



## The Moral Philosophy of Raimond Gaita and Some Questions of Method in the Philosophy of Religion

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### Abstract

Raimond Gaita's moral philosophy is distinguished by, among other things, its attention to the role of embodied, enacted witness in disclosing certain moral values, and its understanding of the emotions as forms of thought. In this paper, I consider how Gaita's insights on these matters may be applied to certain questions in the philosophy of religion, paying particular attention to the nature of religious experience and 'the problem of evil'. I suggest that Gaita's discussion of how we come to recognise moral values or 'meanings' can be extended to the question of how we might recognise religious meanings. On this view, religious experience may take the form of an appreciation of the meaning borne by a material context (rather than, for example, some supra-sensory encounter with a supernatural agent), and our sense of the goodness or otherwise of the world may be answerable to the authoritative example of particular lives.

### Keywords

Gaita, saintly example, religious experience, problem of evil

### Introduction

The moral philosophy of Raimond Gaita is a rich and many-stranded account of the normative dimension of our lives with other human beings. In this paper I am going to pick out just two themes from this larger picture: these themes concern the role of embodied, enacted witness in revealing certain moral values, and the nature of the emotions as forms of thought. I am going to argue that Gaita's development of these themes suggests a new perspective on some central questions in contemporary philosophy of religion.

The recent literature in philosophy of religion has been much concerned with the exploration of various analogies between religious

and other kinds of understanding. Two such analogies have commanded particularly wide attention: first, the idea that religious belief can be justified in rather the way that a scientific theory concerning the existence of some not directly visible entity might be (here, religious belief functions as an explanatory hypothesis); and second, the idea that religious belief may be grounded in religious experience, in rather the way that our beliefs about everyday perceptual objects are grounded in sensory experience.

Both these strategies are of interest, but both have a tendency to consign to the background, or treat as epistemically irrelevant, the believer's feelings and behaviours. After all, scientific theorising is not as such wedded to certain states of feeling, or to the striking of a certain bodily posture; indeed feelings may well be thought to get in the way of scientific insight. Similarly, perceptual experience of the kind that is typically the focus of this literature concerns simple observation, rather than affectively informed, enacted engagement with an environment. Gaita's thoughts on the role that is played in our moral understanding by embodied, enacted witness and by the emotions considered as forms of thought point the way, I am going to argue, to a rather different religious epistemology.

So drawing on Gaita's work, I am going to suggest another analogy for the nature of religious understanding – not now scientific theorising, or sensory observation, but the recognition of the 'meaning' which attaches to a material context or place. The identification of such meanings is evidently fundamental to human life. It is, after all, only when I appreciate the meaning or existential import of a particular material context that I know what sort of behaviour is fitting in the context. And this is not simply because in a given context some behaviours are appropriate and others not, but also because the action that is constituted by a given stretch of behaviour may vary with context. My applying paint to a wall, to take a simple example, will count as one action when performed in my home, and another if performed in a lecture theatre. Sensitivity to place-relative meanings is, I suggest, so basic to our sense of the world that very often it receives no acknowledgement in discursive thought. Instead, we register such meanings, in many cases, directly in what we feel and what we do – rather than our feelings and behaviours being shaped by some prior feeling-less or action-independent conception of what the context demands.

Gaita's work is concerned with the recognition of inter-personal meanings, and with the role of bodily response and feeling in disclosing such meanings. I am going to expound his thinking on these matters a little now, before returning to the question of how his reflections are relevant to the question of how we might apprehend religious meanings.

## The role of enacted witness in revealing moral values

I shall begin by citing what has become quite a celebrated passage, where Gaita is describing his experience as a young man, working as an assistant on a psychiatric ward. He writes:

The patients were judged to be incurable and they appeared to have irretrievably lost everything which gives meaning to our lives. They had no grounds for self-respect insofar as we connect that with self-esteem; or, none which could be based on qualities or achievements for which we could admire or congratulate them without condescension. . . . A small number of psychiatrists did, however, work devotedly to improve their conditions. They spoke, against all appearances, of the inalienable dignity of even those patients. I admired them enormously. . . . One day a nun came to the ward. In her middle years, only her vivacity made an impression on me until she talked to the patients. Then everything in her demeanour towards them – the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body – contrasted with and showed up the behaviour of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been. She thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this.<sup>1</sup>

This passage turns on a distinction between what a person sincerely professes on some normative matter and the attitude that is revealed in their behaviour. This is a familiar enough distinction: we all know that in our behaviour, we can fall short of our ideals, even when those ideals are sincerely professed. In Gaita's example, the psychiatrists have the right normative theory: they hold, quite sincerely, that their patients are fully their equals. But this is not a view which they succeed in enacting; it is not something they believe (as Gaita puts it) 'in their hearts'. So their blindness or insensitivity to their patients' worth is realised not in what they have, in all sincerity, to say about them; instead it takes the form of a failure of behaviour and feeling.

