good and evil
an absolute conception

second edition

raimond gaita

GOOD AND EVIL

Reviews of the first edition

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Raimond Gaita's *Good and Evil* is one of the most important, original and provocative books on the nature of morality to have been published in recent years. It is essential reading for anyone interested in what it means to talk about good and evil. Gaita argues that questions about morality are inseparable from the preciousness of each human being, an issue we can only address if we place the idea of remorse at the centre of moral life. Drawing on an astonishing range of thinkers and writers, including Plato, Wittgenstein, George Orwell and Primo Levi, Gaita also reflects on the place of reason and truth in morality and ultimately how questions about good and evil are connected to the meaning of our lives.

This revised edition of *Good and Evil* includes a substantial new preface and afterword by the author.

GOOD AND EVIL

An Absolute Conception

Second Edition

Raimond Gaita

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For Martin Winkler,
teacher and friend

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Preface to the first edition

This book began as a PhD thesis under the supervision of R. F. Holland. I owe very much to him as will be evident to anyone who knows his work. I also owe much – probably more than I am any longer able to tell – to many years of critical but sympathetic discussion with Peter Winch and Marina Barabas.

Also, but again in ways that are hard to specify, I owe much to the students at the University of London, especially those at King's College, who, since 1977, suffered my explorations of the themes of this book and who helped me to formulate my thoughts more clearly.

I am grateful to Paul McLaughlin for his comments on the final draft.

Preface to the second edition

I

To write a preface or an afterword? I decided to do both. The preface is intended to guide new and previous readers through a conceptual landscape that may seem, to some degree, foreign to them, and to remove obstacles to seeing its main features, obstacles I had created. The afterword develops more forcibly than in the body of the book: an argument with a radical conclusion.

The book is not altered substantially. Grammatical errors have (I hope) been corrected, sentences have been shortened, and I have made other efforts to make my meaning clearer. In service to that ambition almost every page has been altered.

When the book was first published it proved controversial, earning high praise and some abuse. Its style and tone were partly responsible for both. They remain essentially unchanged, though I would not write now as I did then. Friends of the book convinced me that short of radical revision, attempts to modify its style and tone were more likely to deprive the book of its power than make it more congenial to the people it irritates. I have taken their advice. My thanks to Bernard Holiday, Christopher Cordner, David Levy and, most of all, David Saksena.

II

In the Introduction to his fine collection of essays, *Against Empiricism*,[1] R. F. Holland writes:

> A stance has to be taken unless it goes by default, towards the difference between judgements that are of the highest significance for ethics and judgements that are not. In the former case I would say that it is more a matter of registering an experience or marking an encounter, than passing a judgement. I am thinking now of what can be seen in the unprofitable fineness of certain deed or characters – and is pointed to by the unprofitable vileness of others; the difference between the unqualified goodness attested or offended against there and the ordinary run of merits and demerits among people and their works.

Good and Evil 'registers' three 'experiences', 'marks' three 'encounters'. It describes them and reflects upon what strikes me morally and philosophically important about them and attempts to place them conceptually. The 'marking' is, in all three cases, a kind of testimony. In that respect, and others, the book is not morally neutral, but (for good and bad reasons) it is no longer necessary to apologise for that. *Good and Evil* is not, however, a book on practical ethics or a book intended to help the reader answer the question, 'How should one live?' My primary aim is to *understand* those encounters and to place them in traditions of philosophical thought about morality and concern over the meaning of our lives more generally. Even in its most polemical final chapter, my concern is to understand what moral philosophers can be held morally accountable for – what kind of holding to account it is – even in the practice of the discipline. I hope I will not be misunderstood, then, if I say that the book is resolutely and morally passionately an enterprise in meta-ethics. I do not avoid testimony and commitment, but I constantly step back to examine the concepts and assumptions that feature in its descriptions and discussions. *Good and Evil* invites readers to see morality and philosophy from a new perspective; not so much by arguing for this or for that thesis, as by exposing assumptions, showing other possibilities and being sceptical about what we often think *must* be the case.

Of the three encounters, the most important is not the one that I first write about. It appears in Chapter 11 disguised as a response to the compassion Mother Teresa showed to the beggars of Calcutta. Younger readers may not know of her, or they and others who do

may have been persuaded by Christopher Hitchens that she was really no saint.[2] Hitchens is wrong, I believe, but I will not argue that here. For me, the most transforming encounter with saintly goodness was not, in fact, seeing Mother Teresa on television and reading her and about her. When I was a young man I worked as an assistant in a psychiatric hospital, in a ward where many patients had been for twenty or more years. There I met a nun who responded without a trace of condescension towards people who were incurably mentally ill and who had been abandoned by friends and relatives, even by their parents. I tell the full story and reflect on it at some length in *A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice*,[3] published almost ten years after *Good and Evil*. When I wrote *Good and Evil* I was not prepared to speak so personally.

The wonder of the nun's behaviour has inspired much on my philosophical work because it revealed what a human life could mean. Even people like those patients, who appear to have lost everything that gives sense to our lives, are fully our equals. Yet if I try to explain what it means to say that her love showed me that they were fully our equals ('proved' it to me, indeed for I could not doubt it), I could only say that she responded without a trace of condescension and that the wondrousness of it compelled me to affirm its rightness.

Much of the reflection in this book is about what that can mean. It seeks to understand why 'goodness' (of a kind that invites a capital 'G'), 'love' and 'purity' are words that seem to be indispensable to any attempt to characterise her demeanour, what kind of testimony it compelled and what 'evil' means when it is paired with that kind of goodness. Since *Good and Evil* was first published, philosophers have shown some interest in the concept of evil, but not in the kind of goodness that we so naturally pair with it in our ordinary ways of speaking.

The second 'encounter' is not personal in that way. It came though reading Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*,[4] in which she records Moshe Landau's inspired intervention at the trial of Adolf Eichmann in 1961, over which he presided. Against those who wished to make a show trial of it, Landau was moved to say that the trial had one and only one purpose – to do justice. From one

perspective his point was about the procedures necessary to preserve the integrity of the court. From another (and of course these perspectives do not conflict) he gave voice to one of the sublime features of our system of criminal justice. Justice was owed to the chief architect of the Final Solution, not just for the sake of future legal or political goods, but because it was owed *to him* (as a human being, I am tempted to say), even though there was no doubt about his identity or about his terrible guilt. Only if justice were done for that reason, amongst others, would it be done at all. Only then would the integrity of the court remain intact. That is how I read Landau's remarks.

