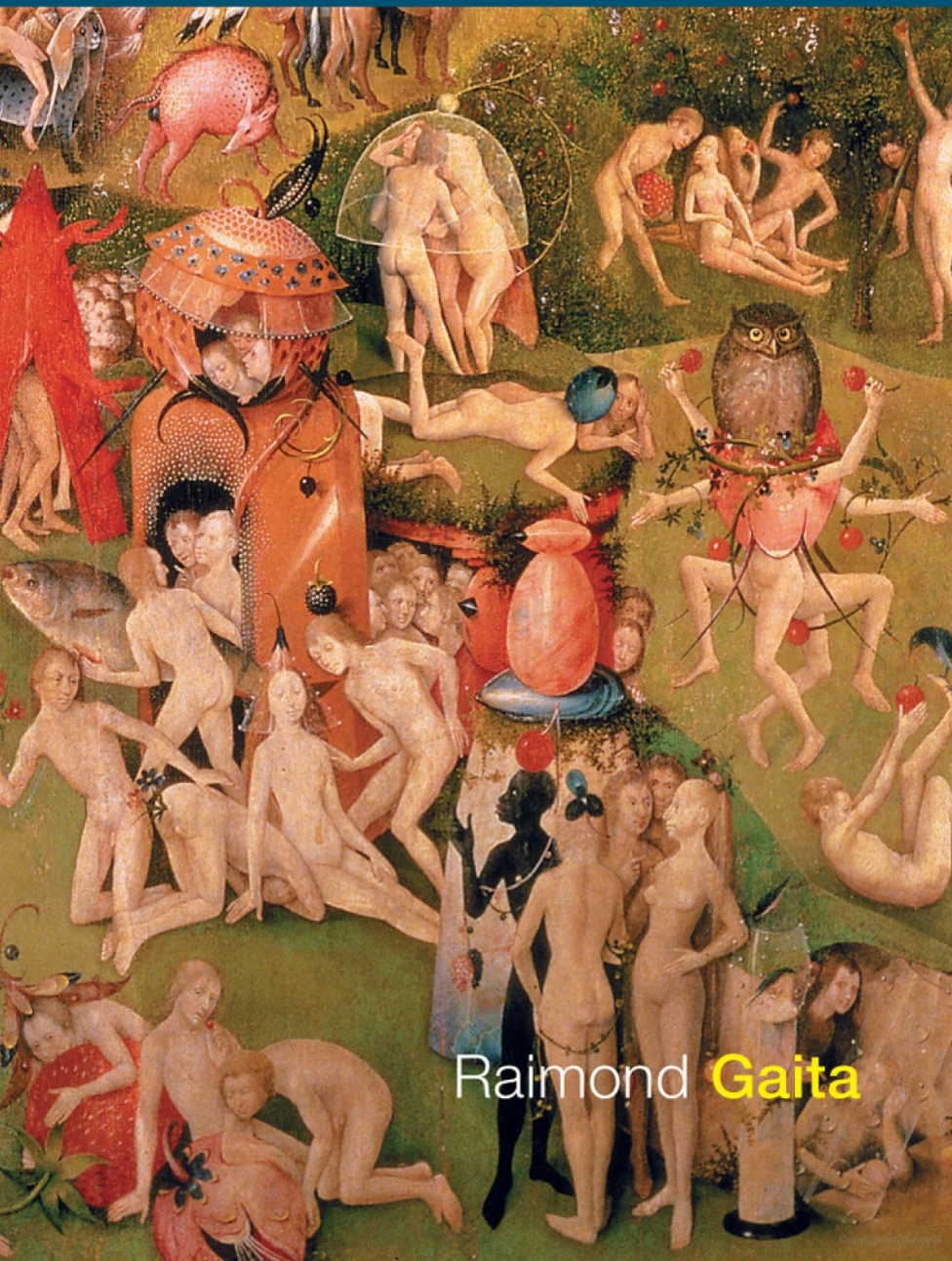
a common humanity

thinking about love and truth and justice



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a book whose discussion ranges from the injustices suffered by the Australian Aborigines to Wittgenstein's remarks on sensation.

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Preface

'Why do you want to read philosophy?' I asked the student I was interviewing. 'Because I want to know whether there is a God', he replied. When I asked him why he wanted to know that he looked astonished that I could ask such a question and replied with some force. 'Nothing is more important. Everything depends on it'. What would he say, I asked, to someone who said that nothing was more important than living a decent life, that everything depended on *that*? For a while he was silent. Then, with bemused condescension he responded, 'You must be talking about morality and all that stuff'.

I am sure that his sense of morality is not unusual. Nor is it unusual to fail to see much connection between religion and morality. Even so, it is curious, not least because he was in fact a morally serious young man. This estrangement from morality of morally serious people—young and old—is a mark of the times, I

think, as is the hunger for meaning that shows itself in quests for religion and (more often and more vaguely) 'spirituality'. Tempting though it is to see this phenomenon as the result of confusing morality and corrupt forms of it, one should not succumb to the temptation too quickly. Moralizing (in the pejorative sense) goes deep in what we call morality and is, I think, one of the reasons why many keep their distance from it. So deep does it run that there is good reason to suspect we would understand good and evil, virtue and vice, justice and injustice, obligation and practical necessity better if we did not think of them under the concept of morality.

Gitta Sereny reports many brutish examples of this unsavoury side of morality in *Cries Unheard*, the story of Mary Bell who, at the age of 11, was convicted of the manslaughter of two small boys, Martin Brown and Brian Howe. When children kill children, the horror of it provokes strong and sometimes apparently inconsistent reactions in many of us. We respond fiercely to what we regard as crimes not only against innocents, but also, at the same time, against innocence. More people are inclined to speak of the *evil* of those crimes than they are even of the massacre of thousands of adults. At the same time we draw back from the concept, partly because it was not the innocence of this or that child but the innocence of children that ignited our ferocity, and the killers are children too. Furthermore, we hardly know how to attribute to child-killers concepts which they must possess if they are to have the intentions necessary for their actions to be evil. Mary Bell persistently pleaded that she did not fully understand that death is final. When Sereny asked her, 'Did the fact of their being dead mean anything to you?', Mary replied, 'No, nothing, because I hadn't intended . . . Well—how can I say this now . . . But . . . I didn't *know* I had intended for them to be dead . . . dead for ever. Dead for me then wasn't for ever.'