Gaita goes on to draw out this example in the direction of a moral radical thesis:

If I am asked what I mean when I say that even such people as were patients in that ward are fully our equals, I can only say that the quality of her love proved that they are rightly the objects of our non-condescending treatment, that we should do all in our power to respond in that way. But if someone were now to ask me what informs my sense that they are rightly the objects of such treatment, I can appeal only to the purity of her love. For me, the purity of

<sup>1</sup> Raimond Gaita, *A Common Humanity. Thinking About Love & Truth & Justice* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1999), pp. 17–19.

the love proved the reality of what it revealed. . . . From the point of view of the speculative intelligence, however, I am going round in ever darkening circles, because I allow for no independent justification of her attitude.<sup>2</sup>

Here Gaita suggests not simply that the nun's example led him to a deepened appreciation of the sense in which the patients are fully his equals, but also that he cannot see any other route to this deepened understanding. There is no way, he says, in which this newly acquired insight might be corroborated. He also thinks, evidently, that the insight stands in no need of corroboration. This proposal is likely to strike the reader, at least initially, as rather counter-intuitive. We are inclined to think: doesn't the nun behave in this way because she, first of all, recognises some quality in the patients? And if that is so, shouldn't we be able (at least in principle) to identify this quality independently of any reference to her behaviour? And can't we then corroborate the value claim that is implied in her behaviour – by seeing whether that behaviour constitutes an appropriate response to the quality? But it is just this (apparent) possibility that Gaita seems to deny in this passage.

The counter-intuitive character of this proposal can be removed, at least to a degree, by reflecting further on what exactly Gaita comes to learn from the nun's example. What he learns in the first instance, I suggest, is that it is possible for the patients to figure in an embodied, enacted relationship of genuine equality. No doubt he had assumed, in some sense, that they could figure in such a relationship before the nun's appearance on the ward. But in the light of the nun's behaviour, he realises that he had not fully understood the kind of bodily demeanour that would distinguish such a relationship. Had he known that this sort of demeanour was characteristic of such a relationship, then he might well have wondered whether the enactment of a relationship of genuine equality is in fact a possibility for human beings. So what he comes to learn is that it is possible for the patients to figure in an embodied, enacted relationship of genuine equality, and at the same time he comes to a new understanding of what is required, in terms of bodily demeanour, for such a relationship.

If this is the nature of the discovery that Gaita makes, then we can see why he should suppose that the insight that is disclosed in the nun's behaviour neither requires nor permits further justification. For the nun's behaviour, on this account, reveals the possibility of an enacted relationship of genuine equality by providing a token of such a relationship. This sufficiently explains why the insight conveyed in her behaviour does not require corroboration. In these terms, we can also see why independent corroboration of this insight (concerning

<sup>2</sup> Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, pp. 21–2, Gaita's emphasis.

the possibility of an enacted relationship of equality) may not even be possible. After all, corroboration would presumably take the form of an appeal to some quality in the patients, or some truth concerning the patients, which is identified independently of the nun's (or anyone else's) behaviour. But concerning any such quality, we can always ask: granted that the patients have this quality, is it possible for them to figure in an enacted relationship of genuine equality? And no behaviour-independent characterisation of the patients will tell us, we might suppose, that such a relationship is in fact a human possibility. (Compare again the gap between the psychiatrists' thought that a relationship of genuine equality is appropriate given the patients' dignity and, on the other hand, their capacity to act in this way.) So any such attempt to corroborate the idea that the patients can figure in an enacted relationship of genuine equality will fall short, we might suppose, of what we can anyway know from the embodied witness of the nun, which is simply an instance of such a relationship.