The third experience is of remorse, which I think of not as a psychological response to wrongdoing, useful to stiffen one's resolve not to offend again, but as a pained, bewildered realisation of what it means (in a sense interdependent with *what it is*) to wrong someone. When it is lucid, remorse, as I characterise it, is an astonished encounter with the reality of the ethical. I describe it variously in the book. In Chapter 4, my example is a Dutchwoman who was involved in a plot to kill Hitler and who ordered three Jews she had been sheltering in her home to leave because the plot would be aborted if they were discovered. Within days of leaving her home all three were murdered. She hated Hitler for many things, she said, but most of all because he made a 'murderess' of her. In *A Common Humanity* I tell the fictitious story of a man who, in a fit of irritation, pushes aside an old beggar who had aggressively demanded money from him. The beggar falls, hits his head on the curb and dies. Though no one would have given a thought to his death were he to have died of natural causes, he haunts the man who killed him, tempting him to kill himself because he can no longer live with himself. After roughly two thousand years of hearing that human beings are sacred, that we are all God's children, we no longer find that remarkable. Step back from that tradition, even a little, and it seems astonishing.

Much the same is true of Landau's intervention. We are perhaps thankful for it, even inspired by it, but not astonished. We have grown accustomed to the idea that justice is owed to every human being irrespective of who they are, what they have done and what attitude they take to what they have done. Some people disagree, of

course, but the matter is, at most, controversial for us. Aristotle would have found it absurd and, in a way, he would have been right. I try to reclaim the wondrousness of it for philosophical reflection.

The encounters I mark are dramatic. Holland did not have such occasions in mind when he spoke of 'judgements that are of the highest significance for ethics'. Dramatic though my examples are, I suggest that they all reveal something universal. Or, more accurately perhaps: someone who is claimed by them will take them to reveal something universal in the same way as someone who responds to the parable of the Good Samaritan does. I do not always characterise in the same way what is revealed. Sometimes I say that it is the inalienable preciousness or the infinite preciousness of every human being. (I acknowledge that when 'infinitely' qualifies 'precious' it signals desperation, but no more, I think, than when 'unconditional' qualifies 'respect' or when 'inalienable' qualifies 'dignity'.) Sometimes I speak of seeing the full humanity of someone. At other times I adopt more Kantian idioms and speak of the unconditional respect owed to every human being, or of the inalienable dignity each human being possesses. When I opt for one over the other I rely very much on context to show why. It is clear, I think, why one turns naturally to Kantian idioms when one speaks of what is owed to Eichmann – when one says that even he is owed unconditional respect, for example. It sounds grotesque to say that Eichmann is infinitely precious (though a saint might say just that). But the meanings of these expressions require more attention than I give them. I will say a little more about them in this preface.

The work of saintly love is not always done by religious people. In his wonderful book *If This Is Man*, Primo Levi gives an example. Levi's story is far more dramatic than any of mine, but it will take me to the same destination as my reflections on Mother Teresa in *Good and Evil* and on the nun in *A Common Humanity*. It will also make clear why Kant haunts my thought and why Aristotle is so often a foil to it; it will give some reasons for why I believe that it is a mistake to think that morality has essentially to do with principles of conduct and that philosophical thought about morality is essentially about kinds of practical reasons.

Levi tells of an incident that occurred during his last weeks in Auschwitz. Russian artillery could already be heard in the camp.

After years in the death camp the prospect of liberation seemed only weeks away.

> The night held ugly surprises.
>
> Ladmaker, in the bunk under mine, was a poor wreck of a man. He was (or had been) a Dutch Jew, seventeen years old, tall, thin and gentle. He had been in bed for three months; I have no idea how he had managed to survive the selections. He had had typhus and scarlet fever successively; at the same time a serious cardiac illness had shown itself, while he was smothered with bedsores, so much so that by now he could only lie on his stomach. Despite all this, he had a ferocious appetite. He only spoke Dutch, and none of us could understand him.
>
> Perhaps the cause of it all was the cabbage and turnip soup, of which Ladmaker had wanted two helpings. In the middle of the night he groaned and then threw himself from his bed. He tried to reach the latrine, but was too weak and fell to the ground crying and shouting loudly.
>
> Charles lit the lamp . . . and we were able to ascertain the gravity of the incident. The boy's bed and the floor were filthy. The smell in the small area was rapidly becoming insupportable. We had but a minimum supply of water and neither blankets nor straw mattresses to spare. And the poor wretch, suffering from typhus, formed a terrible source of infection, while he could certainly not be left all night to groan and shiver in the cold in the middle of the filth.
>
> Charles climbed down from his bed and dressed in silence. While I held the lamp, he cut all the dirty patches from the straw mattress and the blankets with a knife. He lifted Ladmaker from the ground with the tenderness of a mother, cleaned him as best as possible with straw taken from the mattress and lifted him into the remade bed in the only position in which the unfortunate fellow could lie. He scraped the floor with a scrap of tin plate, diluted a little chloramine and finally spread disinfectant over everything, including himself.

When moral philosophers discuss an example like this they usually do so to illustrate the concept of a supererogatory act – an act that

is beyond the call of duty. It sits at the edge of conceptual territory whose prominent features are notions of obligation, rules, principles, and conditions for the ascription of culpability. Supererogatory acts, the tradition tells us, are the actions of saints and heroes. Those who do them are to be praised, but those who do not should not to be blamed. Because no one can be blamed for doing them, they cannot be obligatory. From that perspective the difference – crucial to the argument of this book – between heroic and saintly deeds does not matter. Also from that perspective – one that finds moral rules and obligation at the centre of its field of moral vision – supererogatory acts teach us nothing important about the nature of morality.

It is, of course, easy to see why what Charles did should be called supererogatory: it *is* supererogatory. But the thought that he did something beyond the call of duty need not be what first strikes one. Instead one might be struck by, or to put it better, one might *wonder* at its *goodness* – the kind that I have mentioned before that might make one reach for a capital 'G'. Such wonder might be informed less by the fact that Charles risked his own life (after ten years in Auschwitz with freedom probably only weeks away) for the sake of a man certain to die within days, than by the fact that he was able to respond 'with the tenderness of a mother'. Then one would be struck, not so much by what he achieved for Ladmaker, nor by the intention which enabled him to achieve it, nor by his motive in so far as that is distinguished from his intention, but by the *spirit* of what he did. For philosophers who argue over whether it is intentions or consequences that really matter morally, the spirit in which someone acts might seem relatively unimportant to an understanding of morality. For others, like me, it can be critical. As much as the behaviour of the nun at the hospital or the behaviour of Mother Teresa, Charles's behaviour showed a goodness to marvel at.