Cries Unheard is a plea that we try to understand Mary. Few people, I think, would be unmoved by Sereny's portrayal of the horrors of Mary's childhood before and after the killings. I doubt

that many could keep their hearts hardened against her. Some might think, 'There but for the Grace of God go I'—a thought that need not be pressed in the direction of determinism which, as every professional philosopher knows, is difficult even to state clearly let alone to assess.

Anyone whose contemplation of Mary's life moved them to think, 'There but for the Grace of God go I', would, however, withhold a certain kind of judgement. It is not judgement of the kind implied only by the insistence on truthful, often severe, descriptions of her deeds, her motives for them and her responses to them. The judgment they would withhold is judgement of the sort implied by what we now call judgementalism—judgement that would *blame* her (bearing in mind all the connotations of that word), that would encourage one to point a finger at her and to turn one's back on her. But a preparedness to see (and in that sense to judge) a situation in a severe moral light while at the same time refusing to blame strikes some people as incoherent. That, I think, is the effect of a moralistic conception of morality.

Nearly everyone is vulnerable to the tendency to believe that severe moral appreciation must run together with blame. But there are voices in our culture that speak of different possibilities. Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* shows how moral severity may take the form of pity. The chorus does not blame Oedipus for the evil he did on account of ignorance for which he was not culpable. It pities the evil-doer he became and that informs the quality of the pity it feels at the terrible spectacle of a man who has lost his kingdom, whose wife/mother has hanged herself, who has blinded himself and is exiled. Its severe pity holds him fast in serious moral response—it holds him *responsible to* the evil-doer he has become—insisting that he face the full meaning of it.

Something similar is true of Sereny's attitude to Mary Bell. Sympathetic to her, profoundly sorry for her, even fond of her, she tries to understand her while not for a moment letting that understanding and her fond sympathy undermine her recognition

that Mary committed morally terrible deeds. The features of a life that solicit our pity, that might make us say, 'There but for the grace of God go I', may also permit—sometimes they may require—severe moral description. Debate about this matter—particularly as is applies to criminals who suffered terrible abuse during their childhood—has been hostage to a false sense of what the possibilities are: either we hold on to the possibility of moral judgement of their terrible deeds and then we must blame them; or we refuse to blame and must then relinquish the possibility of moral judgement.

Books like Sereny's and to a lesser extent, I think, Blake Morrison's, *As If*, help to free us from the grip of that false disjunction, but its effect can be detected even in them, occasionally showing itself in a degree of conceptual awkwardness. Sereny, for example, says that she doesn't wish to justify what Mary did. But who would? Could anyone in any circumstances think that the killings could actually be *justified* in any ordinary meaning of that term? What Sereny really means, I think, is firstly, that her efforts to elicit sympathy for Mary, to help us to understand her, are not intended to diminish our horror at what she did, and secondly, that moral terms are necessary to describe the *kind of horror* it is. Mary calls herself a murderer and it is quite clear that her resistance to describing what she did accurately and in detail is not mere squeamishness. She hides from the full acknowledgment of the terrible meaning of her deeds, meaning that would be revealed to her only in a lucid remorse. Sereny knows that and her knowledge of it deepens rather than undermines her attempts to lead us to an appreciation of the awful misery of Mary Bell.

More than any of the moral concepts, the concept of evil is associated in people's minds with this moralizing tendency in morality, the tendency in it to be closed to complexity, to shun and even to demonize wrong-doers. Again, many morally serious people refuse to use the word because they see it as an obstacle to understanding and sympathy. Inga Clendinnen, author of *Reading the Holocaust,* is didactic, almost aggressive, in her rejection

of the word to describe some of the most terrible deeds known to humankind. Written by someone with a moral sensibility that is deep and subtle, her book has won many prizes and was voted by *The New York Times* as one of the ten best of 1999. I suspect that her refusal of the word and her reasons for it struck a chord in many of those who nominated her book for its many accolades.

As much as anyone, Hannah Arendt taught us to see even the most terrible criminals as human beings rather than as monsters. Her chief exhibit was not a child like Mary Bell, or like Robert Thompson or Jon Venables who killed James Bulger. It was Adolf Eichmann, one of the most conscientious implementers of the Final Solution. Her book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem* has as its subtitle, *'a report on the banality of evil'*. Explaining why she chose it, Arendt said she was often struck when listening to Eichmann and to the evidence by how ordinary he was. Inattentive readers have taken the 'banality of evil' to mean the banality of the concept of evil—the banal thinking to which anyone committed to its use is condemned. Yet it was Arendt who said in *On Revolution*, a book written at the same time as she wrote *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, that 'the men of the eighteenth century did not understand that there exists goodness beyond virtue and evil beyond vice'.

A marvelous epigram, I think, but what to make of it? Is not compassion often an expression of goodness and is it not a virtue? Is not malevolent cruelty an evil, and is it not also a vice? The answer I develop in this book is that someone who affirms that every human being is infinitely precious (or sacred, as a religious person would say), will look differently at compassion and cruelty to someone who cannot or will not do so. The former might speak of goodness in ways that invite a capital 'G' and of evil in ways that make clear that both are interdependent with that sense of preciousness. On account of that interdependence she will think of good and evil as distinctive amongst the moral concepts, rather than merely extravagant expressions of praise in one case and condemnation in the other.