Of course, the picture is further complicated by the fact that Gaita does not only come to learn that the patients can stand in an enacted relationship of genuine equality. He also comes to suppose that this sort of relationship is fitting. But I think he would say that there is no chain of argument that will take us persuasively from the first claim (such a relationship is possible) to the second (it is fitting). On the ward, he sees that such a relationship can be enacted, and in seeing this, without further reflection, he grasps that this behaviour is indeed fitting. It is not difficult to see why we might associate these two claims. Human beings cannot enact a relationship of genuine equality with just anything (not with a stone, for example, nor even we might suppose with a tree, or a dog). So anything which can figure in such a relationship is thereby shown to have a special kind of importance – an importance relative to the kind of role it can play in human life. And we might take it as a basic truth that anything which is capable of entering so profoundly into a human life ought to be treated with the kind of respect that the nun shows the patients. So I think Gaita would say that here we are dealing with a fundamental judgement of value, one that cannot be further argued: if the nun can relate to the patients on the basis of genuine equality, then it is incumbent upon you and me to relate to people such as the patients on that ward on the same basis, so far as we can. (Compare his comment that: 'Our sense of the preciousness of other people is connected with their power to affect us in ways we cannot fathom...'<sup>3</sup>)

If all of this is so, then the only support that we can provide for the claim that the nun's behaviour is fitting is the observation that such behaviour is possible. And in turn, as we have seen, we might

<sup>3</sup> Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, p. 26.

suppose that our knowledge of the possibility of such behaviour requires reference to lived example, and cannot be corroborated by other means.

So the burden of Gaita's argument to this point is that certain kinds of normative insight are relative to enacted example, and not otherwise available.

### The emotions as forms of thought

I shall touch now, more briefly, on a second theme in Gaita's work. While his discussion of the nun is focused upon her behaviour, he clearly supposes that there is some sort of connection between what she does and what she feels. Or to put the point otherwise, the failure of the psychiatrists is not just a deficiency in action, but also a failure of feeling: the nun reveals that 'in their hearts' (as Gaita puts it) the psychiatrists do not believe in the full equality of their patients.

Later in this same text, Gaita develops a fuller account of the role of emotional feelings as the seat of evaluative insight. Here again he cites a particular case:

Suppose that someone is accused of being sentimental in her thoughts about what the death of a dog may mean. She believes that it is proper and (for her) obligatory to bury the dog in a dog cemetery, to erect a monument to it and each year to light a candle to its memory, and other things like that. She might try to support her beliefs by false empirical claims about the capacity of animals... But she might not do anything like that. She might simply give poetic but sentimental accounts of what it means for human beings and dogs to be fellow creatures, sharing a common fate, destined to die, and so on. Suppose that someone does judge her to be sentimental. Could someone else who is unsure say, 'I don't care whether she is sentimental. I want to know whether her beliefs are true or false'? I think not. What could they be after, in insisting on that distinction? It made sense in the scientific case, and would make sense here if she entertained false empirical beliefs about dogs. But on the assumption that she does not, her sentimentality is not rightly thought of as a cause of her thought's failure on a dimension that could be specified independently of its vulnerability to sentimentality and similar afflictions. Its being sentimental is the primary form of its failure as thought.<sup>4</sup>

On one familiar account, emotional feelings comprise a thought component and a feeling component – where the thought gives rise to the feeling. On this view, embarrassment, for example, is to be disaggregated into the thought (which may be simply entertained, and not asserted) that I have done something that will lower my

<sup>4</sup> Gaita, *A Common Humanity*, pp. 250–1.

standing in the eyes of others, and a negative feeling, broadly one of discomfort, which arises from this thought. This account treats the emotions as world-directed, rather than as simply stomach-churnings or twinges for example – but their intentionality is attributable to their thought component, and their feeling component is treated as not in itself world-directed, but as a kind of thought-induced sensation.

Gaita's account of affective states such as sentimentality and pity invites us to think that this distinction between the thought and feeling components of an emotion may on occasions be misconceived. It would be a mistake, he is suggesting, to suppose that the sentimentality of the woman in his example is to be disaggregated into a thought element and a feeling element – and to suppose that in so far as her thinking fails, it is because of a failing in the thought element. Rather, he is suggesting, the 'primary form' of her thought's failure may be its 'being sentimental', or its being affect-laden in a certain way.

It is natural to bring together the two themes in Gaita's work that we have been examining. The nun's example shows that some kinds of normative insight are relative to lived example: Gaita only comes to understand that the patients can (and ought to) figure in a relationship of genuine equality by seeing this possibility enacted. And we might add that there is, presumably, a first-personal counterpart for this case: someone might recognise the full equality of the patients by themselves displaying the kinds of demeanour that the nun shows in her relationship to the patients. In such a case, we should suppose again that an appreciation of the full equality of the patients is relative to the knowledge that they can figure in an enacted relationship of equality, and that knowledge of the possibility of such a relationship is relative to particular tokens of it. The example of the woman who mourns the death of her dog suggests similarly that some kinds of normative insight, or lack of insight, are relative to feeling: it is in her felt response to this event that her thought fails. (Contrast this picture: a feeling-independent thought fails, so generating a certain feeling, which is not directly assessable for its aptness to the situation.)

