Conference Abstracts
(last updated 10 August)

Dr Stephen Buckle
Australian Catholic University

Raimond Gaita’s Moral Philosophy: A Psychological Reflection.

Raimond Gaita’s moral philosophy emphasizes the importance of interpersonal encounter. Much of the inspiration of this idea derives from Wittgenstein’s remarks about what it is to have “an attitude towards a soul”. I sketch the use Gaita makes of this idea to show its implicit psychology. I then contrast it with an older psychological conception deriving from Plato, and give some reasons for thinking the older idea superior. I conclude with a brief account of the recent fortunes of that older idea, as exemplified in recent reactions to its best modern representative, Immanuel Kant.

Associate Professor Christopher Cordner
University of Melbourne

Moral philosophy and its possibilities.

The question of what philosophy is, and might be, is kept before us in Gaita’s work – not only in his philosophical work but also in his other writings. I will reflect on some of the ways Gaita engages with this question, specifically a propos ethics or moral philosophy.

I also want to reflect briefly on the wider importance of the question. The philosophical and broader academic climate discourages the question of what philosophy is, for several reasons, all of which bode ill both for the practice of philosophy and for the broader culture. I shall briefly reflect on why this is so.
Dr Miranda Fricker  
Birkbeck, University of London

The Power of Negative Thinking: Remorse and Blame.

I will explore Rai Gaita’s contention that the emotion of remorse, considered as a suffering perception of the harm one has done to another, should be at the centre of moral philosophy. And I’ll suggest that the counterpart emotion, now from the recipient’s perspective, is blame - blame considered as a suffering perception of harm done to one by another. This is blame in its outward-directed, transformative mode of communication, rather than in its inward-directed mode of stagnant resentment or ‘ressentiment’.

Both remorse and blame are clearly negative moral emotions. But while few have considered remorse to be an unhelpfully negative moral sentiment, the idea that blame is unhelpful, and pointlessly negative is frequently expressed, with the implication that moral life would be better without it. I think this is wholly mistaken (except inasmuch as there can of course be corrupt versions of blame, just as there can be corrupt versions of any emotion). As an antidote, I will try to present a conception of blame as an essential moral emotion, situating it in its proper place: as the second-personal counterpart to remorse. This pair of mirror emotions structures the basic ‘reactive attitudes’ that should indeed be at the heart of moral philosophy.

Barry Hill

Rai Gaita’s Mont Blanc.

Barry Hill meditates on the young philosopher as a mountaineer, imagining a poem that might fully embody the lineaments of thought in the presence of sorrow. This may turn out to be a grappling, you might say, with the classic and romantic forces in biographical elements in Gaita’s thought.

Dr Geoffrey Brahm Levey  
University of New South Wales

Aborigines, Immigrants, and Anglos: Australia’s Problem with Difference.

For many years, Raimond Gaita has been an eloquent critic of the inability of successive Australian governments to recognise the common humanity of Aborigines. Yet, he also has reflected warmly on the basic decency of the post-war Australia that
greeted his immigrant parents and in which he grew up, a decency that, he has argued, was further extended by Australia’s adoption of multiculturalism in the 1970s. And he has written realistically about the fact and the value of Anglo-Australian institutions and culture in defining the nation, whilst making the vital point that love of country isn’t the preserve of Anglo-Australians. In this paper, I discuss a powerful current in Australian political thinking, from its earliest days to the present, at times racial (and racist) and at times not, that extends acceptance on condition that people cease being what they are. I highlight the conundrum often implicit in such a demand: that it requires Australians who trade in it also to subjugate part of what they are (or at least claim to be), namely, liberal democrats. What I call the Australian dilemma presses the question of how best to reconcile the two core components of Australian identity – its commitment to liberal democracy, on the one hand, and the established Anglo-Australian character of its institutions and culture, on the other. Raimond Gaita’s resolution of this dilemma is, I suggest, among the most subtle and effective yet offered.

Alex Miller

Sophie’s Choice

My paper, “Sophie’s Choice”, is a personal reflection on my friendship with Rai and the effect on me of his wonderful memoir, Romulus, My Father. I have been greatly affected by the book, in ways I will probably never adequately express. The impression left on me by Romulus, which has persisted with me most strongly, is of Rai’s mother’s unhappy life and her tragic death, when her beginnings had seemed to me to have been so promising. It is the haunting presence of Rai’s mother’s absence in Romulus, My Father I wish to talk about.

Dr Brigitta Olubas
University of New South Wales

Romulus, My Father and the Australian literary imaginary.

This paper is concerned, from the perspective of literary studies, with the question of what kind of book Romulus, My Father is. As memoir, but also as a memoir written by a philosopher, this text returns us to its author in important ways. The book’s genesis in the eulogy Gaita delivered at his father’s funeral suggests that its primary function is to speak to the truth, the finality and the specific achievement of a particular life. Gaita puts it more precisely still: “I wrote it partly because I wanted to bear witness to, rather than merely record, or even celebrate, the values that defined
my father’s moral identity.” (“From Book to Screenplay” viii) As a moral philosopher, Gaita brings to the writing a noteworthy clarity of thought, but more than this he brings to its subject matter and its cadences a sense of weight and of moment that is unusual in Australian writing. This derives in part, no doubt, from the weight and substance and also – for readers of Australian fiction at least – the unfamiliarity of the terms being put into play: concepts of truth, honour, integrity. It also derives, I want to suggest, from the solemnity with which the protagonists are invested, their sense of their own significance and destiny, not simply the tragedy of their stories, though this is part of it, but also the force and dignity of their everyday actions, that impels us rather to a sense of “character”, as Harold Bloom puts it:

