This is the Author’s version of the paper published as:

Author: A. Segal
Author Address: asegal@csu.edu.au
Title: Work, character and invisible virtue: Raimond Gaita's Romulus, my father in the context of his philosophy
Year: 2007
Journal: Meridian
Volume: 19
Issue: 2
Pages: 19-38
Date: October
ISSN: 0728-5914
Keywords: Raimond Gaita Romulus, My Father Plato Aristotle virtue character memoir philosophy

Abstract The article argues that Raimond Gaita's memoir Romulus, My Father is itself marked by the incommensurability ' between a worldly Aristotelian ethic, emphasising mutually recognised virtue, and an otherworldly Socratic ethic for which virtue is not internally connected to recognition ' that Gaita invokes to describe his father's conduct. To this extent the memoir resists its author's attempt to conceptualise it, a resistance connected to its being so haunting.

Call Number: CSU279963
Work, Character and Invisible Virtue: Raimond Gaita’s *Romulus, My Father* in the Context of his Philosophy

By Alex Segal

School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Charles Sturt University
Locked Bag 678
Wagga Wagga NSW 2678
Australia

Tel. (02) 6932466

Email. asegal@csu.edu.au
Abstract

The article argues that Raimond Gaita’s memoir *Romulus, My Father* is itself marked by the incommensurability – between a worldly Aristotelian ethic, emphasising mutually recognised virtue, and an otherworldly Socratic ethic for which virtue is not internally connected to recognition – that Gaita invokes to describe his father’s conduct. To this extent the memoir resists its author’s attempt to conceptualise it, a resistance connected to its being so haunting.
Commenting on his memoir *Romulus, My Father*, Raimond Gaita says that in it he sought to show that his father with “some confusion and much intensity” lived two “incommensurable conceptions of the ethical”. ¹ On the one hand, a worldly Aristotelian ethic informs Romulus and his best friend Hora’s yearning for “a community of equals, each worthy to rejoice in the virtues and achievements of the other”. ² This ethic – which, Gaita says, is particularly evident in the humanism of the book’s first part – is “for the relatively fortunate”. It ties respect to good character, and affirms that virtue should illuminate a good human life as “deserving of public honour”, and manifest itself “to those who are worthy to judge and honour it”. ³ On the other hand, the intensity of Romulus and Hora’s moral concern and the ferocity of their disdain for “the trappings of wealth and status” bespeak a renunciatory Socratic ethic. This ethic severs “the virtue of a virtue” from “its being visible to the appreciative judgment of one’s peers”, and can reveal “the full humanity of those who suffer severe, ineradicable, and degrading affliction” and of those who are steeped in evil (“Reply”, pp. 58, 59, 61). ⁴

In *Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception*, Gaita says that a tramp who never meets “the demands which are internal to friendship” remains subject to them, can be thought of as someone’s friend, and thus remains “one of us”, “a fellow in a realm of meanings which condition the way we may matter to one another” (*Good and Evil*, p. 153). This may help
characterise the tension in Romulus’s goodness. Its great emphasis upon actually meeting the demands of friendship, both in one’s own case and in that of others, bespeaks an ethic for the relatively fortunate (a seriously mentally ill person cannot meet such demands), an ethic which prizes earned respect, and pictures virtue as visible and as the object of mutual recognition. Yet despite this emphasis, his goodness – and this is what Gaita finds most remarkable about it – time and again evinced, albeit within certain limits, the fellowship beyond friendship, and beyond the Aristotelian ethic, that the example of the tramp affirms.

Illuminating though it is, Gaita’s self-interpretation, I shall argue does not quite master his text. Indeed, I shall argue that the tension Gaita ascribes to his father marks the memoir – something which I shall suggest contributes to its fascination, its haunting power. First, though, I shall briefly recall some aspects of the story – as it is told in the memoir – of Romulus’s life. As we shall see, it is a life marked by misfortune.

Born into rural poverty in 1922 in the Romanian-speaking part of Yugoslavia, Romulus, from an early age, had to devote himself to work. Mischance denied him the scholarship on which his attending secondary school depended, leaving his love for learning unfulfilled. At thirteen, he fled his grandparents’ house – in which he had been brought up – to save himself from killing a violent, drunken uncle. Far from home, he became an apprentice blacksmith. When his apprenticeship ended, he moved to Germany in order to develop his
talents. During the war, a conscript in an army of foreign workers whose skills were exploited by the German war-machine, he fell in love with Christine Dorr, a young, vivacious, cultured but unstable chemistry student, whom he married when the war ended. With the birth of Raimond in 1946, her health deteriorated and caring for her baby was beyond her. Her illness eventually led the young family to migrate to Australia.

