The article addresses Raimond Gaitas attempt to construe the ethical in terms of a notion of speech that is tied to presence (each of us, he holds, is called to become someone authentically present in speech and deed (Gaita 1991, p. 145)), a notion through which he articulates a sense both of human uniqueness — speech demands that one find one's own words — and of human fellowship: to find one's words is to achieve the depth that enables one to be taken seriously by others. The article argues, however, that the notion of speech is caught in a double bind; for it requires a spontaneity that is incompatible with the self-presence that it also requires. In a way that Gaita cannot acknowledge, goodness is beyond speech.
Goodness Beyond Speech

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Abstract

The article addresses Raimond Gaita’s attempt to construe the ethical in terms of a notion of speech that is tied to presence (each of us, he holds, is called to become someone ‘authentically present in speech and deed’ (Gaita 1991, p. 145)), a notion through which he articulates a sense both of human uniqueness – speech demands that one find one’s own words – and of human fellowship: to find one’s words is to achieve the depth that enables one to be taken seriously by others. The article argues, however, that the notion of speech is caught in a double bind; for it requires a spontaneity that is incompatible with the self-presence that it also requires. In a way that Gaita cannot acknowledge, goodness is beyond speech.
Goodness Beyond Speech

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When Raimond Gaita advocates ‘finding a style or a voice in moral philosophy’ (Gaita 1991, p. 18), his words exemplify his own style’s use of the metaphor of speech – a use he explicitly adverts to. He says that he prefers to say that we let a moral situation ‘speak to us and are claimed in response’ than that we see it, and, pace Iris Murdoch, to connect wisdom to what is spoken rather than to vision, citing Murdoch herself to illustrate the point: ‘words do not themselves contain wisdom. Words said to particular individuals at particular times may occasion wisdom’ (Gaita 1991, p. 141; he cites Murdoch 1970, p. 32). In making this point, Murdoch cites Plato, and it is perhaps Plato who comes to mind with respect to a second aspect, thematic and stylistic, of Gaita’s moral philosophy: its testifying to a certain ‘beyond’, evoked in the phrases – central to his writing – ‘goodness beyond virtue’ and ‘justice beyond fairness’. As in Gaita’s case a beyond of philosophical reason seems to be at stake here, his philosophy not only thematises but is itself marked by a movement ‘beyond’.

Crucial to this movement is the metaphor of speech. In locating the subject matter of ethics in the speech and actions of those with something to say rather than in propositions and arguments, Gaita seeks to exceed the scope of academic moral philosophy. In being related to otherness, speech and conversation – as Gaita characterises them – are themselves involved in a movement beyond. And to the extent that Gaita in his philosophy strives to achieve speech, he speaks personally, in the first-person – a way of speaking that philosophy has traditionally eschewed. Yet irreducible
though this connection with speech may be, the movement beyond, I shall argue, ends up
undermining the affirmation of speech, thereby destabilising much that is central to the
philosophy. In what seems to me one of its most powerful gestures, Gaita’s thinking
testifies to something beyond speech – something that it does not and cannot thematise as
such. I begin my inquiry by considering Gaita’s picture of the way in which the world is
‘bathed in speech’ (Gaita 1991, p. 141).¹

1.

Speech has traditionally been differentiated from writing in terms of presence, and
it is presence – presence ‘in what we say and to those to whom we are speaking’ – that
Gaita affirms in affirming speech. He ties it to the way that our interlocutors matter to us,
claim our full attention, and to the way that they must be moved by our utterance’s
manner of disclosure (inseparable in speech from what is said) and so must take what we
say ‘on trust’ (Gaita 1991, p. 273). It is difficult, Gaita writes, ‘to imagine the mutually
constitutive sense of self and other without conversation’ (Gaita 1999, p. 271).