Charles's tenderness would not, of course, have been what it was, let alone have been wondrous, were it not for what he was trying to achieve – that Ladmaker be returned to his bunk as clean and comfortable as possible. That, however, could have been the intention of many different kinds of people and be achieved in many different ways. At one extreme it could have been the intention and achievement of one of the SS officers, not one who was callous, of

course, but nonetheless one who never seriously doubted that Ladmaker deserved extermination because he was a Jew. Charles's behaviour is, one might say, at the other extreme.

Goodness, wonder, purity, love – these concepts take one to a different perspective from the one whose conceptual features incline one to be struck most of all by the thought that Charles's behaviour was supererogatory or by the thought that moral reflection is especially concerned with discovering (and perhaps justifying) principles of conduct.

Responding to the claim that morality is a guide to action, Peter Winch pointed out that if it were not for morality, we would have fewer problems for which we need guidance. Were it not for morality, we would most often deliberate only about the best means to our ends. A strange guide, he mused, that first puts obstacles in our way and then suggests ways around them.[5] His point was, in part, that before one has a problem about what morally to do, one must first see one's situation in a moral light. One way of characterising my concern in *Good and Evil* (and in this preface) is to say that I want to show how the world appears to moral reflection about what to do and how to be when it is illuminated by the kind of goodness shown by people like Charles, the nun and Mother Teresa.

In Chapter 11, I say that it was not the superlative development of a natural or moral capacity that enabled Mother Teresa to respond as she did to radically afflicted beggars in Calcutta. I would say the same of Charles and of the nun I encountered at the hospital. True, they were compassionate people, but their compassion was informed by an understanding that it was elicited by people whose preciousness had not been even slightly diminished. Simone Weil says that compassion for the afflicted is 'a more astounding miracle than walking on water, healing the sick or raising the dead'.[6] Elsewhere she says: 'The supernatural virtue of justice consists in behaving exactly as though there were equality when one is the stronger in an unequal relationship. Exactly in every respect, including the slightest details of accent and attitude, for a detail may be enough to place the weaker party in the condition of matter which on this occasion naturally belongs to him, just as the slightest shock causes water which has remained liquid below freezing point to solidify.'[7] Charles's behaviour was the 'miracle' Weil describes. So

was the nun's and Mother Teresa's. The reason that Weil calls it a miracle is not because such people are able, very impressively, to resist temptations that threaten to prevent their will from executing a clearly perceived duty. Nor is it because they are able to resist temptations that would obscure clear vision of their duty. At the risk of being misleading, I will say that her point (and mine) is conceptual. It is about the concepts that must be available to us if we are to see things in a certain way, in this case, if we are to see people who are radically afflicted in a way that enables us to respond with a compassion that does not condescend.

Schopenhauer was right to complain that Kant failed to understand the importance of compassion to our understanding of the ethical. Kant was right, however, to think that no extension of compassion or sympathy considered as natural dispositions could take one to an understanding of the distinctive kind of limit another human being should be to our will – a limit that Kant expressed in the Categorical Imperative. There is no need, I argue in this book, to set compassion and moral impossibility or necessity against one another, but the kind of compassion expressed by Charles is conditioned by a particular understanding of what it means to be a human being, suffering as Ladmaker did. I try to characterise that understanding. If I have succeeded, it will be evident why Kant, rather than Schopenhauer or Hume, haunts my thought.

A similar point needs to be made about empathy, which is now such a prized virtue. It was not Charles's capacity for empathy that was wondrous, not at any rate, if that means his capacity to see things and to feel things as Ladmaker did. We are told nothing about how Ladmaker saw things, but it would hardly be surprising if his affliction had made him numb and if years of degradation had made him incapable of any serious conception of his intrinsic worth as a human being, of his 'inalienable dignity', as Kant would put it. To be sure, Charles responded to Ladmaker's condition, but he responded to what it meant for a human being to have fallen into that condition rather than to what it felt like. The wonder of what Charles did is that he responded fully to Ladmaker's degradation, saw fully the depth of it, while affirming Ladmaker's undiminished humanity. I hope, therefore, that it is clear why I emphasise how wondrous it is that Charles could see Ladmaker as he did, rather

than what he subjectively felt when he saw him lying on the floor.

Kant would have said that Charles affirmed in Ladmaker a dignity that no human being could lose. If the case I make against them in this book is fair, however, Kantian elaborations, intended to make the affirmation philosophically perspicuous, fail to the point of parody. Alan Donagan said that Kant's famous injunction that one always treat humanity as an end and never merely as a means was Kant's way of rendering, in a way he believed to be more perspicuous to reason, the moral content of the biblical command to love one's neighbour. Donagan formulated it thus: 'always act so that you respect every human being, yourself or another, as a rational creature'.[8] Were someone to ask me whether Kant had succeeded in the ambition that Donagan attributes to him, I would say that he had not. It is a profound question whether Kant was even on the right track, or whether this great philosopher got things quite backwards. Perhaps it is the biblical injunction, stories and parables, that enable us to make sense of the idea that a person is an end in his or herself.

In some of the most moving passages written by a great philosopher, Kant expressed his belief – perhaps one should say his *faith* – that a person broken and embittered by misfortune could act morally in ways quite unaffected by the emaciation of his inner life. His capacity to perform acts that would 'shine like a jewel' would be undiminished. Perhaps such a person could risk his life to make Ladmaker comfortable – could perform supererogatory acts – but he could not do so with the tenderness of a mother.

Nothing, I think, in Kant's account of the will and in his celebration of its capacity to overcome spiritual deadness in a person, could explain the subtle, modulated responsiveness of Charles's demeanour towards Ladmaker. In fact, Charles's vital responsiveness to Ladmaker's need is inconsistent with the spiritual deadness that Kant believed to be no impediment to undiminished moral responsiveness. Yet it is in that tenderness that Charles revealed Ladmaker to be someone precious – a neighbour, to allude to Donagan's account of what Kant was trying to do. For that reason I believe it is more than a cheap shot to point out that it looks like parody rather than philosophical clarification to say that Charles responded to the imperative to treat every human being as a rational

creature. Nor will it improve things to say that he responded to Ladmaker as to a fellow citizen in the kingdom of ends. Admittedly, to say that Charles responded to Ladmaker as to a neighbour or as to a fellow human being will also provoke requests for clarification. But if resistance to satirical points of the kind I made just now is any guide, then those expressions look to be of the right kind. They seem to be in the right conceptual territory. I suggest, then, that we do what comes naturally and call the understanding shown in Charles's tenderness a form of love.