On arrival (in 1950), they were placed in a camp in North-Eastern Victoria; and, shortly after, Romulus, an assisted-passage migrant, was sent to another camp in central Victoria to work on building a reservoir. Here he befriended the Romanian brothers, Hora and Mitru. Christine being incapable of caring for Raimond, Romulus sought to do so – first at his camp (which was for adult males only), where Hora assisted him; then, after pressure from the authorities, at a small dilapidated rented farmhouse, a few kilometres from the camp and without running water or electricity. His hope that here Christine would settle into family responsibilities ignored the extent of her incapacity and just how inimical the environment was to such an event. She began an affair with Mitru, whom she followed to Melbourne when he found work there, but was soon unfaithful to him. Romulus proved a loving and responsible father, albeit that his insistence on absolute truthfulness, and his anxiety that Raimond – who had an inclination to delinquency – may have inherited Christine’s flaws, made him excessively severe on occasion. His own admirable character traits – a formative influence on the young Raimond – emerged in his friendship with the equally admirable Hora; but his friendship – without any condescension – extended also to Vacek Vilkovikas, a man of great sweetness but so strange that Gaita in his commentary describes him as “gently mad” (“Reply”, p. 61).
Christine and Mitru had a child together. She again proved a neglectful mother, and her reckless spending meant that Mitru could not make ends meet, Romulus paying their rent. The tension of the situation led to Mitru quarrelling with and striking Romulus, who did not return the blow; to Mitru beating Christine; and to his attempting to commit suicide, Hora reproaching his brother for letting himself be trampled on by a “characterless woman” (Romulus, p. 89). Mitru’s first suicide attempt failed, but his second – when Christine was pregnant again – succeeded. Romulus, deeply shaken, regained his equilibrium only through his work (by this time he was again a metal worker), work which earned him the respect of the wider community. Christine, whose children by Mitru had been made wards of the state, sought to re-establish her relationship with her husband and her son; but when this failed, she committed suicide, a tragedy which left Romulus and Raimond each alone in his remorse, and which it took them decades to work through.

Before Christine’s suicide, Romulus had entered into a correspondence with Lydia, a Yugoslav intending to migrate to Australia, a correspondence in which a mutual love seemed to develop. But it was illusory: a letter came in which she told him that she had just recently gotten married, a betrayal the malevolence of which undermined his moral and mental universe. Succumbing to madness – a madness in which evil spirits haunted him, and in which he was led to attempt suicide – he was placed for a time in a mental hospital. Later, when Lydia and her husband came to Australia, he sought them out with the intention of wreaking vengeance on the husband and perhaps on Lydia herself – an intention that, in the event, was deflected by the sight of her beauty. Romulus’s shame at what he had intended
to do was perhaps what enabled him to begin to regain his sanity. But although he
recovered, the trauma had a lasting effect on him, intensifying his asceticism and severity.

Told by his son, the story of Romulus’s life is one which, as Robert Manne says, lucidly
reveals “the nature of friendship; the terrors of madness; the relationship between work and
the moral order; the poverty of a prudentialist ethic that would tell us to be honest because
it pays”. My analysis begins with the relationship of work and the moral order, a
relationship which the memoir connects to friendship and to the poverty of a prudentialist
ethic. Earning Romulus the esteem of his peers, his work, as we shall see, is a crucial part of
his exemplification of the Aristotelian ethic.

II

Something of the depth of the value of good work – as it is construed by the memoir –
emerges at the end of Chapter 5 when the author declares that remembering his father,
Hora and their friendship, enables him to say what on many occasions he has needed to say:
“I know what a good workman is; I know what an honest man is; I know what friendship is”
(Romulus, p. 74). Being “honest through and through”, Romulus’s work “both expressed and
formed much of his character”, revealing thereby “the relation between work and
character”. Inasmuch as his work was in his control, “everything was perfectly made”, even
though he worked “at great speed, able to cut steel by sight to within a millimetre”. He
assumed responsibility for faults due to poor materials or his workmen’s carelessness; doing
so “was the duty of an honest person”. For Romulus and Hora, rejecting “shabby” prudential reasons for honesty (reasons that seem to render honesty not true, not honest – not “perfectly made”) is “the mark of our humanity”. And they, like those in the wider, non-immigrant Australian community of the 1950s, correlated our humanity with what they took to be the central moral concept: character, in the sense of a settled disposition – involving “honesty, loyalty, courage, charity (taken as a preparedness to help others in need) and a capacity for hard work” – “for which it was possible rightly to admire someone” (Romulus, pp. 98-101).

Good work’s connection to character implies a connection to friendship and, more generally, to an ideal of respect. Romulus and Hora’s friendship rested on a mutually recognised disdain, enabled in Romulus’s case by his “unboastful confidence” in what he could do, for the prudential valuing of a good name and for the “external signs of status and prestige”; and on a shared yearning, nourished by “a long tradition of European thought”\(^\text{vi}\), for “a community of equals, each worthy to rejoice in the virtues and achievements of the other”, “decent men and women who humbly, but without humbug, knew their own worth and the worth of others” (Romulus, pp. 97-101) – a community which their particular, respect-informed friendship perhaps exemplified. Romulus’s anger at Raimond’s adolescent rebelliousness was motivated by a belief in decency and respect, but not at all by a sense of respectability that is tied to social status, something he reviled perhaps even more than delinquency itself (Romulus, pp. 59-60).\(^\text{vii}\)
The inability of mainstream Australians to imagine that “the foreigners in their midst might live their lives and judge their surroundings in the light of standards which were the equal and sometimes superior to theirs”, constituted an impediment to the yearned for community of equals. That Romulus overcame this impediment by forging a good name for himself through his work contributed to his pleasure in the good name (*Romulus*, pp. 100-01).

Evincing “practical genius”, not merely skill (*Romulus*, p. 4), his materials seeming “in friendship with him, as though consenting to his touch rather than subjugated by him” (*Romulus*, p. 97), Romulus’s work partook of the high European standards, and of the respect and ease of his friendship with Hora. *Good and Evil* argues that respectfulness for materials beyond concern for function distinguishes a craftsman from a “superbly skilled” worker, and enables the analogy with craft to clarify the nature of virtue. The analogy suggests both the irreducibility and necessary relation of virtue to purpose, to human needs that are specifiable independently of morality. For both Socrates and Aristotle, just treatment confers “not merely certain natural benefits or goods” – analogous to the functional aspect of craft – but also itself “as a distinct and irreducible object of gratitude” (*Good and Evil*, p. 78; Gaita’s italics), an object analogous to the aesthetic aspect of craft. And craft, requiring “a limitless process of self-exploration through an exploration of what [one does]”, is analogous to wisdom, to, that is, a kind of tradition-constituted deepening of understanding that is not involved in discovering the function of a thing (*Good and Evil*, pp. 87-88). Like his refusal of prudential justifications, Romulus’s respect for materials (apparent also in his appreciation of “the craftsmanship” of the work of others (*Romulus*,
resists instrumental thinking, and is tied to the respect for others that binds the community he longs for.

