal’, attitude.) Somewhat along the same lines, he seems to find it beyond question that a white owner of black slaves, even someone who like the Good Samaritan says, of an injured slave, ‘I can’t leave him here, he’s a human being’, while acknowledging his human fellowship with the slave, cannot yet (as long as he remains a slave-owner) acknowledge his full humanity.²

The Naturalness of Racism

Undoubtedly *A Common Humanity* is an important contribution to the philosophy of racism. However, I would argue that Gaita’s discussion of racism is somewhat marred by his inclination to draw sharp lines. The case of M, as he presents it, is somewhat obscure, so I should like to bring in some variations. Imagine a slightly different woman, A, who responded with a similar callousness to the grief of the Vietnamese women. However, in her society there was no institutionalized racism, on the contrary racism was generally frowned upon. The thought that the women were Asian did not enter into A’s reasoning, at least not on a reflective level (and neither did their skin colour or the shape of their eyes); if asked she might even deny that it played a part. Perhaps she reacts in the same way to reports, say, about white mothers in the slums of Rio de Janeiro – or in her own country. A, in short, may not have thought that the mothers belonged to some particular category which rightfully had a bearing on how she responded to them. She simply felt very distant from them. She failed to be moved by their expressions of grief, she found it hard to enter imaginatively into their lives, or to see each of them as a particular individual. Perhaps, although this was not

something she would have admitted to herself, what they had in common was that they were slum-dwellers, that they tended to have many children, that their conditions of life were alien to her.

For contrast, let us imagine the opposite case. Here is someone, Z, whose feelings of sympathy for the Vietnamese women are strong and, unlike M's, remain so, but who on the other hand has been taught, and has accepted the teaching, that these women belong to a category of human beings who are not capable of the same kind of deep and genuine feelings as white people. Her *feelings*, then, unlike those of A, would not be racist, but if called upon to act, she would disregard or suppress her own feelings and support a racist cause.

The point of contrasting these cases is to draw attention to the complexity of racist attitudes. Z's attitude, we might say, is centred around racial *categories*, whereas A's is centred around *substance*: what weighs with Z is that the women are classified as Asian, whereas what weighs with A are the ways they come across to her, in combination with things she knows or believes about them.³ (Some of these characteristics may be fictitious, i.e. it might be clear that they are attributed to someone solely because of her race; the racist, of course, would not admit this, at least not openly.) In institutionalized racism, I would suggest, there is usually a degree of interplay between category and substance, most racists probably being found somewhere between A and Z.⁴

What this discussion suggests is that explicitly racist attitudes may differ only in degree from the lack of concern for others that seems to be an almost universal shortcoming in our dealings with people, whether individuals or groups, from whom, for one reason or another, we feel distant. Our callousness to those who are different from us need not be hitched to a racist thought system – on the contrary, it could be argued that the omnipresence of temptations like these is an important part of what enables racist attitudes to form and be sustained. We might speak about the “naturalness” of (many forms of) racism. This is not to deny that racial categories may themselves be an effective tool for stirring up group hatred.

Analogous considerations probably apply to most other forms of ethnic hatred or contempt as well as to class antagonism, sexism, homophobia, misopedia, gerontophobia, etc. It is important to keep in mind, for instance, that the conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in Northern Ireland, or between Serbs and Kosovars or Bosniaks in the former Yugoslavia, are closely similar to conflicts between racial groups, without being grounded in ideas about race-type differences. I imagine that racist-like attitudes could be encountered even among people who have no word corresponding to the word ‘race’.

Gaita, I am arguing, is not sufficiently attentive to what I am calling the naturalness of racism, its continuity with other forms of the belittling of the human; he is inclined, on the whole, to speak as if it always had an explicit thought-system at its core – in other words, to emphasize category at the expense

of substance, entailing that there is a clear boundary dividing racists from non-racists.