III

When we ask what makes a principle a moral principle, a rule a moral rule, an obligation a moral obligation – then I think we should seek at least some part of the answer in the kind of elaboration we give when we express most seriously our sense of what it means to wrong someone. Nowhere is that sense more sober than in lucid remorse. 'My God what have I done? How could I have done it?' Those are the typical accents of remorse. They do not (I argue) express an emotional reaction to what one has done, but a pained, bewildered – or perhaps better, incredulous – realisation of the full meaning of what one has done. But now, if one puts in the mouth of the remorseful person many of the philosophical accounts of what makes an obligation a moral obligation or a principle a moral principle, of the nature of morality and of its authority, we get parody.

'My God what I have done? I have violated the social compact, agreed behind a veil of ignorance.' 'My God what have I done? I have ruined my best chances of flourishing.' 'My God what have I done? I have violated rational nature in another.' 'My God what have I done? I have diminished the stock of happiness.' 'My God what have I done? I have violated my freely chosen principles.' An answer must surely be given to why, at one of the most critical moments of moral sobriety, so many of the official accounts of what it is for something to be of moral concern, the accounts of the connection between obligation and what it means to wrong someone, appear like parodies. It will not help to add to those exclamations, pained responses to the natural harm (physical and psychological)

that the wrongdoer has caused. Even if one thinks the parodies to be to some degree unjust, they point unmistakably to the fact that the individual who has been wronged and who haunts the wrongdoer in his remorse has disappeared from sight.

The conception of individuality at work here is not that of a metaphysical particular, nor of a person's individuating characteristics, nor of a striking or charismatic personality. It is the kind of individuality that we express when we say that every human being is unique and irreplaceable. I elaborate it and its importance in Chapter 9 and again in the afterword. In part it is constituted by attachments whose intensity and importance we cannot fathom and which are beyond reason and merit. In so far as we consent to those attachments, they are attachments of and to persons who are required, under pain of superficiality, to distinguish reality from appearances – real love from infatuation, for example. In Chapters 8 and 9 and also in the afterword, I try to explain what lucidity amounts to in this connection and why we are required to try to achieve it. In those sections of the book, I hope readers will find a resolution to what otherwise might seem to be a paradox: namely, that the book is marked, on the one hand, by its strong opposition to foundationalism and, on the other, by its equally strong commitment to a version of the Socratic claim that an unexamined life – a life that does not rise to the requirement to be lucid about its meaning(s) – is unworthy of a human being.

The kind of individuality that I have just sketched is not an objective feature of people in the way their individuating characteristics are. While some of those individuating features may not be objective in the way that difference in height or weight are, they nonetheless give substantial meaning to the claim that we treat people differently because they *are* different from one another. Were we asked to justify that claim, we know what to refer. But if someone were to say that we treat people as unique and irreplaceable because they *are* unique and irreplaceable, though not on account of their individuating features, what would she point to? There seems to be nothing. Yet when parents who are grieving over a dead child say that they cannot yet have another child in the way they might get another pup, they express just this sense of the irreplaceability of their child. And were they asked why they 'cannot' have another to

assuage their grief, they would speak of what it is (means) to have and to lose a child in ways that would always refer to the child. Adapting to my purpose a remark of Wittgenstein's, I would say that this kind of individuality is not a something, but it is not a nothing either. It is not a set of natural or metaphysical properties. It is under-determined by what is necessary to it – the other forms of individuality, the responses of people to one another, the unfathomable need that they sometimes have of one another, and more. The history of that need and the forms of response to it have generated and, in turn, been formed by what (following Rush Rhees) I call a language of love.

Rhees was impatient with this kind of talk of individuality. He said 'If one wants to talk of individuality, all right. It means little more than "something that can be loved" '.[9] But he did not take sufficient note of the fact that the language of love is critical as well as celebratory. Central to its critical dimension is the distinction between love and its appearances, a distinction that focuses on whether the lover is sufficiently attentive to the independent reality of the beloved. Reference to their uniqueness and irreplaceability – not just to those who love them, but period – is inseparable from that way of speaking of the independent reality of persons. And as I remarked about Mother Teresa, about the nun in *A Common Humanity*, and now about Charles, to wonder at the nature of their love is not to glory in a superlative achievement, as might be the case when one marvels at a feat of heroism. The wonder directs those who experience it to people who are loved, compelling those who wonder to testify – in astonishment – to a radically transformed perception of them. A religious person might say that the love revealed what it means for a human being to be sacred.

When Rhees said that to talk of individuality, as I have been doing, means little more than to speak of 'something that can be loved', his irritation was, I suspect, directed against the hope that appeal to individuality could rationally ground the love, or other responses. My claim is that love and that kind of individuality are interdependent and that the language of love, historically shaped by and shaping the work of love, yields to us a sense of love's object that makes the love seem right. Rhees after all said, 'something that *can* be loved' (my emphasis). Not anything can be. That is the constitutive role

that love plays historically. It also has a revelatory role. Sometimes we see that something is precious only in the light of someone's love for it. Love's capacity to reveal is, in part, a function of the authority of the lover. It also depends on our openness to this kind of authority. That means that we must be open to the language of love and its distinctive critical categories – open to their distinctive grammar. Estrangement from the language of love – perhaps because we are suspicious of it, believing that it should be replaced by a rationally more attractive and tractable language of metaphysics – will prevent us from seeing clearly, perhaps from seeing at all, the distinctive kind of preciousness that human beings can have.

The kind of individuality I have been describing was known to the world before the work of saintly love yielded to us a conception of individuals as infinitely precious. Some of the most moving passages in Homer's *Iliad* depend on it. It was known to Aristotle who, as I said, functions in this book as a kind of test for how a non-reductive humanism looks before our sense of what it means to be a human being is transformed by the works of saintly love. True, this conception of individuality plays no important role in his ethics, but he would not have thought absurd the suggestion that it should.

The love of saints depends on, builds on and transforms that sense of individuality. It deepens the language of love, which nourishes and is nourished by our sense that human beings are irreplaceable and, because of that transformation, it compels some people to affirm that even those who suffer affliction so severe that they have irrecoverably lost everything that gives sense to our lives, and even the most radical evildoers, are fully our fellow human beings. As with the love it transforms, the love of saints plays a constitutive and revelatory role.