Of those who engage in “self-exploration through an exploration of what they do” (that is, those who have a vocation), *Good and Evil* argues that “What they are and what they do come together in the concept – what it is to be an X (a craftsman, a nurse or a teacher for example)”. As vocational concepts resist the convergence of opinion that is possible with relatively transparent functional concepts (“the concept of a dustman for example”), the understanding of them “may deepen without limit”. But the opacity that they thereby share with “moral emphasis” (*Good and Evil*, p. 87) is for Gaita, I think, compatible with the visibility of virtue. After all, the craft/virtue analogy applies quite naturally to Aristotelian virtuous deeds – “done for their own sake”, “out of love for their fineness” (*Good and Evil*, p. 89). Moreover, an understanding that may deepen without limit partly constitutes inner states which, professing “to be truthful and true”, seem for Gaita to be visible. Because in grief one must be “related to the reality of someone’s death”, grief must be “true to … that reality”: internal to grief is a “critical vocabulary that distinguishes real from false forms of it”. An analogous lucidity differentiating craftsmanship from merely skilled carpentry informs the understanding of “what it is to make furniture” (*Good and Evil*, p. 87). This understanding, one might surmise, is nurtured by the community for which Romulus and Hora yearn; and its opacity is perhaps evinced by the individuality of the finest cabinet making.
Although mainstream Australians affirm the individuality-evincing notion of a character (*Romulus*, p. 102), for Romulus and Hora individuality goes deeper. Made by the honesty revealed in their talk, connected to character itself and to “seeing another person as being fully and distinctively another perspective on the world” (*Romulus*, pp. 72-73), theirs exemplifies the becoming “authentically present in speech and deed”, the standing “behind [one’s] words” and speaking “out of the life that [one] must make [one’s] own”, that is affirmed in *Good and Evil* (pp. 145, 284).\(^ix\) It is perhaps figured by the hand-eye coordination of Romulus’s work.\(^x\) Joyful “in having a hammer and steel in his hands”, his genius flourishing during his apprenticeship, “he developed the distinctive rhythm of his hammering – tap tap bang, tap tap bang”. The taps, Gaita surmises, “gave him time to assess what to do and to gauge his accuracy”. It is as if the accuracy involves an integration, a coming-together, of the self. What could have been merely mechanical (“of course the sound was that of a hammer ringing on the anvil”) becomes expressive (*Romulus*, pp. 4-5).

That Romulus and Hora yearn for this community bespeaks the mismatch – referred to in Gaita’s commentary (“Reply”, p. 59) – between the values of the Aristotelian conception and the world. But on this conception – Gaita’s writings seem to imply – the mismatch arises either from failings (for example, shoddy workmanship, valuing of status and prestige) so banal as not to put into question the fellowship that underpins the yearned for community or from those failings for which, evincing our common nature, we can be consoled by fellowship with others who like us suffer shame in response to them. The “European fatalism”, the “sense of the tragic” (“Reply”, p. 59) of Romulus’s response to the latter failings, is a sense of all other human beings as his “fellow mortals, victims of fate and
destined for suffering” (Romulus, p. 122): as Gaita sees it, this sense of the tragic deepens, rather than ruptures, the Aristotelian conception.

From what has been said so far, one might expect the spirit of Aristotle to inform the tribute – which I cited at the beginning of this section – to Romulus and Hora’s work, honesty and friendship. The utterance, which is in the part of the memoir that Gaita’s commentary associates with Aristotelian humanism, seems to be a public honouring of achievement and virtue, an honouring which evinces the kind of understanding that the honoured qualities evince. It testifies to the kind of tradition that constitutes the Aristotelian community, evoking moral education through example – an education thematised in the chapter it concludes: Gaita there writes that he owes the development of his interest in ideas, an interest which, at a certain point in his teenage years, displaced his delinquent inclinations, to Hora, whose “strong resonant voice” – a manifestation of an inner equilibrium – and “fine ear for rhetorical pauses and emphases” made a powerful impression on him (Romulus, p. 72). Yet the tone of the tribute is not Aristotelian. It is set by the beautiful, otherworldly invocation that introduces it: “The philosopher Plato said that those who love and seek wisdom are clinging in recollection to things they once saw” (Romulus, p. 74). The shift to Plato is elicited, I think, by the preceding paragraph which describes how Hora’s openness to individuality, to being radically altered by “the voices of others”, undermines his equilibrium; a misfortune for which, it seems, he cannot find consolation in fellowship with others who suffer it. What Hora learns from reading Solzhenitsyn – that often people betray others not because of cowardice, nor when suddenly “confronted with a dramatic decision”, but because of having been slowly corrupted “through many compromises, none of which
seemed important in itself” – shakes his belief, central to his self-understanding, that he has “sufficient courage to die rather than betray his principles or other people”, a belief in no way impugned by the memoir as a whole and concerning a matter about which he, having suffered under Romanian communism, had often thought (Romulus, pp. 73-74). If – as this perhaps suggests – one becomes worthy precisely in ceasing to think oneself worthy, then the community of those worthy to rejoice in each other’s virtues and achievements may be undone by the very self-exploration that is essential to it.