We might suppose, therefore, that behavioural and feeling responses can themselves constitute a mode of thought, a way of taking stock of certain truths concerning the significance of other human beings, or other creatures. (Again, this seems to be the implication of the case of the psychiatrists. Their behaviour- and feeling-independent thoughts concerning the worth of the patients are true enough. Nonetheless, they fail to apprehend in full the significance of the patients, and this must be, then, a failing in feeling and in behaviour.)

As we have seen, Gaita's discussion invites a further claim: not only can behavioural and feeling responses themselves constitute forms of thought, but what they reveal may resist articulation by

discursive means, or by means of some feeling-less or behaviour-free thought. This is certainly the implication of the example of the nun, as he develops it. Similarly, we might suppose, a certain reckoning with the significance of the death of a friend may be vouchsafed in feeling, and may not be otherwise available. For instance, two people may reckon with the loss of a friend in terms that are verbally indistinguishable (and that will, let us suppose, remain verbally indistinguishable however much they articulate the nature of their loss), and yet we may think that one of them has a truer recognition of what this loss amounts to, on account of what she or he feels. In sum then, actions and feelings can themselves be the locus of our recognition of certain 'meanings', and what they reveal may not be graspable in other terms.

If all of this is so, then we should see feeling and enacted example as vehicles for the disclosure of 'meanings', and we should suppose that these vehicles do not just stammer out insights that are revealed more primordially or more clearly by feelingless or behaviour-free modes of apprehending the world. And if that is so, then it is natural to wonder whether something similar should not be said about our recognition of meanings not just in moral but also in religious contexts.

### Recognising religious meanings: religious experience and 'the problem of evil'

Religion is concerned of course with our relations with other human beings – as Gaita notes, the nun no doubt sees her relationship to the patients as in some way consonant with her religious commitments.<sup>5</sup> But religion is concerned we could say with particularly encompassing meanings, and with the question of what mode of life, or what sort of conduct and what sort of feeling, is fitting for a human being not just in their relations with other people, but given a broader material context, and perhaps given simply the sum of things.

If this is the right way to read Gaita's work, and the right way to read religion, then we might ask whether Gaita's approach points to the possibility of a rather different way into the standard 'problems' of the philosophy of religion. We might wonder, for example, whether we should take more seriously the possibility that the saints, or other exemplary figures, convey certain religious insights by virtue of what they do, and that these insights cannot be otherwise conveyed. I want briefly to consider two ways of developing this idea, drawing upon

<sup>5</sup> He notes for instance the connection between her demeanour and her use of the language of divine parental love in her prayers: *A Common Humanity*, p. 22.



two familiar topics in the philosophy of religion – first religious experience, and then ‘the problem of evil’.

Recent analytical philosophical discussion of religious experience has tended to privilege the case of experience which seems to its subject to be directly of God. Richard Swinburne’s definition is reasonably representative of this literature. He comments: ‘For present purposes it will be useful to define it [religious experience] as an experience which seems (epistemically) to the subject to be an experience of God (either of his just being there, or of his saying or bringing about something) or of some other supernatural thing.’<sup>6</sup>

It is striking that this sort of approach has a tendency to abstract from the material context of religious experience – the focus of the experience is instead God considered as a supernatural object. And when some part is given to the material context, it is notable that the recognition of God in that context tends to be separated from what might be revealed in behaviour or feeling. For instance, one of Swinburne’s categories of religious experience is the case where someone ‘seems to perceive the supernatural object in perceiving a perfectly ordinary non-religious object’. And as an analogy for this case, he cites ‘the way in which someone may see a vapour trail in the sky as the trail of an aeroplane.’<sup>7</sup> Here, we non-inferentially recognise an object in its effects. But the data in this case (the vapour trail) are given, I take it, just by looking – that is, they are given independently of feeling and behaviour.