Judge the evil deed, but not the doer, we sometimes say, and rightly. But some evil-doers are not even slightly remorseful, have characters as foul as their deeds and there appears nothing in them from which remorse might grow. On occasions—perhaps on most occasions—it might seem that way to us only because we have not seen the good in them. I doubt that it *must* be so. The belief that it must be possible for sensitive perception to discover some good in them is, I think, a counterfeit of the affirmation, unsupported by reason, that even such people are owed unconditional respect. It is dangerous to put that affirmation in the form of an empirical assessment of what awaits discovery in every evil-doer for those who have eyes to see. If realism forces us to conclude that it is not always so, we are likely to succumb to the belief that there are, after all, some people who deserve to be shot in the street like mad dogs. Ironically, therefore, it is the concept of evil, interdependent with the affirmation that every human being is infinitely precious, that enables us to keep even the most radical evil-doers amongst us as our fellow human beings.

A Spanish song, often quoted by Simone Weil, says, 'If you want to become invisible, there is no surer way than to become poor'. Weil goes on to say, 'Love sees what is invisible'. Were I pressed to state the central concern of *A Common Humanity* I would say that it is with the ways human beings are sometimes invisible, or only partially visible, to one another, with how that effects and is effected by an understanding of morality. No one, of course, means that poor people are literally invisible to wealthy people or black people to white people. When we spell out what we mean, we often say that some human beings are invisible to the moral faculties of their fellows.

Treat me as a human being, fully as your equal, without condescension—that demand (or plea), whether it is made by women to men or by blacks to whites, is a demand or a plea for justice. Not, however, for justice conceived as equal access to goods and opportunities. It is for justice conceived as equality of respect.

Only when one's humanity is fully visible will one be treated as someone who can intelligibly press claims to equal access to goods and opportunities. Victims of racial or other forms of radical denigration, who are quite literally treated as less than fully human, would be ridiculed if they were to do it. The struggle for social justice, I argue, is the struggle to make our institutions reveal rather than obscure, and then enhance rather than diminish, the full humanity of our fellow citizens.

To speak, as I do, of fully acknowledging another's humanity will, I know, sound like rhetoric to many people who would prefer to speak of recognizing someone fully as a *person*, or even as a rational agent, at least when, in philosophical mode, they try to make perspicuous what really is the bearer of moral status. My endorsement of Weil's remark—that love sees what is invisible—will sound even worse to them. In this preface I can only plead that I mean both and soberly. Later I argue that improbable though it may seem at first, placing the weight that I do on our humanity and on love rather than on, say, the obligated acknowledgment of rights, is more hardheaded than the longing to make secure to reason what reason cannot secure, all the while whistling in the dark.

Even those who are sympathetic to the role I accord to our humanity in the shaping of our moral concepts, may, however, be less sympathetic to the role I accord to love. It was not love, they will say, but sober judicial reasoning based on common and international law that delivered the judgment on native title that I praise in Chapter Four as an example of justice beyond fairness. And it was not love, but a sense of justice that I praise in Judge Landaus' inspired intervention against the political manipulation of the Eichmann trial, when he said that the court owed Eichmann justice for his sake, as a human being. Has it not been clear at least since Kant (the objection continues) that we have obligations to those whom we do not love and often could not love no matter how hard we tried, and that obligation, but not love, can be commanded?

All that is true, and I would not wish to deny it. We should not, however, draw the wrong conclusions from it. We have obligations to those whom we do not and could not love, but that does not mean that we would find it even intelligible that we should have those obligations if we did not also find it intelligible that someone could love them, and more fundamentally, if we did not see them as having the kind of individuality I elaborate in this book and which, I claim, is in part constituted by our attachments, of which the forms of love are the most important.

If discussion in Australia (where this book was first published) is any indication, I did not make sufficiently clear the part I assigned to love in the *formation* of the most important of our moral concepts. Its epistemic role—its role of revealing what I often call (though with embarrassed reservations) the preciousness of individuals—is what struck reviewers. Given that I begin with the dramatic example of the nun who revealed that even people who had lost everything that gives sense to our lives are our equals, that was perhaps not surprising. And there are other, less dramatic, examples that reveal something more familiar, but fundamental nonetheless: the ordinary love of parents for their children, lovers for their beloved. Children often come to love their brothers and sisters when they see them in the light of their parents love. Sometimes people who work in dehumanizing institutions are reminded of the full humanity of those in their care or under their guard when they see them in the light of someone who loves and needs them. Often we see something as precious only when we see it in the light of someone's love.

To underscore this part of my argument I shall quote one of the most important passages in the book:

> Our sense of the preciousness of other people is connected with their power to affect us in ways we cannot fathom and in ways against which we can protect ourselves only at the cost of becoming shallow.

> There is nothing reasonable in the fact that another person's absence can make our lives seem empty. The power of human beings to affect one another in ways beyond reason and beyond merit has offended rationalists and moralists since the dawn of thought, but it is partly what yield to us that sense of human individuality that we express when we say that human beings are unique and irreplaceable. Such attachments and the joy and grief which they may cause conditions our sense of the preciousness of human beings. Love is the most important of them.

The love of saints depends on, builds on and transforms that sense of individuality, deepening the language of love which compels us to affirm that even those who suffer affliction so severe that they have irrecoverably lost everything that gives sense to our lives, and the most radical evil-doers, are fully our fellow human beings. On credit, so speak, from this language of love, we have built a more tractable structure of rights and obligations. If the language of love goes dead on us, however, if there are no examples to nourish it, either because they do not exist or because they are no longer visible to us, then talk of inalienable natural rights or of the unconditional respect owed to rational beings will seem lame and improbable to us. Indeed, exactly that is happening.

In a review of *A Common Humanity*, Lloyd Reinhardt, a Sydney philosopher, said that talk of Eichmann's preciousness sounds a bit sickly. I agree with him. In fact unless it comes from the mouth of a saint, for whom Eichmann along with every other human being might be just that, it makes one squirm. Reinhardt suggested that it would be better to speak of respect for the human being as such. Given that I also expressed embarrassment at my frequent use of the word 'precious' (partly because it can so easily sound precious), why did I not just abandon it, especially in contexts where it might make one squirm?