If we witness here the living of “incommensurable conceptions of the ethical”, the incommensurability is less between conceptions than within the Aristotelian conception: at issue is this conception’s linking of virtues of character to visibility. For the exploration of courage that seems to elicit the break with Aristotle suggests that this supposedly Aristotelian virtue may resist self-esteem. Moreover, this break is not, pace Gaita’s commentary, connected to Romulus and Hora’s contempt for the trappings of status and prestige, a contempt which, going hand-in-hand with pleasure in an esteem-worthy esteem, bespeaks an ethic for the relatively fortunate. I shall need, though, to consider this contempt at its most extreme. But before doing so I consider the way that the memoir impugns – more deliberately than in its account of Hora’s self-questioning – the character-centred ethic. For the extreme attitude, as we shall see, is tied to the transformation in Romulus induced by a mental illness which itself occurs in the wake of experiences that this ethic – of which Romulus is a passionate exemplar – cannot accommodate.
The ethic becomes most limiting when, “given an Australian accent”, it deprecates personality as superficial and changeable, “the false semblance” of the “real individuality” – connected to what is “steady and deep in a person” – achieved by a character. Though nourishing some possible “worthy ways of being human”, this sharp “division of the human spirit” – between personality and character – “maimed others and would not allow some even to see the light of day”: in particular, its puritanism closed off “the perspective from which men could unreservedly glory in feminine beauty and grace” and, severing femininity from sensuality, undermined women’s potential “truly to be women”. It was “the wrong conceptual environment” for Christine – “highly intelligent, deeply sensuous, anarchic and unstable” – “to find herself and for others to understand her”. The contempt for her as one “lacking entirely in character” – her “engaging vivacity” assimilated to “a dangerously seductive manifestation of personality” – was “emblematic of a culture whose limitations were partly the reason she could not overcome hers” (Romulus, pp. 102-04). And the narrowness of this culture’s idea of work perhaps shows in responses to the young Raimond, who preferred reading to farm life: “Tom Lillie [one of the farmers for whom Romulus worked] believed I was lazy, and disliked me almost as much as he did my mother, thinking, perhaps, that I was like her” (Romulus, p. 60).

By contrast, Romulus asked little of Raimond in this regard and encouraged his reading. And although he mistook Christine’s love of theatre, Shakespeare and opera – none of which he enjoyed – for the snobbishness that values status and prestige, albeit indulging it in her
“because he loved her” (*Romulus*, p. 6), sensuality did not elicit his censure. Concerning Christine’s “promiscuous nature” – which he blamed for her affair with Mitru, not blaming Mitru whom he thought was likely to suffer from it – he was sorrowful, not angry (*Romulus*, pp. 82-83). Moreover, it was in part from Romulus’s madness in the wake of Lydia’s betrayal, and perhaps also from the “compassionate fatalism” of his response to Christine and Mitru (*Romulus*, p. 121), that Gaita as an adolescent came to the belief that anyone under the sway of sexual love “should be prepared to be destroyed by it” (*Romulus*, p. 137). This belief underpins his arguing in his philosophy that “the requirements of morality” may be in “deep and irreconcilable” tension with the attachments that condition them (*Good and Evil*, p. 240), his arguing that love, in sustaining “the faith that human beings are precious beyond reason, beyond merit”, both “commends itself to morality” and “offends it” (*Common Humanity*, p. 27). Such ideas, to the extent that they were evinced by Romulus’s conduct, perhaps signal Romulus’s distance from what Gaita takes to be the Australian ethic of character. Resisting a sharp “division of the human spirit”, providing space for the anarchic and unstable, they may (had they informed the culture more generally) have provided a better “conceptual environment” for Christine.

But the faith that human beings are precious beyond reason and merit takes us beyond Romulus’s own ethic of character, and the community he longed for. Only a renunciatory ethic can affirm a sexual love that requires a preparedness – perhaps connected to seeing the full humanity of the severely afflicted – to be destroyed by it, to suffer severe affliction oneself, an affliction for which Romulus could not be consoled by a sense of fellowship with other lovers who suffer it. Moreover, the Aristotelian ethic, even when deepened by a sense
of the tragic, may not be able to accommodate the centrality to Romulus’s moral concern of compassion – a compassion evoked by Gaita in Socratic terms: “He was truly a man who would rather suffer evil than do it”; and evident in “the help he gave those in need”, in “the pain he visibly felt for their pain”, and in his “unhesitating acceptance” of those deserving his “most severe judgments” (Romulus, pp. 165, 172-73, 207). Still less may this ethic be able to accommodate Romulus’s totally uncondescending response to Vacek (“Reply”, p. 61), a response which enabled Raimond to see Vacek “as living yet another form of human life” (Common Humanity, p. 2), and incompatible with Aristotle’s belief, referred to in Good and Evil, that it would be better if those without “ground for self-esteem” had “never been born” (Good and Evil, p. 26).