In *Good and Evil*, I fail to distinguish adequately individuality as transformed by saintly love from individuality before that transformation. The confusion runs through the chapter on remorse and elsewhere. Much of what I say about remorse – certainly the rhetorical affect of the parodies I offered earlier in this preface and offer also in the book – depend only on the latter conception. Most of what I say in the chapter on individuality and in the afterword, also depends only on it. However, much of what I say about the 'shock'

of remorse – that aspect of it that prompts me to say that it 'registers an encounter' – requires a conception of the victim of one's wrongdoing that has been informed by saintly love. Only then, I think, is it intelligible that someone should be tempted to kill himself because he murdered another human being who mattered to no one, not on account of his shame for what his deed revealed about his character, but only because of the deed and what it means to have become a murderer. The same, I think, is true of what I call the 'radical singularity' of the guilty, a singularity that expresses itself in the judgement that it is always a corruption of serious remorse to seek to find consoling fellowship in a community of the guilty. It is not always a corruption of shame to be consoled by the fact that others have done what has shamed one.

The failure to distinguish between a sense of the preciousness of individuals before and after it is transformed by the works of saintly love also spreads serious confusion through my discussion of evil. The book begins with an horrific example taken from Chaim Kaplan's Warsaw diary. Immediately after introducing it, I deny that I did so in order 'to shock or to bully anyone into accepting or rejecting any philosophical positions in ethics'. A student commented that I had succeeded in doing so nonetheless. He was right, or at any rate, his ironic tone concerning my intention was justified. Though I intermittently glimpsed, I never saw clearly, the fact that if a morally serious person is sceptical about whether the concept of evil has an indispensable place amongst our moral concepts, then pointing to horrific examples of it will (rightly) not diminish his or her scepticism. It is not want of moral seriousness or sensitivity that makes such people sceptical. The concept of evil that I elaborate in *Good and Evil* (and also in *A Common Humanity*, more conscious of this point) depends on a sense of the preciousness of human life transformed by the love of saints. If one does not have it (and on my account, one will have it only if one also has a conception of goodness we attribute to saintly deeds) then talk of evil will mark out only what one takes to be especially morally horrible. In that case, given some of the nasty ways people speak of good and evil – the oversimplifying, demonising ways – it is better to resort to the many other ways we have to mark out what is morally horrible.

Because evil, as I understand it, requires a conception of preciousness violated, and because people can do evil for banal reasons, the concept of evil (that I develop) has little or no place in the characterisation of people or their motives. For that reason, people who say that the concept of evil does not help to explain the actions of evildoers are right. Sometimes, however, appeal to the concept is necessary to characterise adequately people's responses – the person whose remorse is informed by a sense that his victim was infinitely precious, or a spectator who responds to wrongdoing in a way informed by that same sense, for example. In *A Common Humanity* I describe the latter kind of case in some detail when I discuss the role that a concept of evil should play in disentangling the many different kinds of moral responses to the Holocaust.

IV

Despite my disavowals, many readers have taken *Good and Evil* to be (implicitly) a religious work, or to require religious commitment if its arguments are to be pressed home. I persist with my disavowals, but I am now more sympathetic to the reasons why people have read it that way. I am also more conscious of the importance of the works of saintly love upon what I say about the preciousness of individuals. The reader will have noticed that am also acutely conscious that 'precious' is a word that sometimes sounds precious. 'Sacred' is so much better. A religious person should have no difficulty in acknowledging that Eichmann was sacred. I am not religious, however, so I cannot use it.

'Sacred' is a word whose elaboration points in two directions – to theological and metaphysical doctrine, and to the language of love. Philosophers, especially bioethicists, have tended to focus on the doctrine. As a result there is little philosophical writing that is inward with the kind of experiences that incline someone to be sympathetic to talk of the sanctity of human life, even if they feel they cannot speak that way themselves. Those experiences are, I think, inseparable from a sense of awe, mystery and beauty that is naturally expressed in the language of love. A philosophical and

moral battlefield, where people fight over abortion and euthanasia, is not a good place to develop an ear for its nuances. If one is not to distort the significance of the fact that the language is richly anthropomorphic, one must listen to it with patient sympathy.

We are sacred, some people say, because God loves us, his children. The 'because' indicates love's constitutive role. Religious people also say that the love of saints reveals us to be sacred. Some say that only God's grace makes the love of saints possible. Others say that God loves through His saints. Either way, love plays its revelatory role. Much of this anthropomorphic language elaborates on what it means to be a child of God. 'Child' in 'child of God' is an expression in the language of love. 'We are all God's offspring', doesn't work so well; nor would a religious person who is opposed to abortion speak of the foetus as sacred because it is God's foetus. Such people speak of 'an unborn child', which, I suggest in Chapter 8, is an expression in the language of love. Attempts to extract from this anthropomorphic, often poetic, language a cognitive content whose character is necessarily (*qua* cognitive) separable from poetic form, usually looks banal and seems incapable of inspiring the kind of wonder that is fundamental to religious testimony. Though (for most religious persons) everyone is sacred because God loves all his children, he loves, as parents do, each one of them as an individual. Each of them is called to rise to that fact with the kind of individuating responsiveness that I describe in the afterword. That, at any rate, is the argument of Chapter 13, where I argue that it is essential to serious religious claims that their proponents believe that they deepen our understanding of the world. Their content must, therefore, be available to us in an idiom that gives sense to talk of depth and shallowness. In Chapters 13 and 14 and in the afterword, I try to explain why, and what that idiom is like.

My commitment to what the nun in the hospital revealed is not conditional upon my believing something like she believed. My thought is not that it would be rational to respond without condescension to those patients if it is also true that they were God's children. Nor do I wish to say that the wondrousness of her behaviour gives strong prima-facie grounds for believing in God or for attributing metaphysical properties to the patients. My affirmation is as firm and unreserved as it is metaphysically groundless.

To discuss the works of saintly love with God abstracted from them might seem ridiculous. I did it, though, to meet a point made to me by Stanley Hauerwas. He granted that one could testify to the rightness of the nun's demeanour without thinking the rightness had to be underwritten metaphysically, but he asked whether her behaviour would have been possible were it not for the history of religious practice. That history is a complex mix of doctrine and practice expressed in the language of love – a complex history of the relations between the God of the philosophers and the God of religion. But now, abstract the God of the philosophers from the God of religion. What do we have? Oversimplifying a little, but not I think at the expense of the point, we have God's gratuitous love for his creatures. It now looks as though to say that we are sacred because God loves us provides no reason for believing that the kind of compassion the nun showed and that Charles showed to Ladmaker is rationally intelligible. External to human life and activity the love of God may be, but unless the way it is external provides such a reason, it seems not to do what is needed for someone who believes the rightness of the nun's behaviour is insufficiently accounted for unless there is reference to God or to the metaphysical properties of the patients. Ditto for the rightness of Charles's response to Ladmaker. The religious tradition that speaks of the God of religion rather than the God of the philosophers has often called saintly love absurd. Weil calls it a form of madness. Nothing that can be said about human beings – about their natural or their metaphysical properties – could ground it, in the sense of providing rational foundation for it. It cannot even make it less offensive to reason. How is God's gratuitous love for his creatures different?