In fact, I often do abandon it in such contexts, but the reason I use it as often as I do is that the individuality that is basic to respect for a human being as such is the kind constituted by attachments, deeper and stronger than sympathy, most of which are forms of love. If we unpack what it means to do justice to Eichmann for his sake, because it is owed to him, then we will uncover that conception of individuality, as it is first constituted by our attachments and then as it is transformed, deepened and made wondrous by the love of saints. If someone had shot him like vermin, in the streets of Buenos Aires, and if his assailant were later to be remorseful, then Eichmann's individuality, as I have been speaking of it, would show itself—would haunt him—in his remorse.

Although I fully acknowledge that it is our religious tradition that has spoken most simply (and perhaps most deeply) about this when it declared that all human beings are sacred, I think that the conception of individuality I have been articulating, even as transformed by a language of love nourished by the love of saints, can stand independently of explicit religious commitment and independently of speculation about supernatural entities. What grew and was nourished in one place, I say, might take root and flourish elsewhere. But there is a question, put to me by the theologian Stanley Hauerwas, whose answer I am not sure of. He asked whether the kind of love shown by the nun could exist in the prolonged absence of the kind of practices that were part of her religious vocation.

Iris Murdoch said that attention to something absolutely pure is the essence of prayer and is a form of love. If she is right, then the answer to Hauerwas' question will depend on whether, with the demise of religion, we can find objects of attention that can sustain that love, or whether they will always fail us. I don't know the answer.

Two events of national and international importance occurred in Australia in the last decade of the twentieth century. Both centred

on matters of race. In 1992 the High Court of Australia delivered a judgment, now known as Mabo, which delivered to aborigines native title to lands taken from them at the time when Australia was settled. In 1997 a report was handed to parliament which dealt with the policy, enacted from the late nineteenth century until the 1960s, of taking children of mixed blood from their aboriginal parents and sending them to institutions or to foster homes where they were often treated brutally, victims of racist contempt. The report is called *Bringing Them Home*. Mabo and *Bringing Them Home* are important, partly because evils done to this long suffering and gentle people should be more widely known to an international community increasingly conscious of the need to defend human rights wherever it is possible to do so. But they are also important, well beyond the shores of Australia, because both raise profound and subtle questions about the nature of justice, the relation of justice to law, the relations of both to what we call the national interest, and most troubling of all perhaps, about the nature of genocide. Genocide is the international crime par excellence because it is a crime, not merely against this or that community, but against the community of humankind, a crime 'against the human status', as the French prosecutor at Nuremberg put it.

Racism of a certain kind—not all kinds for racism is a complex phenomenon, but the kind usually connected with skin colour—is best characterized as an incapacity on the part of racists to see that anything could go deep in the inner lives of their victims. For such racists it is literally unintelligible that parenthood or sexuality, for example, could mean to 'them'—the victims of their racial denigration—what it does to 'us', just as it is unintelligible that we could see in a face that looked to us like the Black and White Minstrel Show's caricature of an Afro-American face, all the magnificence and misery of Othello.

Legal justifications of colonial settlement in many parts of the world were often infected by racism of that kind. Sometimes,

at least, the law was intended not just to rationalize imperial interests, but also to justify settlement of foreign lands to a reasonable conscience. Terra nullius—the doctrine that the land was, for legal purposes, empty—is an example. Consistent in theory with the recognition of the full humanity of those whose lands were colonized, in practice its application was often the expression of a racist denigration of the 'capacities of some categories of indigenous inhabitants to have any rights or interest in land' (to quote Justice Brennan). That denigration expressed the belief that since nothing could go deep with them, their forcible removal from their lands could not do so (could not count as dispossession as we ordinarily mean it) and therefore could not constitute a grievous wrong against them. More than preceding judgments in other lands—America or Canada, for example—Mabo made clear why the rejection of terra nullius and the property laws infected by the racists assumptions which often governed its application, was nothing less than the recognition of the full humanity of the indigenous peoples who had been dispossessed. Reflection on it reveals why that recognition was an act of justice that could only be parodied by calling it an act of fairness.

Just as many of the settlers could not imagine that the aborigines could have relations of any depth to the land, so many of their descendants could not imagine that they had relations of any depth to their children. The first form of blindness enabled whites to take their lands from them with a relatively clear conscience. The second enabled them to take their children for reasons that were various but which sometimes served the intention of eliminating them as a people. Guided by the 1948 United Nations Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, *Bringing Them Home* accuses past Australian administrations of genocide.

Because the Holocaust is the most striking of our paradigms of genocide, no other crime is so identified with the twentieth century. Were it not for the Holocaust, other instances of genocide—

Armenia and Rwanda for example—might have been seen to be no different in kind from the crime of mass murder, whose frequency and scale also marked that century, but which is as old as political association. After the Holocaust and especially in the two great trials of Nazi criminals—Nuremberg and the Eichmann trial in Jerusalem in 1961—many people were overwhelmed by a sense that they were confronted with a new crime which humanity needed to bring into the space of common understanding, even if aspects of it would always defeat attempts to do so.

No recent writer that I know of has been more alive to what is new in our political experience than Hannah Arendt, no one so resistant to the melancholy wisdom of Ecclesiastes that there is nothing new under the sun. She laboured to make us aware that the crimes that define the Holocaust and which make it a paradigm of genocide were new to our political philosophies.

Perhaps it is too early to tell, but if one is to judge by the rapidly degenerating understanding of the limits to the concept's application, then I suspect she laboured in vain. Early attempts to define or at least to mark the distinctive features of genocide functioned negatively, distinguishing genocide from other terrible crimes. Pogroms motivated by murderous racial hatred, especially when their victims numbered tens of thousands, were the crimes most likely to be confused with genocide, and in fact were so even by Jews who had to be convinced as late as the Eichmann trial that the Final Solution was not merely the worst of the pogroms. Mass murder as a means to the elimination of political opponents was only a little less likely to be misunderstood for the same crime as genocide. The murder (in the death camps) of the Jehovah's Witnesses and homosexuals, however, was almost universally recognized to be a crime different in kind.