If we take seriously Gaita’s thought that the recognition of meanings can be behaviour- and feeling-dependent, and if we take seriously the idea that religion is concerned centrally with meaning recognition, then we might wonder whether there are other ways of understanding religious experience. This is not to say that more standard accounts do not fit the phenomenology of some kinds of religious experience – but it would be good, I think, to allow for other possibilities, which will foreground the fact that, in the normal case, religious belief is not accidentally connected to questions of meaning recognition, and in turn, therefore, related to matters of behaviour and feeling.

The phenomenological literature on the experience of sacred place provides one way of applying Gaita’s insights to the question of religious experience. Summarising some of the main themes of this literature, Thomas Barrie remarks for example that sacred sites are commonly set apart – by the use of a boundary wall, or by virtue of their relative inaccessibility, as when they are set on a mountain or island. And he notes how the approach to a sacred place often

<sup>6</sup> Richard Swinburne, *The Existence of God* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2nd edition 2004), p. 295.

<sup>7</sup> Swinburne, *The Existence of God*, p. 299.

requires the believer to negotiate a number of demanding thresholds. Quoting Joseph Campbell, he comments: 'The way is arduous and fraught with peril because it is, in fact, a rite for passing from the profane to the sacred.' And he adds: 'The path is rarely easy but is experienced as a trial, either physically or psychologically.'<sup>8</sup>

This feature of sacred sites, which recurs across cultures, is surely significant – the implication seems to be that if a believer is to apprehend the meaning or significance of a sacred site, then some preparation of the body is required. By travelling to some relatively inaccessible place, or by undertaking an arduous journey of pilgrimage, or by subjecting the body to a degree of physical discipline by traversing the various thresholds of a sacred site, the believer is brought to acknowledge the seriousness of religious meanings. These meanings, before all other meanings, cannot be appreciated in a state of casual indifference, but demand of the believer a certain seriousness of purpose, and a correlative disposition of the body. Of course, emotional responses are also important here: the practical difficulties the believer has to negotiate in order to reach the site help to engender a spirit of focussed, reverential attentiveness.

The experience of the sacred site shows, I think, how the phenomena that Gaita has discussed in the case of inter-personal relations (or the relations of a person to their dog) may be transposed into the domain of religious faith. The appreciation of moral meaning, Gaita has argued, is relative to bodily demeanour and what one 'believes in one heart'. Similarly, firsthand appreciation of religious meaning, in the case of the sacred site, depends upon assuming the right disposition of the body, and experiencing the right set of affective responses.

Moreover, just as the nun's behaviour is tied to what she 'believes in her heart', so the case of sacred sites invites us to suppose that meaning recognition is relative to feelings and behavioural response in conjunction. And this is what we should expect given recent theorising about the emotions. We might say, for example, that emotional feelings give structure to the perceptual field. They accord salience to some elements in the field, as when my feeling fear of a fast-approaching dog means that the dog looms out at me, while other features of my environment are consigned to the periphery of my awareness. And emotional feelings are at the same time folded into predispositions to behave: to feel fear of the dog is partly to be aware (not necessarily focally aware) of the tensing of various muscles, and the body's making ready to act in this situation, so as to avert imminent danger. So a certain insight, concerning what matters or is worth attending to in a situation of practical choice, is realised here in a particular organisation of the perceptual field, and in a correlative

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Barrie, *Sacred Place: Myth, Ritual, and Meaning in Architecture* (Boston MA: Shambhala, 1996), p. 59.

emotional feeling and posture of the body, where perception, feeling and bodily demeanour together form a unified state of mind.

So Gaita's examples of meaning recognition (or meaning blindness) in moral contexts invite us to think afresh about the nature of religious experience – and to see how such experience may be mediated by our appreciation of the meanings borne by a material context, where these meanings are disclosed in the body, and correlatively in forms of felt response. Such an approach to religious experience would be relatively distinctive when set against the backdrop of recent analytical discussion of these matters, and would help to deepen our appreciation of the significance of the data described in phenomenological treatments of the nature of sacred space. It would also help to bring into clearer focus the ways in which belief, practice, and disposition of the heart are mutually defining in religious contexts.

We have been talking about delimited zones which have a special, sacred significance. But as I have said already, we might also suppose that the religions are concerned with ultimate meanings – with the question of what sort of bodily demeanour, and correlatively what kinds of feeling and modes of salient perception, are fitting for human beings given the nature not just of specific places, but of reality as such.

So we might see the religious adept as sensitive not only to the character of some localised 'sacred' space (in fact, some traditions regard the distinction between sacred and 'profane' space as deeply problematic, of course) but as sensitive to a range of global or encompassing meanings, which are embedded in the material order in its totality.