It is true that Gaita discusses what I called the substance of racist thought. In this regard, he distinguishes between racial stereotypes, e.g. the claim that blacks have lower IQ's, that they are lazy, immature, etc, and what he calls *the denigration of the inner lives* of those belonging to the despised group. In Gaita's paraphrase,

We grieve but they 'grieve', we are joyful, they are 'joyful', we love and they 'love', we feel remorse and they feel 'remorse' and so on... We distinguish real love from infatuation, real grief from maudlin self-indulgence, and that we do so is fundamental to the kinds of states they are – to their very existence. The inner lives of blacks or Asians are placed in inverted commas by white racists *because* they cannot believe that there could be any depth in them (Gaita 1999: 63).⁵

This is an important observation, since it brings out why racial prejudice may be so deeply impervious to empirical evidence. A racist, on this account, would typically fail to be moved by the feelings of a black or an Asian (or if he is moved he would consider this a symptom of sentimentality). However, the "because" that I have italicized seems to give support to the notion that these types of prejudice are based on the acceptance of racist thoughts (as in the case of Z), whereas what I would suggest is that for *many* racists, their spontaneous tendency to denigrate the

inner lives of blacks or Asians, etc, is part of what disposes them to accept racist ideologies.⁶

The claim, say, that blacks do not *feel* grief or love as deeply as whites do is not necessarily refuted by the fact that many blacks *express* grief or love just as intensely as many whites do. Gaita suggests that experience may help overcome this form of prejudice, but not experience in the sense of empirical findings, rather of the form that comes from living with the people one is prejudiced against. This is an important distinction, even though, again, it is probably one of degree rather than kind. It is directed against the facile claim that racism is “simply due to ignorance”, with its suggestion that a few lessons in racial equality is all it would take to cure someone of racism for good.

It is true that in some individuals, racism is simply due to lack of information or familiarity (this may often be true of people in a racially homogeneous country like Finland), but others who are much more familiar with other race groups may simply have dug in their heels and refuse to change their minds. ‘Experience’, as a road to the acceptance of equality, must be understood to refer to the quality of the relation and not just to the quantity of contact.

Again, there is, of course, a great deal of variation between individuals. In 2002, the Swedish television journalist Stina Lundberg Dabrowski made an interview with three generations of Ku Klux Klan members in Georgia. One of the people she interviewed, a teenage girl who had grown up in the midst of a community of

bigots, and whose grandparents had leading positions among the Klan leaders, seemed remarkably unencumbered by racist attitudes. She thought that the Klan rhetoric was stupid, that integrated schools were all right, and that intelligence had nothing to do with race. She could even imagine marrying a black boy if it were not for the fact that (as she had been told) the Bible prohibits interracial marriage. She could offer no explanation of why she thought differently than all those around her, saying only that she had always thought that way. Maybe she had been struck by the fact that blacks did not correspond to the stereotypes she had been taught; or she may have been put on her guard by the emotional way in which her elders expressed their views, making her feel, perhaps, that they themselves did not feel fully at ease with what they were saying.

In short, racists or not, we are most of us, most of the time, liable to be belittling the human in one way or the other. On the other hand, there is a chance that, like Orwell in Spain, we may suddenly be awakened to the fact that we are.

Privileging homo sapiens?

Gaita discusses the question whether the emphasis he places on appeals to the human might open him to a charge of speciesism⁷. According to Gaita, a speciesist is someone who will treat a morally irrelevant feature of a living being, its belonging to the biological species *homo sapiens*, as though it was morally relevant, the way a racist or sexist will treat morally irrelevant features of a person

(skin colour, gender) as though they had moral relevance (Gaita 1999: 262, 268). I find some of his remarks about this question obscure.

In order for an accusation of speciesism to get a purchase, one would have to read Gaita as follows: when a speaker enters a plea for compassion by pointing out that some individual who is being treated brutally is a human being, she must be assuming that his attackers are confusing the victim with some other kind of entity (a physical object, an animal), and hoping that when they realize their mistake they will desist from their present course of action. The plea, in other words, is being entered against the background of a contrast between human beings and other entities – a contrast which is thought to have a bearing on the ways in which they are to be treated, presumably in accordance with some moral principle.

Is this a plausible reading? I would suggest it is a caricature. We do not believe that cruelty between human beings is not due to an oversight. In fact, when someone is accused of treating a person as a physical object or an animal, it is rarely if ever the case that he is literally dealing with the other the way one would normally deal with an object or animal. Rather, what is in question is usually a type of treatment that is exclusively reserved for human beings. (In fact, in many such cases one would probably prefer being treated the way objects or animals usually are.)