For Gaita fellowship is interdependent with what he calls ‘deepened understanding’
(Gaita 1991, p. 159) – an understanding achievable only by a being that is capable of
speech, that can ‘stand behind its words and speak out of the life that it must make its
own’ (Gaita 1991, p. 284). Only a being for whom things can ‘go deep’, matter
profoundly – ‘morally and spiritually’ (Gaita 1991, p. 196) – can matter profoundly to
others. The respect at stake in fellowship is internal to the possibility (constitutive of and

¹ In this essay I focus on Gaita’s philosophical books; elsewhere (see Segal 2002) I have considered the
affirmation of authoritative speech as it is found in his biography Romulus, My Father.
constituted by speech, conversation) of my identifying with the other person’s point of view: ‘Someone must not only take seriously what they claim to be of moral concern to them; their taking it seriously must be capable of being taken seriously by others’ (Gaita 1991, p. 37). They must be capable of being seen ‘as a potential partner in that conversational space in which we are answerable to the demand or to the plea that we try to invest our thoughts and words with the authority of an individually achieved lucidity’ (Gaita 1999, p. 59).

Gaita wishes to acknowledge not only our commonness but ‘also our radical individuality, and the fact that we cannot acknowledge one without the other’ (Gaita 2002, p. 82). He ties the fellowship involved in speech to radical otherness. In order for the evil I may do to another to matter profoundly to me, making the other ‘an absolute limit to [my] will’ (Gaita 1991, p. 31), radically other to me, the evil must be able to matter profoundly to them – which, as we have seen, requires that they be capable of speech. If tortured, one capable of speech suffers not merely the ‘natural harm’ torture inflicts ‘but, also, the injustice of it, … a separate and irreducible cause of their torment’ (Gaita 1991, p. 78). Mattering morally and spiritually to the victim, the torture can matter morally and spiritually to the perpetrator or would-be perpetrator.

And in speech is a radical injunction to kindness. For kindness confers on beings with this capacity ‘not merely certain natural benefits or goods but, also, just treatment as a distinct and irreducible object of gratitude’ (Gaita 1991, p. 78; Gaita’s italics). An unconditional respect informing it, the caring of fellowship cannot, for example, be ‘merely for creatures who die’. With the exceptions discussed below, it must be for mortal beings ‘who can reflect on their lives and on their mortality and who take different
attitudes to what they do and suffer because of such reflection’ (Gaita 1991, p. 27) –
beings, that is, who are capable of speech. Caring the necessity of which is expressed by
the words ‘I must help, I can’t walk past’ involves ‘full responsiveness to the reality of
another human being in need’, the responsiveness tied to ‘the movement towards
perfection’ in which ‘the world becomes ever more compulsively present to the will’
(Gaita 1999, p. 276; Gaita here cites Murdoch 1970, p. 39). In question is another human
being in need, for only beings capable of speech can elicit such responsiveness.

And only what is in common between such beings – not between animals and us
(‘death marks our creatureliness and our common mortality with all living things’ (Gaita
1991, p. 127)), nor between animals themselves – makes for fellowship. The common
nature must inform and condition our responses in a particular way, as in awareness of
human mortality involving a speech-use of the term ‘we’ that is ‘both expressive of and
constitutive of a sense of human fellowship’ and ‘conceptually interdependent with pity’,
‘not merely enumerative of beings who belong to the same class because of some
common characteristic’ (Gaita 1991, p. 27). In sufferings in which our common nature is
at stake, speech, telling ‘a story … of our common sufferings’, enables a consoling pity-
informed fellowship with those who suffer as we do – with those, for example, who
suffer grief or apprehension of mortality or shame in response to their own vice. The
story of how ‘even Achilles could tremble in fear’ is a reminder that one is not alone in
one’s weakness and of how one cannot be called to achieve what is humanly impossible
(Gaita 1991, pp. 47-49). And Gaita’s account suggests that admiration-informed stories
(about, say, the courage of Achilles) enhance a sense of our own and others’ virtues:
‘Great talent, great courage and great resilience, excite our admiration, partly because
they are at the limit of an empirically conditioned sense of human powers’ (Gaita 1991,
Faced with such virtues, our delight, expressed in joyous speech, is partly in and for what humans are capable of – in and for humanity itself. If we achieve such virtues, we can, Gaita’s account seems to imply, enjoy ‘the public expression of the esteem of our peers’, the ‘quite uncorrupt wordliness’ affirmed by Aristotle (Gaita 1991, p. 90).