Nowadays state instigated mass murders are routinely called genocide. Even an English Law Lord said that General Pinochet was guilty of genocide. So too is 'ethnic cleansing' as it occurred in the former Yugoslavia even though it was motivated by the

desire to clear territory of people deemed to be foreigners, its brutality compounded by hatred. As I write there is a Bill before the Australian Senate which proposes to include amongst those against whom genocide can be committed, groups 'based on gender, sexuality, political affiliation or disability', just those groups whose early exclusion from the concept were critical to an appreciation of its distinctive nature. In many parts of the world the assimilation of indigenous peoples to an occupying culture is called genocide if the intention is the destruction of the indigenous culture.

Does it matter? It does, I'm sure. If we stretch the concept too far then injustice will be done to those who might be tried for a crime which should not attract the obloquy that rightly attaches to genocide because of its horrific paradigms. And—perhaps as importantly—our efforts to understand a critical and novel element of our political experience will be subverted, perhaps beyond redemption. It is sad but true that human kind understands itself partly by the crimes it knows itself to be capable of. We must therefore strive to give them their right names.

Thinking about *Bringing Them Home* can help us do that, I believe. The reason why the children were taken changed over the years covered by the report as did the way they and their parents were treated. Sometimes the policy was genocidal, sometimes it was not. As far as I know no children or parents were killed in the service of a genocidal intention. Understanding why the policy was sometimes but not always genocidal and why it was genocidal though no one was killed will help to determine what is rightly called genocide.

Many people believe that if there is no killing then there is no genocide. A thought experiment shows why I believe they are mistaken. Imagine a people forcibly sterilized in order that they be eliminated as a people. Would that count as genocide? I think most people would answer that it does and that hardly anyone would be morally outraged at the suggestion that it does. This thought-experiment stretches the concept of genocide further

than many people had thought possible, but I think it will not stretch it so far as to include assimilation, some instances of which achieved, and were intended to achieve, the destruction of a people as surely as mass murder does.

Accepting that there can be genocide without mass killing does not demean the Holocaust and it will enable us to understand better what it is about the Holocaust that we try to understand by bringing it under the concept of genocide. Never before the Holocaust and never after it has there been such a relentless determination to wipe from the face of the earth a people who were vilified as pollutants of it. That is one respect in which it is unique, unprecedented and not yet repeated. There is, however, another aspect that makes it unique, or perhaps more accurately, there are other aspects that have prompted people to call it that, aspects that have also prompted some of them to say that it is mysterious, destined to defeat all our efforts to understand it. For understandable reasons these features—the ones that make it unprecedented and unrepeated as genocide and the ones that make it something different and worse than genocide—get mixed up. The confusion hinders our understanding of genocide, partly because the features of the Holocaust that make it different and worse than genocide are just those that make many people think that only a crime that includes mass murder could count as the same kind of crime as the Holocaust. It is ironical, but I think it is true, that our paradigm of genocide has hindered our understanding of it.

It is possible to characterize the genocidal aspects of the Holocaust and even to explain why it is such a terrible paradigm of genocide without resorting to good and evil as distinctive moral concepts. If we have use for them anyhow, then we will of course see the genocidal elements of the Holocaust as evil, but if we don't have use for them, then we will not be bereft of what is necessary for a full understanding of genocide. To understand the aspects of the Holocaust that make some people say that it is

mysterious, we need a concept of evil as something distinctive amongst our moral concepts, something that concepts of cruelty and savagery do not capture, something that captures the insight that 'there exists evil beyond vice'. The death camps make our need of it more evident than do the killings in the east where a relentless genocidal determination was already apparent.

Considerable resistance has grown over recent years to seeing the Holocaust as unique in any sense that implies that it may elude all our attempts to understand it. Though I show sympathy for the claim that it is mysterious, I neither endorse nor reject it. Instead, I try to create conceptual space for it. Resistance to it is sometimes based on the moral objection that it privileges Jewish suffering and sometimes on the belief that it is obscurantist. There can be little doubt that there are corrupt uses of the Holocaust of a kind that are expressed only a little unjustly in the cynical quip that 'there is no business like Shoah business'. Nor can there be doubt that the difficulties in understanding it have attracted obscurantists. That being said, the preoccupation with the Holocaust in *A Common Humanity* is an expression of my belief that efforts to understand it—which must include efforts to characterize the limits of our understanding—are essential to humanity's efforts to understand itself. Anxiety about Holocaust denial of the kind made notorious by David Irving is, I suspect, often an acknowledgment of this.

As always when Irving is in the public eye, free speech is the topic of passionate argument. Though the cause of the celebrated trial in London was Irving's attempt to prosecute Deborah Lipstadt for saying what was plainly true—that he was a Holocaust denier of a particularly virulent sort—it is Irving's right to free speech that is more usually at issue. Denying it to him is dangerous and should therefore be resisted on prudential grounds, but it is not, I think, an affront to free speech conceived as a positive ideal. That ideal presupposes a constituency of argument in which people defend—'to the death' as Voltaire insisted—the rights of radically

opposing opinions to be heard. One reason why they should be heard is that, just conceivably, they might be true. And even when there is no requirement that they be heard, they should be permitted to be expressed because, as we say, 'everyone is entitled to their opinion'. Conceived as a positive ideal, free speech enjoins us to be open to the opinions of others and to try to overcome the common psychological obstacles to such openness—hot-headedness, arrogance, hardening of the intellectual arteries, fear and so on. Succumbing to any one of them could make one impervious to reason. There is, however, another way to be impervious to reason, less common but more interesting to anyone concerned to understand the nature of critical thinking, and it is Irving's way. It is to be a crank.