V

Inalienably precious, infinitely precious – these are, I have admitted, not always congenial expression. If one cannot speak religiously and if one believes that talk of natural rights, or of citizens in the kingdom of ends, is metaphysically unsustainable and, perhaps, whistling in the dark, would it be better to speak of what is owed to human beings just because they are human beings? If Charles had

been asked why he risked his life for Ladmaker, he might have said, 'He's a human being. He cannot be left like that.' When I characterised Charles' demeanour towards Ladmaker I said he responded as though Ladmaker's humanity had not been diminished despite his visible and extreme degradation.

I have admitted that if one wants to say that justice was owed to Eichmann, then it is better to say that it was owed to him as a human being rather than because he was inalienably precious. Clearly, though, there is no neutral elaboration of what it means to be a human being that will render unproblematic the 'because' when one says that Eichmann was owed a just trial because he was a human being, or that one must not torture terrorists with information about 'ticking bombs' because they are human beings. We must be careful, however, about what we make, reflectively, of the absence of such an independent elaboration. One ought not to assume that it would be better to speak of a person, their rights and what is owed to them. That, at any rate, is the burden of the argument in Chapter 10. The argument is, I am afraid, less clear than it should be. It is clearer, I think, in *A Common Humanity*. It is clearer again in *The Philosopher's Dog*.[10] There I develop what I call a naturalism of surfaces – a naturalism defined by the importance it attributes to the living human body and the many forms of its expressiveness in the constitution of the concepts that mark our creatureliness.

Virtue theory – considered as *theory* – construes the virtues as being inseparably tied to a conception of the human good that is enriched by an understanding of how our rationality, our cultural lives and our animality combine. Phillipa Foot tells us in her recent book, *Natural Goodness*, to think of plants and their good when we think about ethics.[11] She took pleasure in being provocative, but she was serious in recommending that we could account for the virtues and why we prized them by extending, in ways suggested by Aristotle, our understanding of what is good for the life of a plant. Such attempts have proven interesting, sometimes ingenious, but often desperate at the crux, in my judgement. There is a better way, I have suggested, to take seriously the concept of a human being over that of a person and to integrate it rightly with nature and culture. Given the sympathy of many virtue theorists for Wittgenstein's later work, it is surprising that they seem not to have seen in Part two

of *The Philosophical Investigations* an important alternative to Aristotelianism.

Although I believe that Wittgenstein has pointed to a better way to think of the importance of our humanity to the constitution of some of our most fundamental concepts – and not just our ethical concepts – I do not want to suggest that there is a way of speaking of human beings and their lives which will make the wondrousness of saintly love, tractable (or even less offensive) to reason, or which would justifiably diminish the astonishment at what it reveals. Kant was right to insist that we have obligations to those we do not, and perhaps could not, love. It does not follow that we would find it even intelligible that we have such obligations unless we also found intelligible that someone could love such people. And when we ask ourselves whether we find that intelligible, we must ask ourselves whether a saint could do it. We know the answer.

If someone like Eichmann were the beneficiary of a saint's love, it would be a severe love. It would not count as love unless it were lucid about the evil of his crimes, about the banality of his response to them and about his failure to be remorseful for them. But love it would be. The argument of this book is that it is light cast by such love that enables us to think that people like Eichmann are owed unconditional respect. The same love inspires us to speak of the inalienable dignity of people like Charles. Simone Weil wrote in her diaries: 'If I light an electric torch at night out of doors I don't judge its power by looking at the bulb, but by seeing how many objects it lights up.'[12] Plato's simile of the cave also reminds us that we often do not see the source of what enables us to see things. We often misunderstand what we see, and what enables us to see it. For that reason we often give the wrong names to things.

That realisation drove me to speak of ethical-otherworldliness and to contrast it with humanism which, in this book, I identify with a non-reductive naturalism. Although I outline a sympathetic form of such a naturalism, partly in order to show that it cannot take one far enough, I now regret using the expression 'ethical-otherworldliness'. It sounds either too religious or too theoretically formidable. For the same reason I regret talking of mystery, even though I distinguish between things that are contingently and things that are necessarily mysterious. The latter are not mysterious to us because our epistemic

or other cognitive powers are limited. But mystery is a word with much baggage, most of which I prefer not to carry. I should have been content to characterise the wondrousness of saintly love – to mark its conceptual features, to locate it in a sympathetic conceptual space and to leave it at that. Because I went further, some readers may feel that I did so in order to establish a further thesis – that there are deep mysteries for deep people to marvel at.

Throughout this book and in other works I have been critical of the talk of persons as ends in themselves; of the inalienable dignity and their inalienable natural rights when it appears to express foundationalist aspirations. I have been a reluctant critic, however, because wonderful work – in human rights, especially in international law – has been inspired by such ways of speaking. Landau, a German Jew, was educated in the Germanic tradition of jurisprudence, deeply steeped in Kantian ways of speaking. Writing against torture, he insisted that in all circumstances we must respect the 'inalienable dignity' of every human being. In the context he used it and in others in which people often do, the expression 'inalienable dignity' betrays a noble illusion.

Because dignity is essentially tied to appearances it is essentially alienable. The ties that bind it to appearances can be loosened, but they cannot all be cut. We can, and should, develop a generous understanding of the conditions under which dignity is visible. We can learn and, indeed, become astonished at how much dignity survives the degradation of the body, and to some degree, even of the mind, but there are limits. Misfortune can be so severe, criminals can be so unrelentingly cruel, that some people are, as Weil puts it, 'struck one of those blows that leaves a human being writhing on the ground like a half-crushed worm'. That happened to Ladmaker. Then, I believe, only the love of saints can see and reveal the humanity in them. That is why Weil said that compassion for the afflicted is 'a more astounding miracle than walking on water, healing the sick or raising the dead'.