As speech involves speaking out of a life that one must make one’s own, for something to matter profoundly it must do so in a way specific to an individual: ‘each person must find their own words for the expression of gratitude for the gift that has been their life’ (Gaita 1991, p. 200). We must do what Socrates urged his interlocutors to do – ‘speak as individuals’ and eschew the enchantment with one’s own rhetoric in which one ‘speaks to a crowd and thus to no-one in particular’ (Gaita 1991, p. 278). The individuality at stake here – a matter neither of ‘numerical and qualitative distinctness’ (Gaita 1991, p. 153) nor of knowing what few others know – is tied to the radical otherness of every human, to the way in which other humans are an absolute limit on my will. To see another as capable of a deepened understanding – a seeing that manifests the other’s humanity and fellowship with oneself – involves ‘seeing her as “another perspective on the world”’ (Gaita 1991, p. 159). That trust is inevitably at stake in speech – not evadable by recourse to a cognitively graspable proposition that transcends particular points of views – means that so too is the way the other human is another perspective. Being tied to otherness, conversation ‘promises and threatens surprise’ (Gaita 1991, p. 281): in it rather than in advance of it ‘we discover, never alone but always together, what it means really to listen and what tone may properly be taken’ (Gaita 1999, p. 106).
Its tie to individuality separates fellowship from the common nature that underpins it. For things done not merely ‘because it is in our nature as a species to do them’ – for example, ‘our attitude to the dead’, ‘our naming rather than numbering our children’ – condition individuality and our capacity to ‘speak authoritatively out of’ our experiences (Gaita 1991, pp. 156, 210). Forged in a person’s speaking out of the life that they must make their own, the meaning of each human life is unique, the life irreplaceable. Moreover, ‘differences of character give substance to the idea that individuals are not inter-substitutable’ (Gaita 1991, p. 155), and exemplary character is achievable only if one’s culture makes it achievable and one responds with ‘a disciplined purity to the conversational intimations of that culture’ (Gaita 1991, p. 125). Emerging from their species character not at all or ‘in only an attenuated way’, animals are incapable of fellowship (Gaita 1991, p. 120). Whereas we can rightly on occasion put suffering animals ‘out of their misery’ – when their lives, as they generally do, ‘have no meaning’ – the kind of euthanasia that is performed ‘in the spirit of putting a person out of his misery’ is ‘radically demeaning’ (Gaita 1991, p. 153).

The personal character of speech is tied to its eschewal of moralism, of telling others what they ought to do. Gaita ascribes compassion that is ‘especially pure, perfected by a proper understanding of its object – the reality of a suffering human being’ to one who when asked why they helped simply says that ‘they had to’ (Gaita 1991, p. 77-78), without implying that ‘anyone relevantly like them, in a relevantly similar situation, ought to do the same’ (Gaita 1991, p. 93). Their words – both in response to the suffering human being and in reply to the question – become speech.
That each human being is an individual, another perspective on the world, and thus irreplaceable, makes for a mysteriousness that is an aspect of human otherness and fellowship. For parents, the genetic truth that it is ‘utterly accidental’ that their children should have been those children, is ‘at another level … quite incomprehensible’ (Gaita 1991, p. 185). The ‘common humanity’ tied to human individuality is constituted not by a common nature ‘available to socio-biological inquiry’ but by meaning: ‘what it means to have and to lose children, to love and to mourn someone faithfully’ (Gaita 2002, p. 182).

Gaita’s emphasis on meaning rather than empirical fact is perhaps linked to his emphasis on the possibility rather than the actuality of things mattering profoundly – a possibility to which, he contends, we can be expected to rise. A tramp who never meets ‘the demands which are internal to friendship’ remains subject to them, can be thought of as someone’s friend. Thus he remains ‘one of us’, ‘a fellow in a realm of meanings which condition the way we may matter to one another’ (Gaita 1991, p. 153); he remains in a ‘conversational space in which [he is] answerable to the demand or to the plea’ to find his own voice. And for similar reasons, so too does the worst evildoer remain one of us, an absolute limit on our wills, who is owed unconditional respect. By contrast our respect for certain animals – Gaita himself avows and affirms respect for his pet dog Gypsy – is conditional on their having relations with us that they cannot be called upon to enter into (Gaita 2002, pp. 36-37). Hence it is natural to speak of ‘us and them’, not of ‘human beings and other animals’ (Gaita 2002, p. 170).