Most people, I think, believe that to call someone a crank is to descend into mere abuse, and that if something of interest is to be extracted from the abuse, then it is that the person who is called a crank suffers from one or more of the psychological disabilities that make one seriously beyond the reach of reason. In one of the more difficult chapters of this book I offer a different perspective on what it is to be a crank and on the ways we rule things out of consideration more generally. From that perspective we can see that the concept is essential to any account of critical thinking because it is essential to any account of judgment, in whose absence critical thinking is impossible. Summing up, Justice Gray said: 'The picture of Irving which emerges from the evidence of his extra-curricular activities reveals him to be a right-wing pro-Nazi polemicist. In my view the Defendants have established that Irving has a political agenda. It is one which, it is legitimate to infer, disposes him, where he deems it necessary, to manipulate the historical record in order to make it conform with his political beliefs'. He was right, of course, but someone can be as he described Irving and be no more than that, while someone can be like that because he is a crank. The difference is critical to understanding why the refusal to engage Irving in debate can be

more than disdain for him or piety towards those whose terrible fate he denies.

A myth—edifying and powerful—stands in the way of our understanding this. It is the myth that a serious thinker—a *true* thinker—will fear to think nothing. She will follow reason wherever it takes her no matter how frightened or morally disgusted she may be at the prospect of embracing the conclusions it delivers to her. If necessary she will accept that the whole of morality is a sham to which, as Thrasymachus taught, the strong have fallen victim because of the cunning of the weak.

Were I seriously tempted to such nihilism by living a philosophical life, I would give up philosophy, fearful of what I was becoming. I strongly suspect that virtually all—perhaps all—of my colleagues would do the same. It is a startling fact, given how pervasive the myth is and for how long this kind of scepticism has haunted philosophy, that I have come across no one who is seriously prepared to profess such nihilistic scepticism in her own name and that none of the great philosophers has done so. It survives by being put impersonally or attributed to someone else. Socrates asked his interlocutors to put aside, for the duration of their discussion, what they had heard, what *could* be said by someone or what could theoretically be argued for, and to answer for themselves. When people are asked whether they believe that morality might be a sham, that our sense of the terrible wrongs people have suffered might answer to no genuine moral concept, then if they are also asked to answer seriously in the first person they invariably say they do not and cannot believe it?

Only at this point of seriousness, I think, can there be fruitful exploration of why they cannot profess such nihilistic scepticism. Then one discovers that one would fear to be a person who seriously professed it and that the fear of it is of a different kind from the fear of thinking painful thoughts. One also discovers that the reason one cannot wish to be the kind of person who would follow reason to a nihilistic conclusion is different from an

incapacity to question beliefs that are so deeply inculcated that one finds it psychologically impossible even to contemplate their sceptical examination.

Something similar is true of non moral–examples of 'the unthinkable'. Were I to argue with Irving he would almost certainly wipe the floor with me, but were I then to suspect that he has a case, I would not think that I was finally living the life of reason to an exemplary degree. I would think I was losing something that is necessary to keeps my thoughts in touch with reality and, therefore, something that is necessary to prevent the life of reason from becoming the kind of parody of itself that it sometimes became during the trial in London, and always becomes at meetings of the Flat Earth Society.

Unfortunately the forms of the unthinkable have not excited much interest in philosophy, largely, I think, because it is assumed that appeal to them is merely an extravagant way of saying that someone has denied something flamingly obvious or so well established that it is part of common knowledge. Natural though that assumption is, I believe it is mistaken. Certainly it needs more examination than it has received. Understanding the ways we rule things out of consideration matters to how we conceive of free speech as a positive ideal. More basically, it matters to an understanding of what it is to think well and badly and therefore to an understanding of the difference between radical critique and the ersatz radicalism, the superficial enchantment with transgression, that is exposed the moment one calls upon its advocates seriously to profess their scepticism in the first person.

A Common Humanity celebrates the plurality of voices that constitute what Michael Oakeshott called 'the conversation of mankind'. The phrase comes from the title of Oakeshott's essay 'The voice of poetry in the conversation of mankind'. Like Oakeshott, *A Common Humanity* celebrates what, in a broad sense, could be called the poetic voice. It celebrates the importance of

literary art to the understanding of the human condition.

Every writer needs an address said Isaac Bashevis Singer. That is a fine way of putting the need we have for local roots, even when one aspires to speak universally about what life means to us. The universality of great literature—the universality we express when we say that really great writing speaks to all the peoples of the earth—is quite evidently not the kind of universality we associate with science, which aims at a universal abstract language, stripped of all local association, of all local and historical resonance. In literature, the universality one aspires to is of a kind that is achieved when a story or a poem in a particular natural language, historically rich and dense, shaped by and shaping the life of a people, is translated into other natural languages, historically rich and dense, shaped by and shaping the life of different peoples. That, I think, is what Bashevis Singer meant when he said that every writer must have an address. His was written in Yiddish.

Oakeshott would be sympathetic, I think. I am critical, however, of his conception of conversation, seeing in its elegant urbanity the exclusion of voices—sometimes shrill ones—that need to be heard. Arendt pointed out that tradition can be a threat to voices in the past, denying them the power to shake us. Richard Rorty's understanding of conversation, indebted as it is to Oakeshott, shares this failing which gives it a dilettantish air. Be that as it may: my argument that attention to conversation rather than vision will lead to a better understanding of truth, objectivity and judgment does not lead me, as it does Rorty, to scepticism. One of the deepest of Wittgenstein's lessons is that, because our ordinary ways of speaking about truth and objectivity do not presuppose metaphysical theses of the kind that philosophers like Rorty have been concerned to expose criticism of those theses, leaves things more or less as they are.

Simone Weil said that if we see another person as a perspective on the world, just as we are, then we could not treat that person unjustly. By 'a perspective on the world' she meant more

than a centre of consciousness. What she meant can be captured in the idea of responding fully to someone as a conversational partner, someone who can be asked—sometimes required—to rise to the challenge to find her own voice, to speak for herself out of a life she must live as her own and no one else's. During the course of discussing an example whose lessons run through *A Common Humanity*, I remark of a woman that her racist denigration of the Vietnamese is inseparable from the fact that she could not find intelligible that she could converse with them and learn from them about what it means to be married, to love someone or to grieve for them.