Often I draw attention to the fact that those expressions (especially the Kantian ones) have a power to move and inspire us because of resonances they borrow from more natural (though not thereby less creative) ways of speaking to which they officially condescended. When I wrote *Good and Evil* I was not aware, however, of how often

some of those expressions are not only supported by and given power by a language of love, but are sometimes (in some uses) actually part of that language. Then they belong to an ethical conception in which goodness is the focal concept. It is an ethic of renunciation, expressed first by Socrates when he said to his incredulous interlocutors that it is better to suffer evil than to do it and, later in our tradition, deepened by an affirmation that every human being is infinitely precious. In its religious formulation it affirms that every human life is sacred. At other times those expressions move us because they draw power from another ethical conception. They then play a different role and to some degree undermine not only the part they play in the first conception but that conception itself. The defining concepts of that second conception are autonomy, integrity, courage, nobility, honour and flourishing or self-realisation. Sometimes nobility and sometimes honour is its focal concept. It is an ethic of assertion or, at any rate, an ethic for the relatively fortunate.

Both of the ethical conceptions I have just sketched are interdependent with an understanding of what it is to be human being and, therefore, of what kind of compassion it is intelligible rationally to show to a human being. It will be evident that I believe that only the ethic of renunciation can find words to keep fully amongst us those who suffer severe, ineradicable and degrading affliction or of those who have committed the most terrible deeds and whose character seems fully to match them. My point, I wish to stress, is not that a conception of value that has goodness, rather than, say, nobility, as its focus is unable to appreciate the heroic. It is that within that conception what we make of the heroic, the noble, the honourable, the value of autonomy and so on, is transformed by a sense of the inalienable preciousness of each human being. Kantian rhetoric, I now realise better than when I wrote *Good and Evil*, is morally complex. Sometimes it is heroic in a way consistent with the language of love, sometimes in ways that are part of it, and sometimes in ways that undermine it.

VI

At the beginning of this preface I said that some people objected to the tone of this book. Some objected particularly to my claim that

even a philosopher, true to the deepest aspects of his or her calling, should fear to think some things, should find some things to be morally unthinkable. Although the tone of Chapter 17 is strongly polemical, my concern was not to say that this or that is unthinkable, but rather to introduce the concept for reflection and to ask what role it had in moral thinking and in philosophical thought about moral thinking. In part, my tone expresses my incredulity that the discipline that prides itself about thinking about thinking has not thought much about *that*. Were I to write about this issue now, my tone would be different (as it is in *A Common Humanity*), but the lament that philosophers yield too unself-critically to a self-congratulatory complacency about their readiness bravely to follow to its morally horrible or nihilistic conclusion any argument they believed to be valid, would be much the same.

Some people found the tone of *Good and Evil* objectionable because they judged it to be arrogant, disdainful, high-minded, and moralistic. I hope they are not right. I will not try to defend myself. Instead, I will press this distinction: one must be clear about whether one objects to being thought shallow or whether one objects to the very idea that talk of shallowness has a serious place in philosophy. Many philosophers speak as though they object on the second count.

For reasons I elaborate throughout the book, but especially in Chapter 15, I believe they are wrong. That they are wrong should be one of the lessons of recent scepticism about ideals of neutrality in ethics. The best reason for the scepticism is not that one inevitably betrays moral commitment even when writing philosophically about ethics. Nor is it that one should honour philosophy's ancient promise to answer the questions of morality. It is that one's subject matter is of a kind whose description and reflective assessment must admit as indispensable, as intrinsic to its content, judgements that this or that is sentimental, or overtaken by pathos, or banal and, perhaps, in ways defined by those concepts, shallow.

None of this, of itself, implies arrogance. Arrogance lies not in the mere application of such concepts, but in their misapplication. Just as there is a tendency to one kind of arrogance amongst those who pride themselves on being tough-minded, hard-headed analytical philosophers, so there is a tendency to a different kind of arrogance amongst those who speak too readily of depth and shallowness. And,

it must be admitted, the latter judgements sit uneasily with the kind of neutrality required by philosophy as an academic discipline. It is hard to see how one could sustain fair examining practices if such judgements were made regularly about the work of students. If that is true, and if it is also true that one cannot dispense with such judgement in the full assessment of philosophical problems in ethics, then, as I suggest in Chapters 2 and 17, serious questions follow about the nature of moral philosophy as an academic discipline, at least within a liberal university.

This distinction that I draw in Chapter 14 between sentimentality as a cause of cognitive defect and sentimentality as a form of it is very important, I think. When it is a cause, one can wish (however idly) to be rid of it. More importantly (and this is critical to the nature of the idealised conception of philosophical understanding that I criticise), one can wish oneself to be rid of all that makes one vulnerable to it and yet retain the content of one's thought. But when sentimentality is a form of cognitive defect (a form of the false, as I would now put it) that is not so. Poets, and other writers and artists may wish even more fiercely than scientists to be rid of sentimentality and similar vices, but for a poet to wish to be the kind of creature who is not vulnerable to it, is for his or her to wish to be free of the only idiom in which she can write poetry. To wish to be free of all that makes us vulnerable to cliché, banality, sentimentality and so on in our moral thought – including much of our philosophical thought about morality – is to wish ourselves bereft of ways of elaborating, in the realm of meaning, our full sense of what it means to wrong someone and all that conditions that sense. It is to wish ourselves bereft of the means to elaborate what (in the afterword) M believes distinguishes us from the Vietnamese. That is the deepest reason why understanding in ethics must necessarily be humanly engaged.

I hope now to have assembled the elements of an answer to an objection that must have been forming. Grant, an objector concedes, that, as a matter of fact, when we elaborate what it means to humiliate someone, what it means really to love, to grieve, to be a friend and so on, we often turn to literature. Grant also that no elaboration of what M can readily attribute to the Vietnamese can take us to a full understanding of what it means to wrong someone. Singly

or together, however, these points fall considerably short of showing that it is not properly and primarily the discursive work of philosophy, rather than the work of literature and art more generally, first to articulate those things that condition our sense of what it means to wrong someone and, second, to explain how they condition it. Was it not, after all, Plato and Aristotle who (in their different ways) made the point that the distinction between the reality of a virtue and its counterfeits is fundamental to the very idea of virtue? Did they not also offer accounts of what they regarded as genuine virtues, distinguishing them from their counterfeits, explaining why they did so? Was it not Plato, poet and philosopher combined, who warned sternly of the 'ancient quarrel' between poetry and philosophy? And did he not insist that it must be resolved in favour of philosophy?

I cannot hope fully to answer that objection in this preface, but I hope to reduce its force considerably by exposing to clear view two assumptions about the discursive and the cognitive that inform it.