This answerability is central to Gaita’s thought. It’s there in the ideas that we let a moral situation ‘speak to us and are claimed in response’, that ‘we are called to become
... someone who is authentically present in speech and deed’ (Gaita 1991, p. 145) and that teaching is a vocation of which we cannot say ‘who it is who calls’ (Gaita 1991, p. 298). It constitutes conversational space, constitutes what it is for a life to have meaning and what it is to be a human being. To treat another as a human being is to respond to a calling that comes from no one in particular – a calling, a speech, which exceeds speech in the colloquial sense, and that never marks our caring for animals, even those we respect.

It does, however, inform our caring for humans too young to speak and for those so intellectually and psychologically impaired as to be incapable of speech. For Gaita argues that our responses to adult humans depend on our responses to ‘children and unborn children’, not merely on ‘the properties and capacities [adults] possess when we respond’: ‘that it has grown into an adult human being’ is not contingent ‘to our sense of what we respond to’. The parental response to children ‘as to those whose life-story begins with their conception’ – a story that limits ‘discontinuity in the description of its subject’ – should, Gaita seems to imply, show the way here. And our pity for the ‘victims of misfortune’ who are incapable of speech – a pity not extended to speechless animals and tied to the idea of deepened understanding, of things mattering profoundly – keeps them amongst us as our fellows and an absolute limit on our wills (Gaita 1991, p. 128).

For Gaita, such pity exemplifies goodness at its purest. As a teenager, working in a mental hospital, he was profoundly moved by a nun’s totally uncondescending response to incurably mentally ill patients who appeared ‘to have lost everything that gives sense to our lives’ and not to be ‘living a life of any kind’: ‘the way she spoke to them, her
facial expressions, the inflexions of her body’, revealed, he says, that they, ‘as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed’, were our equals, but also that ‘in our hearts we did not believe this’. Revealing the mystery of what a human life could mean – a mystery tied to the way in which ‘human beings are precious beyond reason and beyond merit’ – she ‘gave living meaning’ to words the young Gaita had thought ‘could never refer to anything real’: ““love”, “beauty” and “purity”’ and above all ““goodness” of a kind that invites a capital G’, goodness which in its mystery is beyond the worldly virtue affirmed by Aristotle. In his ‘witness to the nun’s love’ and in his ‘fidelity to it’, Gaita disclaims understanding ‘what it revealed independently of the quality of her love’: ‘the purity of the love proved the reality of what it revealed’ (Gaita 1999, pp. 2-3, p. 8, pp. 18-19, p. 21).

The idea of the ethical as bathed in speech is stretched to the limit here, those to whom the nun spoke being incapable of presence and individuality. Gaita does not pretend that her speech mattered to them, that they were grateful for her unconditional, unqualified respect. Indeed, her compassion seems precisely for the fact that the respect that they are owed – and which, in her compassion, she gives so freely – cannot matter to them. Impossible as it may seem, she creates a conversational space beyond conversational space, a speech beyond speech. She brings to Gaita’s mind Simone Weil’s statement that true compassion for the afflicted is ‘a more astounding miracle than walking on water, healing the sick, or even raising the dead’ (Gaita 1999, p. 18; Gaita cites Weil 1977, p. 64). By blessing the patients with what they lack without ever losing

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2 As we shall see, Gaita describes goodness beyond virtue as otherworldly. But this term may be misleading, given that his is not a metaphysical account of goodness or ethics and given that the nun’s conduct is not otherworldly in the term’s colloquial sense. In affirming something beyond Aristotelian worldliness, one need not, it seems to me, affirm otherworldliness.
sight of how radical their lack is, the nun, for the young Gaita, restores to speech, gives ‘living meaning’ to, words – ‘goodness’, ‘love’, ‘beauty’ and ‘purity’ – that go dead on us because we cannot rise to what they testify to, and shows that sincere and generous profession does not constitute speech. The fidelity to her love by which Gaita was thereby claimed (notice the metaphor of speech here) informs the account we are now reading, an account in which, speaking in the first person out of the life that he is making his own, he achieves speech.3