In fact, when the words ‘He’s a human being’ are uttered as a moral appeal, their force, in many cases, does not lie in their invoking a contrast with some other type

of creature: it is not dependent on the idea that nothing but a human being could make this kind of demand on me. Rather, they are aimed at awakening the other to the full significance of what stands before him. What tempts me to belittle the humanity of the other is not, in most cases, my tendency to confuse him, say, with an animal or object, just as, if I appeal for mercy for someone by crying out, ‘He too is somebody’s son!’, or ‘Think of how that hurts!’, I am not invoking a contrast with individuals who are not born of parents or who are incapable of feeling pain.

One might argue that the occasions on which the question will arise whether I should treat some animal the same way or differently from a human being are actually quite limited, since in most cases it would be generally agreed that the notion of a comparable treatment has no clear application.⁸ This is partly because the lives of animals differ from those of humans, sometimes quite radically, and partly because most of our relations to animals are not comparable to the various types of relations we may have with other human beings. Gaita himself, in *Good and Evil*, argues that the ways in which human beings may be wronged are different from the ways in which animals may be wronged, and that this is connected with the sense in which human beings, as distinct from animals, can be said to *have a life* which may have or lack meaning.⁹

Yet in *A Common Humanity* Gaita appears to think that the charge of speciesism needs to be taken seriously. In fact, he occasionally argues as though the concept of humanity had a grounding role in morality. This comes out in his discussion of

another remark of Wittgenstein's: 'It comes to this: only of a living human being and what resembles (behaves like) a living human being can one say: it has sensations; it sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious' (Wittgenstein 1958: sec. 281). Wittgenstein is here countering the imagined suggestion that he is a behaviourist; i.e., that he is equating sensations like pain with a certain form of behaviour. His response is to suggest that while equating pain with some specific form of behaviour would be a simplification, the question whether attributions of pain make sense in the case of a living being is bound up with the ways in which that being behaves and expresses itself. In other words, he is criticizing the dualist notion that the word 'pain' refers to an unfathomable inner state. As I read him he is suggesting, furthermore, even if he does not make it explicit, that we should not focus on the question what condition (inner or outer) the word 'pain' might refer to, but rather pay attention to the role of expressions and attributions of pain in our lives, to the way the use of the word 'pain' is bound up with our ways of responding to others and dealing with them.

In line with this suggestion, it might be thought, the class of beings which merit our concerning ourselves with their pain is not to be picked out on the basis of some set of behavioural criteria, but rather on the basis of our responses to them.

This is the way Gaita reads Wittgenstein:

The responses that form and are formed by our sense of belonging to a common kind cannot be elicited by beings that do not look and behave like us. This is ... because those responses are built into the concepts with

which we identify what could be appropriate objects for our responses. This is a circle – a non-vicious circle – from which we cannot escape without losing the relevant concepts... For the same reason we cannot ... tell in advance all that we will count as looking and behaving like us. *We have to see how we respond.*¹⁰ And reflect on our responses of course.

(Gaita 1999: 269)

I would agree with much of this, both as a reading of Wittgenstein and as an account of the nature of compassion. However, this passage crucially vacillates between two different lines of thought, one of which I would consider correct and the other one confused. The first line of thought is clearly expressed in the observation that the internal relation (as one might put it) between responses to pain and the concept of pain is a *non-vicious* circle. That this is so should be obvious provided we are clear about the nature of the investigation being carried out here. We are not trying to decide in what cases a creature is capable of feeling pain (vis-à-vis the other-minds problem), or when compassion is called upon (as a normative stand); rather we are describing the ways in which certain ways of speaking and acting are bound together.

Given this reading, however, the sentence I have italicized might seem problematic. It seems to mean that Gaita *is* taking a normative stand, proposing as a general principle that we should let our responses *guide* us. One might be tempted to parody this thought by suggesting that one would have to check in a

mirror to see whether one was actually emitting a compassionate response before deciding what needed to be done.

The sentence does, to be sure, admit of other readings: ‘it can’t be laid down in advance how we are going to respond; we simply have to wait and see’. However, some of the other things Gaita has to say seem to support the type of generalist reading I suggested. Thus, in the first sentence of the quotation, he speaks of *our sense of belonging to a common kind* as forming our responses (while also being formed by them). In other words, thoughts about *who I am and what I share* with the other are assumed to have a role in the way I respond to him. Also, Gaita writes that ‘[a]ttitudes towards a soul mark out a kind’, and he speaks of ‘the conception of humankind that is built out of our responses’ – though admittedly it ‘takes little notice of the scientific criterion for *homo sapiens* [and] is not a rival species classification’ (Gaita 1999: 268)¹¹. The idea of a generality enters here through the notion that my thoughts about myself, about who I am, are taken to play a part.¹²