Because literature is imaginative, philosophers have always acknowledged that it can provide much food for the thought of philosophers and scientists, but only when what is nourishing to thought – genuinely cognitive content – can be abstracted from literary style and be brought to judgement before a court of philosophy and science. That is the first assumption. It is informed by a second: that the critical concepts used in literary criticism, or when we try to determine whether we have been sentimentally moved by a real or artistic example, are causes rather than forms of cognitive failure. Abandon the second assumption and the way is clear, I think, to seeing that those critical concepts mark out a distinctive cognitive realm. If one sees that, one will at least be suspicious of the first assumption. How, after all, can one distinguish what is genuinely cognitive from what only appears so? Only, it looks plausible to say, by attention to the critical concepts that tell us what it is to think well and badly in this or that realm of inquiry or reflection.

Moral philosophy, even when pressing its meta-ethical task, its task of understanding this strange phenomenon we call morality and the place it has in our lives, should welcome prose enlivened by the realisation that to think of philosophy as a quest for understanding is not therefore to think of it as ideally free of feeling. Or to put it

(I hope) less ambiguously: it should welcome prose that is informed by the realisation that the constitutive concepts of philosophical thought about ethics – the concepts with which we assess whether we are thinking well or badly – cannot be idealised as concepts which define good and bad thinking for any rational being whatsoever, irrespective of whether they are affective beings and irrespective of whatever lives they lead.

Am I suggesting that the distinction between philosophy and art should be blurred? Yes and no. Philosophy should still be primarily a discursive discipline, distinguished markedly from the writing of novels, poetry and plays. But if the discursive is no longer restricted to the exercise of the kind of thought in which form and content are separable, then, in roughly those parts of philosophy which the Europeans call philosophical anthropology, there will be no marked distinction between the narratives that must to some degree nourish inquiry and philosophical engagement with them.

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1

Evil and unconditional respect

The following is a passage from Chaim Kaplan's Warsaw Diary:

> A rabbi in Lodz was forced to spit on a Torah scroll that was in the Holy Ark. In fear of his life he complied and desecrated that which is holy to him and his people. After a short while he had no more saliva, his mouth was dry. To the Nazi's question, why did he stop spitting, the rabbi replied that his mouth was dry. Then the son of the 'superior race' began to spit into the rabbi's mouth and the rabbi continued to spit on the Torah.[1]

I have not quoted this to shock or to bully anyone into accepting or rejecting any philosophical position in ethics – not, for example, to refute the moral sceptic or to bully him into submission or, even, to call him to a kind of sobriety. I have quoted it to appeal to a community wider than one whose sense of philosophical reflection is conditioned by the nature of philosophy as a subject or a discipline (as studied in universities) and for whom examples such as this are a focus for ethical reflection. There is no simple way to identify that community independently of the character of its concern with good and evil. There are those who have been the victims of such evil – Jews and many others, not only at the hands of the Nazis and not only at that time. But there are many others who have neither suffered nor witnessed such evil, yet whose lives and thought have been marked by its presence.

In the face of such evil some people believe that they must assert, and others that they must deny, that even people who have done such deeds are sacred. Few people will say that in full seriousness

because only someone who is religious can do it. But there are people who are not religious who want to say what they hope will be a secular equivalent of it and they will hunt for one of the inadequate expressions available to us to do it. They may say that even such people are infinitely precious, or that they are ends in themselves, or they may say, more simply, that even such people are owed unconditional respect, meaning, not that they are deserving of esteem, but that they are owed a kind of respect that is not conditional upon what they have done and that cannot be forfeited. Some will say that even the most terrible evildoers are owed this respect as human beings and that we owe it to them because we are human beings. That amounts to saying they remain our fellow human beings whatever they do. Many find that incomprehensible. They are likely to retort that if someone is to be treated or respected as a human being then they must behave like a human being. That seems to be sober common sense.

In (academic) philosophy examples such as these are often called 'hard cases', by which it is meant that they present serious difficulties for a philosophical thesis and it is implied that philosophical theories are judged according to how they deal with them. Consequentialists often present examples of the increasingly horrific consequences of someone's refusal to do evil to see at what point their opponents will crack. They think of such examples as hard cases that any account must accommodate under pain of inadequacy and they think that they alone can do it comfortably. The concept of a hard case presupposes a certain conception of ethical reflection: that it aspires to be, at best, theorising. Hard cases test theories and, on this conception, provide challenges that may, in principle, be met in thought alone, in abstraction and at a distance from the actual situations they describe.

In *Gorgias*, Polus presents an ever-worsening catalogue of horrors against Socrates who said that it is better to suffer evil than to do it and that it is better for the evildoer to be justly punished than to escape such punishment:

> What do you mean? If a man is arrested for the crime of plotting a dictatorship and racked and castrated and blinded with hot irons and finally, after suffering many other varieties of exquisite torture and seeing his wife and children suffer the

> same, is crucified or burnt at the stake, will he be happier than if he gets off, establishes himself as a dictator, and spends the rest of his life in power doing as he chooses, the object of envy and admiration to natives and foreigners alike? Is this what you maintain that it is impossible to prove untrue?[2]

Socrates replies that Polus is trying to frighten him with bogeys. That, from the point of view of someone who sees Polus as legitimately presenting hard cases to test the Socratic claim, will seem to be merely evasive. But we do not know how Socrates would have responded had he actually been confronted with an example such as Polus describes. The difference is relatively unimportant if we think that actual experience of the situation at best supplies reflection with data that might otherwise have been unavailable to it, or a psychological impetus to change our moral principles. Natural though that conception of the cognitive significance of experience may be, it is profoundly mistaken. I shall argue that in Chapter 15, but at this stage I do not want the point of my remark, that even in the presence of such evil as is described by Kaplan some people assert that every human being is owed unconditional respect, to be interpreted in the light of such a conception of the cognitive importance of experience. I am not suggesting that Kaplan has presented us with a hard case that we should use to test certain ethical theories.

Some people who suffered evils similar to the rabbi in Kaplan's report have said that it would be no injustice against those who did such evil if they were to be shot in the street like dogs, for they have forfeited the respect owed by one human being to another. Not anyone would have the authority to assert the contrary against those who have suffered and speak in this way. That is essential to a proper conception of what it is to understand that no human being may be killed in the spirit of ridding the world of vermin. The conditions under which someone would have the right to assert, or even to think, the contrary against them are not easy to specify, but someone could not claim that right just on the ground that he had been sincerely convinced by a philosophical argument.

Someone may be sincerely convinced by philosophical argument that all human beings are unconditionally owed respect yet his sincere profession of it be, as we say, 'mere words', not because his profession of it is undermined by his deeds, but because it is not