Perhaps we witness here the force of Gaita’s affirmation of speech precisely when it becomes most vulnerable: at issue after all is, as I have put it, a speech beyond speech. I am not sure. I do not wish to quarrel with Gaita’s responsiveness to the miraculousness or the mysteriousness of goodness; nor with his desire that philosophy ‘leave or create conceptual space for such mystery’ (Gaita 1999, p. 19). But I shall try to show that the metaphor of speech, for all its power and inevitability, is not adequate to such responsiveness. Preliminary to this I consider Gaita’s reflections on evil and remorse.

2.

For Gaita the evildoer is radically other as is any human being: not because he is evil but because he is subject to the call to attain to speech – to achieve individuality, abjure evil and respect the other human’s limit on his will. That he is thus subject does not require that he be capable of answering to the call. Gaita acknowledges that the most foul evildoers lack the good in them ‘from which a sober and lucid remorse could grow’ (Gaita 1991, p. 8) and that it is pointless actually to call them to abjure evil – pointless,

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3 For another discussion of Gaita’s testimony to the nun, see Bachelard 2002, p. 4.
for example, to have said to Hitler that he ought not to murder those in the concentration
camps, such a remark being beyond his ‘epistemic reach’. (We see here another strand of
Gaita’s eschewal of moralism.) That the worst kind of evildoer becomes someone to
whom there is nothing to say might seem to testify to the force of Gaita’s position; for to
picture extreme evil as beyond speech may seem to affirm speech. But a problem for the
affirmation of speech emerges nevertheless. Gaita believes that the remark about Hitler,
being fatuous in the actual speech situation to which it is most relevant, is fatuous per se
– fatuous even if simply made of Hitler (Gaita 1991, p. 94). Yet if actually calling the
worst kind of evildoer to rise to speech is fatuous, then so too, it would seem, is saying of
him that he is subject to this call. And it is on being able to say this that Gaita’s
affirmation of our fellowship with and unconditional respect for the evildoer depends.
The evildoer cannot be beyond speech.

To the extent that in remorse the evildoer begins to answer the call to which he is
subject, remorse, on Gaita’s account, is speech or at least the beginning of speech. It
must go deep with us, and thus demands ‘that we strive to be lucid about it, and mostly,
perhaps always, that means that we must strive for the right words’ (Gaita 1991, p. 226).
It discovers what it is to be an evildoer, the significance of which ‘is only kept alive (for a
culture and for individuals) through a language and art which conveys to us its peculiar
kind of terribleness’; in question are reactions ‘expressed in a natural language whose
creative use reveals what it is to be, in this way, shocking, outrageous and so on’ (Gaita
1991, p. 34; Gaita’s italics). It is ‘a recognition of the reality of another through the
shock of wronging them’ (Gaita 1991, p. 52), revealing my victim in all his individuality
(Gaita 1999, p. 32) and thus as radically other to me and as my fellow. And in it the
presence of others is tied to self-presence: ‘the meaning of what one has done, what one
has become through doing it, and what one’s victims have suffered, are inseparable’ (Gaita 1999, p. 34). As this suggests, remorse itself is present to us in remorse: ‘remorse makes us painfully aware … of the way remorse differs from natural suffering, from the afflictions of Job, and also from shame and dishonour’ (Gaita 1999, p. 31). Bathing remorse in presence, Gaita can speak of ‘the self that discovers itself in remorse’ (Gaita 1991, p. 79).

In one respect remorse resists speech. For it breaks with a common nature thought of in terms of empirical possibilities, with (psychological) facts ‘about our common and individual natures’ that are subject to the kind of discussion that both conditions and expresses human fellowship (Gaita 1991, p. 49). It focusses ‘on what we have become only because we have become evil-doers’ (Gaita 1991, p. 50), not on one’s humanity, not on what kind of person one is, nor on being human. For it abjures consolation from a story of our shared guilt, from the knowledge that we all suffer in recognising ‘what we have become in becoming evil-doers’: ‘The “I” that answers in remorse to the recognition of guilt is not the “I” that naturally and properly partners the “we” of fellowship’ (Gaita 1991, pp. 47-48). And remorse involving awareness of its own nature, the remorseful must not only stand outside fellowship but also know that they do.