Nevertheless, perhaps owing in part to Romulus’s exemplification (in, say, his hand-eye coordination) of admiration-eliciting qualities “at the limit of an empirically conditioned sense of human powers” (Good and Evil, p. 204), his goodness was not the invisible goodness – affirmed in Gaita’s philosophy – that makes its exemplar disappear before the wonder of what it reveals and which does not sustain friendship or evince character (Good and Evil, p. 206). The memoir refers to Romulus’s desire to be respected for his serious attempt to live decently such that the condescension of his neighbours “must have rankled” (Romulus, p. 101) – an Aristotelian desire. The commentary on the memoir says that his was not the saintly, Socratic goodness of feeling unhumiliated by a wrong done to one (“Reply”, p. 61). Thus, Romulus’s example notwithstanding, the seventeen-year-old Gaita – as A Common Humanity (Gaita’s book subsequent to the memoir) recounts – was astonished by a nun’s utterly self-effacing goodness, her totally loving and uncondescending response to
“incurably afflicted” patients in a psychiatric hospital who, unlike Vacek, were “constantly and visibly in torment” and not “living a life of any kind”. Virtually nothing else about the nun made an impression on him: her love rendered invisible the virtues of character essential to “her becoming the kind of person she was” and perhaps to the capacity of her love to reveal what a human life can mean. The love – he felt irresistibly – was “directly shaped by the reality which it revealed”, a reality which cannot be specified independently of it. Its revelatory quality not depending on any of the nun’s metaphysical beliefs, the love was not inspired by beliefs that might turn out to be false: “That”, Gaita says, “is one of the great differences between goodness and, for example, great courage” (Common Humanity, pp. 3, 19, 20, 21). Another is that in encountering such love, “no one conjectures whether it is possible for them” (Good and Evil, p. 204). Paying no attention to human powers, Gaita’s self-effacing fidelity to this love eschews Aristotelian expression.

This fidelity would have made inconceivable his response as a fifteen-year-old which his commentary singles out as showing the incommensurability of the two ethical conceptions (interestingly, at issue is his own conduct, not his father’s). A few weeks after coming home from the hospital that treated his mental illness in the wake of Lydia’s mendacity – illness connected partly to the sway of sexual love over him and partly to the way that, through the betrayal he suffers, a shocked recognition of the reality of evil shakes his sense of “all other human beings as his fellow mortals, victims of fate and destined for suffering” (Romulus, p. 122) – Romulus, together with Vacek, visited Raimond at boarding school. Gaita in the memoir recalls:
As soon as I saw him I knew that his illness had again overtaken him. He came dressed in a dishevelled navy pin-striped suit, with a dirty white shirt open at the neck, the collar partly covered by the collar of his jacket. He seemed shrunken, stooped, not with age (he was only thirty-nine), but with the burden of his affliction. Most startling was his face: thin, unshaven, his eyes, not dead as is often the case with depression, but burning with the terror of his visions, all made worse by the fact that his almost shaven head made him look as though he had come from a concentration camp.

... Afterwards a teacher asked me if one of the men had been my father. “No”, I replied. I was later tormented with guilt and shame for having denied my father, but I knew not quite for what I was ashamed because I also knew that, terrible though it was, my denial was not prompted by cowardice. (*Romulus*, pp. 135-36)

The “too compressed” last part of that last sentence, says Gaita in his commentary, was intended to convey that his denial evinced not character failings but something much deeper: an inability to see the humanity of those to whom the notion of knowing “their own worth” (the worth tied to achievement, to character) finds no application (“Reply”, p. 60). Raimond’s puzzlement – connected perhaps to the living of incommensurable ethical conceptions – means that his guilt did not fully or lucidly register the terribleness of the deed. His guilt was not truly the remorse, the “recognition of the reality of another through the shock of wronging them” (*Good and Evil*, p. 52), to which *Good and Evil* ascribes a “radical singularity” that distinguishes it from shame, and which, bespeaking an other-worldly aspect of the ethical “irreducible to a humanist understanding” (*Good and Evil*, p. 50), is beyond a community of equals, mutually rejoicing in virtues and achievements. It is
significant that Romulus’s affliction, which made it so difficult to see him as one’s fellow, was
tied, as we have seen, to the shaking of his sense of “all other human beings as his fellow
mortals” – a sense that evinces the Aristotelian conception deepened by an awareness of
the tragic. That this conception deepened by such awareness is compatible with the
blindness of Raimond’s response to his afflicted father seems evident from the compatibility
of this blindness with Raimond’s already developed allegiance to the tragic genre, “its calm
pity” enabling him to see Romulus, Christine, Mitru and Vacek as “victims of misfortune”,
“broken by it, but never thereby diminished” (Romulus, p. 124). No wonder Gaita’s
commentary, to evoke the invisibility of the humanity of the afflicted, cites Simone Weil’s
remark – which A Common Humanity cites as testimony to the nun’s love – that true
compassion for the afflicted is “a more astounding miracle than walking on water, healing
the sick, or even raising the dead” (“Reply”, p. 60 and Common Humanity, p. 18). Inasmuch
as his was an admirable character-centred ethic, Romulus was perhaps implicated in the
blindness that led to his son’s denial of him; the tragedy of the denial was perhaps thereby
compounded.

IV

Romulus, as I recounted earlier, recovered from the illness but its terrors, in leaving him
“with no patience for superficialities”, transformed him, conferring on him a “fierce purity”
that rendered his character all the more impressive: he became “transparent to the reality
of the values he professed”; and as his face “reflected his character accurately he became
even more handsome”, a handsomeness to which he, in a sense its creator, was blind
The disdain for appearances that generated this handsomeness was evinced by Romulus, “literal minded and tone-deaf to context”, conflating kinds of utterance that may have the same verbal expression (for example, statements of intention and promises), his charging the maker of such a statement who did not act on it with “a failure to have your character integrated by a commitment to your words”, to be “true to the words you had spoken” (Romulus, p. 197). It was evinced also by the extreme contempt for the external signs of status and prestige. Gaita’s commentary suggests that this contempt breached the Aristotelian ethic, the memoir that it blinded Romulus to how beauty – “in architecture, artefacts, manners, speech or style of eating, for example” – can “grace our lives”. Thus his pleasure in making beautiful objects and in beautiful objects in general was “curiously detached” from appreciation of their beauty, beauty achieved by the craftsmanship that he valued. The “ignorance or repression” here – making incomprehensible, Gaita says, Oscar Wilde’s affirmation of judging by appearances – enabled Romulus’s impressiveness: Gaita suggests that one may appreciate Romulus’s values and Wilde’s “in thought” together – he himself perhaps does this – but not live them together with “the kind of integrity with which my father lived his values” (Romulus, pp. 175-76).