Socrates tells a young orator, Polus, shamelessly besotted with the power he imagines that oratory gives him, that he is good at rhetoric but bad at conversation. The distinction is critical to the distinction that so preoccupied Socrates and Plato, between philosophy and rhetoric. More often than not, commentators say that the distinction comes to this: that whereas rhetoric appeals to the emotions, philosophy appeals to reason.

If we take the distinction between philosophy and rhetoric to be at least in part the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate forms of persuasion concerning how one should live and what life can mean, then reflection on Socrates as Plato portrayed him will make things look considerably more complicated. Whatever Plato intended, the character he gave us eludes the classification that is implied in a simple contrast between thought and feeling. That is why he has haunted Western thought for some two and a half thousand years, repelling and attracting in turns, exciting admiration even wonder, and at times something close to contempt.

It is therefore natural to ask whether he thought, and if he did whether Plato also thought, that the abstract arguments for which he is famous (the elenchus) could take one to the kind of understanding that he possessed of why it is better to suffer evil than to do it. The characters to whom he tries to 'demonstrate' this sometimes resentfully acknowledge the conclusions that Socrates

drives them to, but they believe they have been tricked. Imagine, however, a different kind of character, someone sincerely convinced by the elenchus that it is better to suffer evil than to do it, and who proclaimed it across Athens. Would we believe that he understood what Socrates understood?

In whatever way we answer that question, surely no reading of the dialogues can fail to be struck by the powerful presence of Socrates and the effect that presence had on even the most querulous and resentful of his interlocutors. And it is hard to believe that Plato—poet and philosopher combined—was unaware of it and of the question it naturally raises for anyone who thinks about the difference between philosophy and rhetoric: how should we characterize the difference between Socrates' presence and the charismatic presence of the orators?

One answer has it that the difference is irrelevant because Socrates' presence is irrelevant to the conceptual character of the understanding he sought to provide by means of the elenchus, by means of 'reason'. Another has it that the orator's charisma is a false semblance of the kind of presence that gives to words and deeds a power to move us when we are rightly moved and learn from them. Philosophy—at least the kind of philosophy concerned with the big Socratic questions—would then be distinguished, in part, from rhetoric, legitimate persuasion distinguished from illegitimate persuasion, by whatever makes for the difference between being rightly and wrongly moved.

It is an important fact that we often learn most deeply when we are moved by what people say or do, in life and in art. Often, though, we are moved when we should not be, or in ways that we should not be, or more than we should be. Sometimes we are moved because we are sentimental, or liable to pathos, or in other ways vulnerable to the 'winged words' of rhetoric, as Adolf Eichmann called them. There are, I think, no standards that reason could firmly establish, even in principle, that could be sufficient to assure that we have been rightly or wrongly moved. When we are moved

we trust what moves us and trust that we are rightly moved. We trust wisely, however, only when trust is disciplined. The last two chapters of *A Common Humanity* try to say what disciplining trust comes to and to elaborate its implications for the distinctions between legitimate and illegitimate persuasion. It tries, not so much to argue for a shift in the balance between head and heart in favour of the heart, as to make clear what we mean when we speak of an *understanding* of the heart, when, for example, we say that we have understood something in our head but not in our heart.

If we are to find our feet with people of other cultures, in our own communities or in other nations, we must understand what it is to be lucidly open to learning from one another. Nothing much will be achieved if we have only a thin conception of reason that distinguishes between philosophy and oratory on the grounds that the former appeals to reason whereas the latter appeals to the emotions. Nothing much will be achieved either, if in rebellion against such a thin conception of reason, we surrender uncritically to our vulnerability, to sentimentality, pathos and to failings worse still. A thin conception of reason and uncritical gullibility are two sides of the same counterfeit coin. Reality is found in the conceptual space in which the other becomes visible to us and in which we respond to her with disciplined lucidity.

Iris Murdoch said that understanding the reality of another person is a work of love, justice and pity. She meant, I believe, that love, justice and pity are *forms* of understanding rather than merely conditions which facilitate understanding—conditions like a clear head, a good nights sleep, an alcohol-free brain. Real love is hard in the sense of hardheaded and unsentimental. In ridding oneself of sentimentality, pathos and similar afflictions, one is allowing justice, love and pity to do their cognitive work, their work of disclosing reality. It is the same love, Weil tells us, that sees what is invisible.

Introduction: Take Your Time

It matters where one starts when one thinks about value, especially the kind of value we call moral. Often people begin focusing on commands, rules, proscriptions. Confronted with a command that one ought not to do such and such, it is natural to ask, 'What if I do?' Once that question is asked, the search is on for the justification of morality, typically, for whether moral rules serve our (enlightened) interests—social and personal. If they don't, many people believe, then morality has no rational justification. If moral rules do not serve the purposes for which they are devised, they think, then morality is merely a gratuitous interloper in human affairs.

Some other ways of thinking about morality do not invite the same sceptical quest for justification. In them morality does not appear in the first instance in the guise of a command, nor as anything that might provoke rebellion in a free or inquiring spirit

or excite the impulse to celebrate transgression. In this book I tell the story of a nun whose behaviour showed a goodness that I found wondrous. Her behaviour can be described simply enough. She responded without a trace of condescension towards people who were incurably mentally ill, who had been so for thirty years and more, and who had been abandoned by friends and relatives, even by their parents. Nothing in the circumstances of their lives was likely to encourage the belief that, despite their affliction, they remained fully our fellow human beings.