This ‘radical singularity’ of recognising one’s evil is what, Gaita seems to believe, puts evil beyond vice. It suggests, moreover, that the ethical is ‘other-worldly,

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4 Tony Lynch, in reviewing A common humanity, seeks to disconnect the distinction between vice (badness) and evil from remorse (which, pace Gaita, he thinks can be directed at both vice and evil) yet remain true to at least the spirit of Gaita’s distinction: ‘The bad character has purposes – often awful, monstrous purposes – which he seeks to realise in the world. The evil character, on the other hand, seeks nothing in the world at all. Rather, what is sought, is the destruction, the annihilation, of a world’ (Lynch, pp. 573-74). It is doubtful, though, that this way of making the distinction can capture the evil that Gaita ascribes to Raskolnikov or to the man who, in order to be with his beloved, murders her husband.
irreducible to a humanist understanding of it’ (Gaita 1991, p. 50). But it is not, I think, in itself radical enough to threaten the affirmation of speech. For Gaita seems to suggest that the saintly at least can retain a sense of ‘the unconditional preciousness of each human being’ (Gaita 1999, p. 34) independently of remorse; and he affirms a healing, a return to fellowship, through an effort – involving ‘repentance, atonement, forgiveness, punishment’ (Gaita 1991, p. 51) – that presupposes a culture and a tradition. Given that true remorse surely involves repentance, atonement, reparation and willingness to accept just punishment (Gaita explicitly affirms the connection of remorse and reparation (Gaita 1999, p. 100)), and given that Gaita seems to correlate these things with forgiveness (all are part of a single effort), then the cure for remorseful suffering seems to be remorse itself. And given the self-awareness of remorse, the remorseful would seem to realise this. Thus it would seem that they can derive comfort from anticipating a return to fellowship in the future, albeit that such a return is denied them in the present.

Yet the idea of such anticipated comfort, implicit in Gaita’s emphasis on presence, seems to belie his insistence on singular suffering. To show that ‘remorseful concern with what one has become [in becoming an evildoer]’ is compatible ‘with a proper concern for one’s victim’, Gaita affirms that ‘the pain of grief’ need not distract ‘our attention from the person over whom we are grieving’ (Gaita 1999, pp. 34-35). But more pertinent is whether such distraction occurs if the griever recognises that they suffer a pain of great depth: I think that it does.

Moreover, the kind of singularity Gaita ascribes to remorse may extend further than he perhaps wishes to allow. If it is because ‘proper recognition of the harm the evil-doer has done himself’ excludes self-pity (Gaita 1991, p. 62) that remorse abjures the
fellowship that involves pity for humanity, then singularity must pertain to all our sufferings; for self-pity mars them all. And if the singularity is because the object of remorse cannot be described too generally – for example, in terms of violating the social contract or of betraying rationality (Gaita 2002, p. 164) – then it pertains to the suffering that refraining from evil can involve. For the refrained from evil also resists general descriptions. Indeed, Gaita parallels ‘remorse after the deed’ – inasmuch as it involves singularity – with ‘the problem before the deed’: ‘the personal character’ of each, he says, is ‘internal to our sense of the seriousness of morality’ (Gaita 1991, p. 105).