O]ur word ‘character’ still possesses, as a primary meaning, a graphic sign such as a letter of the alphabet, reflecting the word’s likely origin in the ancient Greek character, a sharp stylus or mark of the stylus’s incisions. Our modern word ‘character’ also means ethos, a habitual stance towards life. (4)

Gaita’s focus on recreating – for himself as well as for his readers – the daily lives, the ethics, of these men, women and children has at its heart a compulsion not simply to speak to the facts of these lives, but to address directly the truth they embody. Such a project imbues the work of literary creation with a demanding sense of gravity, a “bearing witness” that is the work of both poetry and compassion, driving and determining social relations in their broadest sense, and constituting the grounds on which these can be full and proper. This paper will examine some of the literary implications of this very particular concern with truth, and the ways Romulus asks us to re-think our response to the national literary imaginary.

Dr Helen Pringle
University of New South Wales

The Book of Friendship and Friendliness.

In Romulus, My Father, Raimond Gaita writes, “I know what friendship is; I know because I remember these things in the person of my father, in the person of his friend Hora, and in the example of their friendship.” In this paper, I explore friendship as intimacy and as a relation of civility, and in that context, ask how a child best learns these relations in his or her life. I argue that children need also to come to a knowledge of friendliness as an ethical imperative if they are to flourish and make true friends. I draw on the elegy of Romulus and the work of Herman Broch in making this argument.
Emeritus Professor Dorothy Scott

Crucibles of Compassion, Harbingers of Hope: reflections on vulnerable children.

Rai Gaita has challenged me to question the notion that protecting vulnerable children is ultimately a question of human rights, arguing instead that it is ultimately a matter of morality. But what if it is ultimately a matter of emotions, foremost of which is compassion? Rai Gaita’s account of his own childhood speaks to me about vulnerable children as crucibles of compassion and as harbingers of hope. How is such compassion and hope to be nurtured?

Professor Gerry Simpson
University of Melbourne

International Law’s Common Humanity

The idea of a humanity, against which crimes can be committed and in the name of whom these crimes can be punished, occupies an equivocal place in the history of international law. Provoked in part by Raimond Gaita’s reflections on Nuremberg and Eichmann in his essay “Genocide and the Holocaust”, this paper offers a short anatomy of humanity in its various (juridical) guises.

Dr Craig Taylor
Flinders University

Gaita on Moral Thought and Ethical Individuality

What does moral thought involve? On what we might call the standard view (at least in analytic philosophy) we can say that such thought should lead either: to true propositions like, for example, ‘it is wrong not to help someone who is suffering if you can’; or to imperative statements such as ‘you ought to help someone who is suffering if you can.’ Central to this view is the idea that the content of moral thought can be characterised independently of the way in which that thought is conveyed to us. In various works, but most explicitly in his Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception, Gaita has argued that this view fails to capture the nature of moral thought and discounts many of the critical concepts that are involved in thinking well or badly on a given occasion about some moral matter. While Gaita is not the only philosopher in recent times to question this standard view, in this paper I will examine Gaita’s particular contribution to this debate, and more specifically his idea that in
moral matters it is important that a person is able, as he puts it, to ‘speak with an individual voice.’

Dr Bernadette Tobin
Plunkett Centre for Ethics at St Vincent’s Hospital, Sydney

We put animals ‘out of their misery’. Why not human beings?

“We put animals ‘out of their misery’, because their lives have no meaning or if they do, only in an attenuated sense. Whatever we think about euthanasia, we may not do it in the spirit of putting a person out of his misery - it may not be done in a spirit conveyed by the connotations that expression has for us – without it being radically demeaning.” The sentiments expressed in these two sentences are characteristic of Raimond Gaita’s ‘sense for humanity’. In this talk I will reflect on their significance for the traditional objections to euthanasia, specifically that euthanasia violates both the dignity of the person and the duty to preserve life (which, though limited, is thought not to be consistent with an intention to terminate life).

Dr Steven Tudor
La Trobe University

‘Even the Most Foul Criminals Are Owed Unconditional Respect’: The Ethical Lawyer and the Burden of Sublimity.

One of the key experiences that Raimond Gaita seeks to register in a number of his writings is his encounter, through reading Hannah Arendt’s *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, with the idea that ‘even the most foul criminals are owed unconditional respect’ (*A Common Humanity* p 10). Gaita notes that it is ‘a commonplace of legal practice’ (ibid p 54) that no criminal may be denied justice, that in all cases proper legal procedure must be followed and show trials avoided. And yet, as Gaita also notes, that even the ‘chief architect of the Final Solution’ was owed justice for his sake, as a human being, represents ‘the most sublime aspect of our legal tradition’ (ibid p 11).

In this paper, I want to explore this ‘sublime’ aspect of the law, particularly insofar as it poses an ethical challenge for individual lawyers and judges. What does it mean to say that justice and unconditional respect are owed even to the worst criminals? It is, perhaps, one thing to owe *justice* to the worst among us, but must we also show them *respect*? How does a legal system provide these things? Are individual lawyers expected to share in this belief personally and give expression to it in their daily work? What might that amount to? Or is it enough that the individual lawyer or judge
simply helps to maintain a legal *system* that operates ‘as if’ each accused and convicted person it processes is owed justice and unconditional respect?

My aim in this paper is not to predict — or critique — what I think Gaita might say in response to these questions. Rather, I want to try to understand better what it might mean for a lawyer to encounter, through reading Gaita, a personal and even disturbing moral challenge in the idea of unconditional respect for even the worst criminals.