Romulus’s dismissal of beauty, in allowing for shared pleasure in a craftsmanship possible only for the relatively fortunate, still fits an austere version of the Aristotelian ethic; but it resists the teleology of this ethic. Moreover, not being something that Romulus himself appreciated or could have appreciated (in this lies the purity), not being a locus of the self-esteem that is enabled by virtues of character, the impressiveness of his character was
unworldly, and came apart from virtues of character. And the honesty, character and integrity of his character lacked the depth, opacity and individuality of fine Aristotelian deeds. But nor did the impressiveness of his character evince the humanity-revealing compassion of renunciatory, otherworldly, invisible Socratic goodness: bringing his extraordinary character to the fore, making him more visible, leading him to abstract from his interlocutor’s individuality and into error (the conflations of two distinct kinds of utterance, and of a concern with beauty and snobbery), it bespoke an “Old Testament integrity” (*Romulus*, p. 176) – the aspect of “a Biblical prophet” (*Romulus*, p. 174) – not a saint’s self-effacing goodness directly shaped by a reality it reveals. And although it was a consequence of a madness brought about by a sense of the reality of evil, the impressiveness of character is not pictured as involving a sense of the full humanity “of those who have committed the most terrible deeds and whose character fully matches those deeds” (“Reply”, p. 59).

Neither Aristotelian nor Socratic, and coming apart from virtues of character, such impressiveness of character may resist the conceptual framework that dominates Gaita’s philosophy and testify to incoherence in his notion of character. To see it as bespeaking someone living, with “some confusion and much intensity”, the two “incommensurable conceptions of the ethical”, would seem to risk effacing the specificity of what Gaita describes as “Old Testament integrity”. And, *pace* Gaita’s commentary, the way that the contempt for status and prestige departs from the Aristotelian ethic seems to be elicited by the sway not so much of the Socratic ethic as of a distortion of it.
And there are other tensions between the memoir and the philosophy. The memoir’s thematisation of Romulus’s contempt for beauty distinguishes craftsmanship from the beauty it achieves, albeit treating as curious someone’s appreciating the former but not the latter. Yet the philosophy’s analogy of craft and virtue, linking the non-functional aspect of craft’s respect for materials to the “aesthetic dimension” of much of “our appreciative sense of the virtues” (Good and Evil, p. 88), pictures craftsmanship, pleasure in it, and the “certain kind of attention” (Good and Evil, p. 86) constitutive of craftsman-made objects, as already aesthetic.

Moreover, a tension marks the craft/virtue analogy itself – in its application to Socrates – and, beyond that, marks the account of virtue. Gaita says that whereas Aristotle holds that the doer appreciates “the aesthetic dimension”, a matter of nobility, of fine deeds, Socrates, in stripping justice “of all seeming”, anticipates how Christianity excludes the doer’s delight in the good deed, excludes acting for “the sake of being or doing good”. To this extent the Socratic good deed has no return on it and thus is especially pure, saintly, a purity which Gaita, agreeing with Simone Weil, ties to beauty (Good and Evil, pp. 89-90): remember how the beauty of the invocation of Plato displaces the Aristotelian tone of the first part of the memoir. Yet Gaita never makes the equation – of the beauty of Socratic goodness with its aesthetic dimension – that his analogy implies. And this is no accident. For invisibility – to the senses, to the mind and even to the heart – making for the purity of the goodness, the beauty here would seem not to be aesthetic at all. Thus this virtue does not seem, after all, to confer “just treatment as a distinct and irreducible object of gratitude” (Good and Evil, p. 78); for such an object must be visible. And beyond the account of virtue, the invisibility
threatens Gaita’s affirmation of the visibility of the inner life – his affirmation of lucidity, self-reflection, and perhaps of a conceptual framework that allows the various possible worthy ways of being human to see *the light of day*. And the instability extends to the key concept of individuality. For Gaita connects individuality to character (exemplified by Romulus and Hora), and therefore to the esteem-centred ethic, but also to a purity – exemplified by the nun, not by Romulus or Hora – that, making character disappear, stands outside this ethic.