However, I would argue that the notion of sharing something with the other plays a merely accidental part for my moral responsiveness. It is true that it may be *psychologically* important: we all know from experience that our readiness to respond to others may be triggered by the discovery that they and we have something in common (as when we are more easily moved by the plight, say, of Bosnian refugees with their sneakers and VCR’s than that of scantily clad refugees in Congo). But that in itself means that there is something deficient about

our original response to the other. Where the compassion is pure, on the other hand, no thoughts about myself enter in, nor are these thoughts required in order to justify my compassion. Obviously, the compassionate nun in Gaita's example was someone who did not have to remind herself that the mental patients were human beings like her. That, indeed, seems precisely to be the point of the story.¹³

Now, assuming I am right in arguing that no such general ideas are internal to moral responses of the kind we are discussing, it could be suggested that what has nudged Gaita in this direction is something problematic about Wittgenstein's remark. When Wittgenstein uses the modal form 'only of a ... human being ... *can* one say' etc, he gives the impression of laying down rules for the use of certain expressions, rather than simply describing their use. It is as if there were something about the sense of words like 'see', 'hear' or 'be conscious' that actually forbade our using them, whether we wanted to or not, except when certain conditions were fulfilled. However, on the one hand the assumption that there are such rules for the expressions of our language is problematic. And on the other hand (and, as it were, counterbalancing this problem), we are not really given any guidance as to what those supposed rules actually forbid or permit. How close should the similarity be between human behaviour and that of the creature in question for the use of these terms to be 'permissible'?

This problem has been noted by David Cockburn in his essay 'Human Beings and Giant Squids' (Cockburn 1994). He argues, rightly it seems, that if Wittgenstein's point is to be salvaged, the notion of resemblance should not to be taken to refer

to geometrical or other physical similarities between human and other forms of expression; rather, the resemblance should itself be understood as involving the expressive nature of the behaviour. Speaking about ascribing pain to a fly or fear to a squid, he writes:

... it is not the fact that flies writhe or squids flee that makes these ascriptions possible. That we can see these similarities between the behaviour of flies and squids and that of human beings is a *reflection* of, not a condition of, our ability to ascribe the pain or fear. We might then, with some justice, reverse Wittgenstein's remark, writing instead: 'Only of what has sensations; sees; is blind; hears; is deaf; is conscious or unconscious can one say that it is a living human being or resembles (behaves like) a living human being.'¹⁴

(Cockburn 1994: 148)

The relation between the behaviour and the pain or fear, we might say, is an internal one: the remark draws attention to certain conceptual connections, rather than pointing out conditions for the use of certain words. However, if Wittgenstein's remark is understood in this way, any notion of a generality inherent in our responses vanishes.

Where does this leave the issue of speciesism? There are, I would suggest, two ways of taking this notion. It may simply be taken to mean that someone's being human may on occasion be held to be a morally relevant consideration. But to

counter this view by claiming that it is morally unacceptable is simply to beg the question.¹⁵ On the other hand, it may be thought that what would lay me open to a charge of speciesism would be the thought that human beings deserve special treatment simply because they are similar to *me* (or because they belong to the same category as *I*). But this, I have argued, is not a view to be taken seriously, nor is it involved in invoking someone's being human as a moral appeal.

Many of the ways animals are habitually treated by human beings are deplorable or even outrageous – this is also true, of course, of many of the ways in which human beings are habitually treated by other human beings. What is at issue here, however, is not a single oversight but a great number of different types of situation, involving different forms of cruelty or indifference towards different kinds of animals. I assume that fox-hunters, for instance, combine their utter disregard for the suffering of the fox with the greatest affection for their dogs or (at any rate) for their horses. Speciesism, at least in the latter of the senses distinguished above, is mainly a philosopher's notion and plays no important part in actual life – it need, perhaps, no more be involved in people's cruelty to animals than a formulated racist ideology need be involved in the disregard for individuals of a certain appearance.