The wonder of her behaviour has inspired much of my philosophical work. It was, however, not entirely unfamiliar to me. As a boy, I was fortunate to be brought up by two men of fine character and more than considerable goodness. I tell that story in *Romulus, My Father*, an elegy to my father and to his friend Pantelimon Hora. They befriended a man, Vacek Vilkovikas, who like them was an immigrant labourer on a large construction project in country Victoria. A few years after he arrived in Australia, Vacek lost his mind. He lived for a time in hills near us, between two large boulders which he covered with branches and bits of tin to protect him from the weather. Visibly insane, he talked to himself and sometimes cooked in his urine.

After I had written *Romulus, My Father*, a journalist, Rachel Buchanan, asked me whether Vacek had seemed queer to me when I was a boy. I answered sincerely that he had not. Later, my answer puzzled me. Why had he not? Objectively, after all, he was very strange. The answer that came to me was that my father and Hora behaved towards Vacek without condescension. Had they condescended to him—had it shown in their tone of voice or demeanour, in their body language as we say—the cruel sensitivity children often possess would have made me conclude that Vacek was not entirely 'one of us'. As it was, the contrary was true. Their treatment of Vacek enabled me to see him, his strange behaviour notwithstanding, as living yet another form of human life. Though I learned to be wary of his offerings of food and to make other

small adaptations, I accepted that it took 'his sort to make all sorts' (to borrow the fine words of D. H. Lawrence).

Most of us would agree that people like Vacek should be treated as fully our equals, but we believe it, I think, in the way young people believe they are mortal, more in our heads than in our hearts. But Vacek was recognisably leading one kind of human life. He did not bear the marks of the incurably afflicted, nor was he constantly and visibly in torment. It would be hard for anyone to say that the men to whom the nun responded in the hospital were living a life of any kind. They were not suffering an affliction which they could with help and courage overcome. No edifying stories of adversity defeated would come from that place. I could absorb without difficulty, could absorb even without noticing, my father's and Hora's attitude to Vacek. Yet even thus prepared, the nun's behaviour astonished me. Not because it was a superlative example of anything (although of course it was), but because it revealed what a human life could mean. Even such people, who appear to have lost everything that gives sense to our lives, are fully our equals. Her behaviour proved it to me.

That last sentence will provoke scepticism, I know. Here I will simply say that the nun's behaviour gave living meaning to words I had heard often enough, but which I had thought could never refer to anything real—'goodness' of a kind that invites a capital G, 'love', 'beauty' and 'purity'. These words had seemed especially suspect when used together, but I came to realise that, if they are to be used to characterise the nun's behaviour, each needs the other. Simone Weil remarks that 'beautiful' is the word we most naturally use to describe saintly deeds. She is right because it is their goodness rather than, say, their nobility that makes us reach for 'beautiful', and we do it because of their purity. It is this goodness that I believe Hannah Arendt had in mind when she wrote in *On Revolution* that 'the men of the eighteenth century did not know that there exists goodness beyond virtue and evil beyond vice'.

Is there something in our experience that can, so dramatically, teach us what evil is? There is, I believe. It is remorse. Or, more accurately, it is remorse as we have experienced it in a culture in which good and evil have been the names of distinctive moral phenomena, and where both have been connected with a sense of the inalienable preciousness of each human being. There could be, and no doubt there is, remorse for wrongdoing not informed by that sense of the individual. But, for the most part, it has not been that way for us, in the West.

With that qualification, I take remorse to be the pained recognition of the meaning of the wrong one has done—characteristically, of what it means to have wronged someone. It differs from shame in that it focuses on the deed whereas shame—when it is over the wrong one has done—is characteristically for what is revealed about oneself. One might betray someone because one is a coward, or venal. Shame focuses on the failure of character, remorse on the betrayal. When the wrong done counts as the violation of the preciousness of a human being, then it informs one conception we have of 'evil'. I do not mean *the* concept of evil. I doubt there is such a thing, just as I doubt there is such a thing as *the* concept of goodness. We speak in many ways of good and evil. I focus on what I believe to be the deepest of them. Good and evil, as I mean them, are interdependent on each other because each is interdependent on a sense of the preciousness of every human being.

Another way of characterising remorse is to say that it is the recognition of what it means to be *guilty* of having wronged someone. That being so, there is not much difference between remorse and guilt feeling. There are differences—one hesitates to speak of a remorse trip, partly for the same reason that it comes less naturally to speak of neurotic remorse rather than neurotic guilt—but the differences are not so great. Both have many corruptions which are the cause of much of the contemporary hostility to them. Maudlin self-indulgence is the most obvious of

them. Some, however, are so subtle that it is easy to lose sight of the fact that they are corruptions, and corruptions of something whose authentic forms reveal more vividly perhaps than anything else the preciousness of those whom we have wronged. To lose sight of what the corruptions corrupt and thus to become alienated from authentic forms of guilt and remorse would be to lose a sense of the full humanity of our fellow human beings. The claim that one understands the wrong one has done to another while not being seriously affected by it is as suspect, I believe, as the claim that one loves someone even though one is untroubled by their death or loss.

I am, I admit, a little embarrassed about talking, as I so often do, of the preciousness of each individual human being, not least because it can sound precious, or sentimental or soft-headed, but I can find no better way of speaking. The secular philosophical tradition speaks of inalienable rights, inalienable dignity and of persons as ends in themselves. These are, I believe, ways of whistling in the dark, ways of trying to make secure to reason what reason cannot finally underwrite. Religious traditions speak of the sacredness of each human being, but I doubt that sanctity is a concept that has a secure home outside those traditions.

Talk of the preciousness of human beings has, however, the advantage that it directs our attention to a feature of the person and to our response to the person. That is, I think, how it should be, for I believe that both the response and what it is a response to, the subjective and the objective, are interdependent here. Moreover the response—the subjective pole—is love in its many genuine forms. Were it not for the many ways human beings genuinely love one another—from sexual love to the impartial love of saints—I do not believe we would have a sense of the sacredness of individuals, or of their inalienable rights or dignity. Working together, sometimes harmoniously, sometimes in tension, our ways of loving create and are also formed by a language of love in which we record and explore the ways we matter to one another.