Such tensions may detract from the force of Gaita’s philosophy; but I think that they are central to the fascination of the memoir, with its oscillation between self-realisation and self-effacement, as when the otherworldliness of the invocation of Plato suddenly (or not so suddenly) transforms a chapter that generally evinces Aristotelian humanism. In part the memoir testifies to how its author, largely through the influence of his father and Hora, grew up to become a decent man; yet it does so from a perspective that, at a decisive moment, radically limits the value of decency: Raimond’s blindness to the humanity of his afflicted father has nothing to do with a lack of decency. And the exemplarity that structures the memoir is ambiguous. In paying serious tribute to the virtues of character that make Romulus an example of something that draws attention to itself, something impressive, and thus make him a fit subject for a biography, the memoir too must exemplify them. But in its testimony to the humanity of Romulus in his deepest affliction, a testimony that takes the form of a recounting of a failure of such testimony, the memoir must achieve another exemplarity – an exemplarity in which the exemplar does not become an example to us (see *Good and Evil*, p. 206), which becomes exemplarity precisely inasmuch as it disappears. It is perhaps no accident that when the memoir limits the former exemplarity in the light of the
latter, the words it uses ("I knew not quite for what I was ashamed because I also knew that, terrible though it was, my denial was not prompted by cowardice" (Romulus, pp. 136)) are so obscure that Gaita cut them from the German translation ("Reply", p. 61). And there may be an unreadability that would pertain to almost any translation of the memoir. When Gaita describes his father’s Old Testament integrity as “impressive”, he seems to affirm it per se: our sense of the immediacy of the language of the memoir demands that we read the term in this way. Yet impressiveness not being something that Gaita associates with goodness – which is what he most values – the term “impressive” here also calls into question, or at least limits the value of, the integrity: this is how it would be read by someone familiar with Gaita’s philosophy. The necessity of each of these two incompatible readings is tied, I think, to the way that this integrity, with its resistance to appreciation, resists Gaita’s conceptualisation – even more perhaps than does the invisibility of Socratic virtue, which, enabling the humanity of the profoundly afflicted to become visible, may be said to efface itself before visibility. The integrity perhaps marks an otherness which, unlike that affirmed in Gaita’s philosophy, cannot be coordinated with human fellowship, and an opacity which cannot be coordinated with lucidity. This is a discourse, then, that is marked by an irreducible doubling, haunted by that which is other to it.

Romulus, My Father, I believe, fulfils Gaita’s hope, avowed in his commentary, that the events and characters of the story be bathed in the light of “the summer landscape around central Victoria”, a light which he links to the tragic genre, “with its calm pity for the affliction it depicts” ("Reply", p. 57). What I have tried to suggest is that another element of
the power of the book is an opacity, an undecidability – a darkness perhaps, maybe even a madness – which marks its very language.\textsuperscript{xvi}

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the editor of \textit{Meridian}, Iain Topliss, and to an anonymous reviewer for their comments on an earlier version of this paper.
Raimond Gaita, “Romulus, My Father: A Reply,” The Critical Review, 41, 2001, p. 57. Further references to this article appear in the text. Gaita’s sense that Aristotle affirms an “unashamed enjoyment of our noble deeds” that is tied to “the deserved esteem of one’s peers” and to the visibility of virtue (Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception, London, MacMillan, 1991, pp. 89, 90) seems based on Aristotle’s arguing that friendship is necessary to happiness because to good men “the actions of virtuous men who are their friends are pleasant” and “we can contemplate … [our neighbours’] actions better than our own”. Although, for Aristotle, the good man will if necessary die for the sake of his friends, he does so because he “would prefer a short period of intense pleasure to a long one of mild enjoyment” (Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, trans. W. D. Ross (and J. O. Urmson), revised J. Barnes, in Complete Works of Aristotle, Vol. 2, ed. J. Barnes, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1995, 1169a-1170).


Gaita here cites his own book, Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception, London, MacMillan, 1991, p. 90. Further references to this book appear in the text. In not treating the differences of genre between memoir and philosophy as invalidating moving between them, I take my cue from Gaita’s own practice. For I seek here to destabilise the texts I read – texts which include the move at issue – by inhabiting them from within (on the necessity of this inhabiting from within, see Jacques Derrida, Of Grammatology, trans. G. Spivak, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University
Press, 1976, p. 24). In Gaita’s case, the move between genres is evident not only in the already cited “Reply” but in A Common Humanity: Thinking about Love and Truth and Justice (Melbourne, Text, 1999) where he cites response to his biography as supporting his philosophy (p. 96). It is also evident, I think, in the reception of Gaita’s work. Launching the memoir, Robert Manne said that because its writer “is who he is, it is ... marked by the conceptual clarity and moral depth that so distinguishes his philosophical writing” (Speech at the launch of Raimond Gaita’s Romulus, My Father, Australian Book Review, No. 198, February/March 1998, 10-11, p. 10). In a review of A Common Humanity, philosopher Jean Curthoys suggested that the memoir provides “the biographical source of much of his [Gaita’s] philosophy” (“The sacredness of human life”, Australian book review, No. 216, November 1999, 15-16, p. 15).

Elsewhere (in “‘Speaking with Authority’: Biographical and Ethical Reflection in the Work of Raimond Gaita”, Auto/Biography, Vol. 10, Nos. 1 & 2, 2002, pp.11-19) I have attempted – more explicitly than here but not as part of a general account of genre differences between philosophy and biography – to question the proximity and transparency that Gaita posits between his philosophy and his memoir.

For Socrates, as Gaita emphasises, to suffer evil is better than to do it, and the philosophical life is “lived in ‘dark corners’ unilluminated by the light of worldly fame”: he declares that he “will do as his love [philosophy] bids him, and ... be true to her ‘though the mass of mankind should disagree with and contradict him’ ”. Gaita argues that Plato, faithful to this Socratic “ethic of forgoing”, portrays the “perfectly just man” as wanting “‘to be and not to seem good’ ” and as not being allowed “to seem good,
for if he does he will have all the rewards and honours paid to the man who has a reputation for justice”. This portrayal, Gaita contends, renders justice invisible – both to the just man himself and to others (Good and Evil, pp. 20-21, 96-97, 260, 334. Gaita here cites Plato, Gorgias, trans. W. D. Woodhead, in Collected Dialogues, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntingdon Cairns, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1961, 469, 481c and 482c; and Plato, Republic, Bk 2 361b. My quotation of the latter is from Plato, Republic, 2nd edn, trans. Desmond Lee, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1974).