Saintly lives sometimes seem to exemplify this sort of possibility. Think for example of Saint Francis, and his open-handed vulnerability in his dealings not only with human beings, but also with the things of nature. Simon Tugwell interprets Francis's enacted example in these terms:

Whatever happens is God's gift to us. This is the source of Francis' famous love of nature. But we shall misunderstand it entirely if we only look at the obviously attractive features of it. It is easy enough to enjoy the story of Francis taming the wolf of Gubbio or making friends with a cicada, and there is something pleasantly sentimental about his getting a passer-by to purchase for him a solitary lamb that was left in a field full of goats. But Francis' acceptance of all creatures was intended to mean a radical unprotectedness precisely in the face of all creatures. So Francis bids his followers not merely to be obedient to all human creatures, but even to be subject (*subditi*) to wild animals. And subjection does not even stop there. On one occasion Francis' habit caught fire, and he tried to stop his companion putting the fire out, saying to him, 'Dearest brother, do not harm brother fire.' Francis only

permitted the fire to be extinguished because the superior insisted on it... It is this quality of total resignation to the will even of inanimate things which gives Francis' poverty its special nuance.<sup>9</sup>

Francis, we could say, generalises the example of the nun. His concern takes the form not simply of an impartial love of human beings, but of a love of the wild animals and the things of nature. And we could follow Gaita here, and suppose that what is revealed in Francis's behaviour is not fully graspable in other terms. Allowing that some discursive account can be given of the meanings which are acknowledged in Francis's conduct (for Tugwell, these meanings are ultimately rooted in Francis's identification with the vulnerability and suffering of the incarnate God), we might add that these meanings cannot be fully disclosed by discursive means. This is because Francis's conduct establishes that natural things can actually figure in a relationship of genuine equality (or at any rate, a relationship of serious yet unsentimental concern) – and no purely verbal commitment to their equality will be sufficient to show that such a relationship can be acted out. Similarly, the nun shows how equality with the patients can be enacted (and ought therefore to be enacted), whereas the example of the psychiatrists shows only how we may commit ourselves to this sort of equality in words.

In discussions of the problem of evil, one very familiar strategy takes the form of positing various relations of dependence between goods and evils, and considering whether the evils make possible 'outweighing' goods. This sort of approach to the goodness of the world rests fundamentally upon a discursive appreciation of how its various parts fit together so as to constitute a totality which is overall good. But Francis's example, or the example of the saints more generally, in so far as their lives witness to a fundamental trust in the order of the world, offers another kind of route into the thought that the structure of this world is consistent with its derivation from a God whose purposes are good. And if Gaita is right, then we might suppose that the meanings that are revealed in such lives may not be fully graspable otherwise.

## Conclusions

So here again, as in the case of religious experience, we find that a Gaita-style appreciation of how we come to recognise meanings yields a rather different approach to a standard issue in the philosophy of religion. And here again, a perspective which is informed by his

<sup>9</sup> Simon Tugwell, *Ways of Imperfection: An Exploration of Christian Spirituality* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1985), p. 130, Tugwell's emphasis.

insights is likely to be more attentive to the connections between belief, feeling and practice, and more attuned therefore to the relationship of religious belief to material context. By contrast, as we have seen, some discussions of religious experience in effect bypass the material order altogether, by concerning themselves with some direct perception of God as a supernatural object, or if they allow for the possibility of an indirect perception of God, one which is mediated by material context, then they tend to overlook the role of behavioural and affective response in disclosing the meaning of that context – treating God instead as simply the efficient cause of various phenomena which are characterised in ‘objective’ or in feeling- and behaviour-independent terms. Similarly, discussion of the problem of evil can also overlook the embodied witness of particular individuals – tending to focus instead upon discursively articulated connections between various goods and evils, or perhaps a discursively articulated account of the constraints on human beings’ capacity to understand these matters.

So Gaita’s example of the nun, and his insistence upon the role of ‘feelings’ as forms of thought, together point towards a rather different religious epistemology from the scientific- and perceptual-style epistemologies that have driven a certain amount of recent theorising – and thereby they point towards a clearer account of the relationship between religious belief and an embodied, affectively informed stance in the world. His work also invites, perhaps, a rather more modest assessment of what philosophical reflection on these matters might achieve: the role of the philosopher, we might say, is just to prepare a way, so we can see more clearly what is revealed in the luminous, authoritative example of particular lives.

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