Is it being suggested, then, that the concept of a common humanity has no important moral role? Not at all. The point, as I see it, is simply this: there is no need to suppose that this concept is what underlies our moral sensitivity to other human beings. Perhaps it could be said, on the contrary, that the concept of a

common humanity is the *result* of reflection on our responses: it is because we note our readiness to respond to others in compassionate ways that we are open to an understanding of the moral importance of being human, rather than the other way round. Rightly understood, then, the idea of a common humanity carries with it an exhortation to be attentive to those we are inclined to disregard. It is aimed at someone who would narrow down the range of those to whom we owe attention, not at someone who would widen it.¹⁶

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¹ In this essay I shall mainly focus on Gaita's book *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love & Truth & Justice* (1999). Other works by Gaita that are relevant to my theme are the book *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception* (1991), his critical notice of D. Z. Phillips, *Interventions in Ethics*, *Philosophical Investigations* (1994), and the book *The Philosopher's Dog* (2003).

² It seems important that the case is one of racially-based slavery. The point could not, perhaps, be made with the same degree of credibility when it comes, say, to the sort of slavery practised in Ancient Greece or Rome, where the slave-owner and the slave might well have agreed that they were just the same, except that one of them happened to be the owner and the other one the slave – rather like a contemporary company executive and an ordinary employee who earns one thousandth of the executive's salary, an inequality that is not grounded in any, even alleged, innate differences.

³ There might be a discussion of whether A's attitude is actually to be called racist – whether it is really geared to racial differences – but that question is not to be

taken seriously. It presupposes that race is a coherent concept, which it is not. In much debate about racism there is a failure to recognize the extent to which the very idea of race is ultimately dependent on group prejudice. (On this, see Boxill 2001.)

⁴ Appearance often has a dual role in racism. Thus, in the case of anti-black racism, skin colour, on the one hand, is what ‘gives someone away’ as black, while on the other hand, someone unfamiliar with blacks may feel it harder to read the facial expressions of a black individual due to his skin colour or physiognomy.

⁵ My italics. Of course, it is not uncommon for people to have this type of attitude towards practically everyone in their lives.

⁶ Gaita does, it is true, discuss the complexities of the ‘because’; see Gaita (1999: 273f.).

⁷ This word, though utterly awkward, seems to have gained currency and is hardly to be avoided.

⁸ Sometimes the fact that many of us eat animals but do not eat human beings is mentioned as a case of gratuitous favouring of *homo sapiens*: in this case, it is argued, animals are being treated worse than human beings for the simple reason that they do not belong to our species. This may be questioned, however: for one thing, it does not go without saying that eating a human being or animal after its death is in itself a case of injuring the creature in question. Furthermore, the prohibition on eating human flesh lacks many of the characteristics of a moral norm. Obviously, for most people the question is not about a temptation that needs to be resisted; rather, we have a spontaneous revulsion against cannibalism.

As for the cultures in which cannibalism is practised, whatever our feelings about this, I do not think we would regard it as a sign of moral deficiency. For an illuminating discussion of this issue, see Diamond (1991 a).

⁹ See Gaita (1991: Ch. 8). Cora Diamond takes a similar position in Diamond (1991 b). Alice Crary argues that it is an objective feature of a situation that someone's being human and not an animal has a bearing on what it *means* to treat her as we do (Crary 2007). What they are arguing is that simply to deny that the human-animal distinction can have moral relevance is to beg the moral question. An accusation of speciesism will sometimes be backed up by the claim that differences in DNA cannot have moral significance. But this is simply a rhetorical device. No one who considers the fact that someone is a human being important would think of this as a matter of his or her DNA.

¹⁰ My italics.

¹¹ When Gaita points out that the moral role of the words "human being" is not connected with the species *homo sapiens* (Gaita 1999: 262f.), this makes one ask *how* the relevant category is to be picked out. But actually the point should be that no question of categories enters here.

¹² There is a similar ambiguity in Diamond. When she writes, 'A human being is someone who has a human life to lead, *as I do*, someone whose fate is a human fate, *as is mine*' (Diamond 1991 b: 59), one wants to ask what difference is made by the words I have italicized.

¹³ In fact, when it comes to the awakening of my responsiveness, the thought that the other is like someone I love may often be more effective than the thought that he or she is like me. But this too, in a sense, would be accidental.

¹⁴ Gaita, it is true, is aware of these considerations (see Gaita 1999: 164f.).

¹⁵ Cp, above, note 8. Someone might argue that such a position is formally indistinguishable from racism. But – problems about the notion of race aside – there is no reason to suppose that it should be possible to distinguish between morally acceptable and unacceptable views on the basis of form alone, regardless of content.

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