Speech at the launch of Raimond Gaita’s Romulus, My Father, Australian Book Review, p. 10.

For an account of how a tradition of European thought has nourished the idea of “a community of equals, each worthy to rejoice in the virtues and achievements of the other”, see Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”, in Charles Taylor and Amy Gutmann, Multiculturalism and “The Politics of Recognition”: An Essay by Charles Taylor, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1992, pp. 25-73. Taylor locates the beginning of the thought that nourishes such a community in the eighteenth century, arguing that pre-modern Europe linked recognition to one’s place in a social hierarchy, to inequality. Even so, one of his exemplars of the affirmation of recognition between equals is Rousseau, who cites ancient Greece as having nourished such recognition. Certainly the esteem tied to friendship that Aristotle affirms seems to be an esteem of equals, albeit that Aristotle is far from being an advocate of an egalitarian society.
In a rare philosophical exploration of decency – an affirmation of it from a broadly Aristotelian perspective – John Kekes explicitly links it to mutual recognition, a link perhaps implicit in Gaita. Decency, Kekes argues, involves “mutual helpfulness” and “holds between passing acquaintances and strangers who have nothing more in common than the mutual recognition that they share the same social morality” (*Moral Tradition and Individuality*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 51). On this account, the fellowship with the tramp that we have seen Gaita affirm, and Romulus’s fellowship with Vacek, would exceed the fellowship of decency (just as for Gaita they exceed the Aristotelian ethic), albeit that, depending on the content of a particular social morality, decency may well require that one treat the tramp and Vacek kindly. A tension – or at least an apparent tension – in Kekes’ account is that he characterises decency in general in terms of spontaneous helpfulness yet claims that it embraces what he calls “rule-following decency”, a kind of decency that might be hypocritical (pp. 72-74). Gaita may well argue that such “decency” – like a concern for respectability – is a counterfeit decency.


Elsewhere (see “‘Speaking with Authority’: Biographical and Ethical Reflection in the Work of Raimond Gaita”) I attempt to deconstruct the phonocentrism, the privileging of speech over writing, that informs Gaita’s affirmation of Romulus’s individuality. The centrality of Romulus’s speech to the impressiveness of his character renders all the more poignant the memoir’s account of how, in his madness, he attempts to reassure his
son: “He protested that he was fine, that he was not really ill because he could ‘speak normally’ whenever he made the effort. I suspect he was quite oblivious to the pathos of that claim, because he repeated it many times to protest that he was not as ill as he might appear to be” (*Romulus*, p. 125). There is a blindness – and perhaps something mechanical – in this repetition.

Gaita perhaps ties hand-eye coordination to our humanity when he connects its being “natural for us to look into a person’s face while binding his wounds” to “our concept of pain” and to “our sense of the object of our pity – a-human-being-in-pain” (*Common Humanity*, p. 267).

Gaita’s suggestion that this puritanism left women “especially vulnerable to the deadening attractions of middle-class respectability” (*Romulus*, p. 103) perhaps implies that the Australian version of the ethic of character leads to the valuing of a false semblance (respectability) of true character.


The becoming-even-more-handsome of Romulus’s face (an aesthetic quality that, although not effacing itself before what it reveals, is invisible to its creator) may recall the beauty evoked by Thoreau who ascribes unconsciousness not only to the beauty created by one’s work – he affirms architectural beauty that grows “out of some unconscious truthfulness, and nobleness, without ever a thought for the appearance”, and “preceded by a like unconscious beauty of life” – but also to work itself, albeit
metaphorical work: “We are all sculptors and painters, and our material is our own flesh and blood and bones. Any nobleness begins at once to refine a man’s features, any meanness or sensuality to imbrute them” (Henry David Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience*, New York, Norton, 1966, pp. 31-32, 147). Tied to nobleness – for Gaita a virtue of character – such work does not figure Socratic virtue.

It may be possible to sustain the analogy if craft’s respect for materials – the “certain kind of attention” it involves (*Good and Evil*, p. 86) – is treated as analogous to a caring that, going beyond material needs, is responsive to the meaning of a human life; and the beauty achieved by such craft as analogous to the beauty of such caring. If the caring is pure, its beauty will not be visible to the carer herself, and perhaps not even to the recipient. A crucial aspect of it may escape appreciation. That this beauty is beyond the aesthetic is perhaps a paradox, an irreducible complexity, to be affirmed, not a contradiction. Thus recast, the analogy, like the memoir, distinguishes craftsmanship from the beauty it achieves; but, unlike the memoir, allows for a beauty of the object whose invisibility to the maker is not “curious”, not a matter of repression or ignorance, yet is more radically invisible than Thoreau’s unconscious architectural beauty: the latter beauty could perhaps become conscious, be brought to light.

Elsewhere (see “Goodness Beyond Speech”, *Philosophical Investigations*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2004, pp. 201-21) I attempt to provide a more developed account of the tensions that mark Gaita’s philosophical writing – tensions which, I argue, are tied to the phonocentrism of this writing.
Resistant to saturation by intention, the undecidability that marks the language of the memoir is, I think, more a matter of writing than of speech – at least if speech is tied to presence, as it has been traditionally and as it is by Gaita. Thus, in emphasising this undecidability, my argument here supports my attempt elsewhere (see “‘Speaking with Authority’: Biographical and Ethical Reflection in the Work of Raimond Gaita”) to deconstruct the memoir’s phonocentrism.