Gaita in fact seems unsure whether singularity pertains to suffering besides remorse. Good and evil seems – tentatively – to allow space for Simone Weil’s notion (Gaita 1991, p. 47) that ‘the state of soul suitable for criminals’ becomes ‘separated from crime and attached to affliction … in proportion to the innocence of those who are afflicted’ (Weil 1977, p. 65). Yet the statement in the more recent A common humanity – cited above – that remorse ‘differs from … the afflictions of Job’ (Gaita 1999, p. 31) closes this space. Against the more recent view, we might wonder if comparing ‘facts about our common and individual natures’ can console the sui generis suffering inflicted by evil (particularly extreme evil). Lyotard writes:

In the concentration camps, there would have been no subject in the first-person plural. In the absence of such a subject, there would remain ‘after Auschwitz’ no subject, no Selbst which could prevail upon itself to name itself in naming ‘Auschwitz’. No phrase inflected in this person would be possible: we did this, we felt that, they made us suffer this humiliation, we got along in this way, we hoped that, we didn’t think about … , and even: each of us was reduced to
solitude and silence. There would be no collective witness. From many former deportees, there is only silence. From many, there is only the shame felt before the testimony of former deportees. (Lyotard 1988, pp. 97-98)

Gaita’s implicit rejection of the possibility of such singularity in suffering may seem surprising. For, citing Sara Horowitz, he himself adverts to camp survivors’ suspicion that the Holocaust killed ““shared values and a common idea of civilisation””, crushed ‘the hopes of the enlightenment’, put in doubt ‘our understanding of ourselves as moral and political beings’. Survivors are unable ‘to convey to us what they have experienced’; for ‘a critical element of their experience … is incomprehensible even to themselves’ (Gaita 1999, pp. 146-47; no reference is given for the quotation from Horowitz). This singularity seems more radical than that of remorse. Not only are the survivors unable to find consolation in shared suffering. It is not even clear that they remain in a ‘realm of meanings’, a ‘conversational space in which they are answerable to the demand or to the plea’ to find their own voice. Gaita asks who ‘would dare be critical’ of those survivors who ‘could no longer respond to life as a gift and to the kind of goodness that is its source’ (1999, p. 150). Yet he blunts the force of this by immediately proceeding to affirm the example of Primo Levi, a survivor who does thus respond, who does in effect find his own voice. He seems thereby to affirm survivors for whom a critical element of their experience is not incomprehensible and who do uphold ‘shared values and a common idea of civilisation’. Levi is so admirable, for Gaita, because, in spite of everything, he testifies to a common humanity, achieves speech, presence to self and to others. Gaita’s implicit denial of a radical singularity in the
suffering of survivors is perhaps not so surprising after all. Affirming even here a world bathed in speech, he is a long way from the Lyotard whose writings on the Holocaust seek to testify to an irreducible silence.⁵

We see here how far Gaita takes his affirmation of speech. But doubts about this affirmation are I think confirmed by Gaita’s only use of the term ‘radical singularity’ other than to describe remorse.

3.

In the chapter ‘Evil done and evil suffered’ in Good and evil: An absolute conception, Gaita argues that if an innocent person is killed in order that ten others might live, the burden of the killing upon each of the ten is not reduced by its enabling the other nine to live as well. None can seek comfort in sharing the burden with the other nine. One who consented to the killing must do so in her singularity. One who refused consent cannot refuse on behalf of the other potential survivors. No ‘we’ of fellowship, it would seem, exists between the ten. And the position of each is incommensurable with that of the one who must decide whether or not to do the killing. Gaita says that the latter ‘can make little of their “radical singularity”’: ‘for him, their singularity is the countable singularity of a corpse; the perspective of the doer of the deed cannot be theirs’ (Gaita 1991, p. 74). Whereas the one selected to shoot must take into account that there will be ten corpses rather than one corpse if he does not shoot, each of the ten must refuse to add

⁵ Given the seriousness of the issues between Lyotard and Gaita, it is disappointing that Gaita’s discussion of postmodernism is so cursorily dismissive, albeit that his target is carefully specified as ‘much of what is called postmodernism’ ‘often’ does (Gaita 1999, p. 258).
up the number of corpses. What is of moral concern to each of the ten cannot be taken
seriously by – does not present itself to – the one who is asked to decide their fate. The
singularity here seems more radical than that of remorse; it seems to breach
conversational space itself. And such radical singularity seems to mark also the
relationship/non-relationship between the one selected to shoot and the one selected to be
shot. In the case of the latter, his pleading to be shot while having ‘no thoughts about
what the one to whom he addresses his plea must or ought to do’ seems to be what moves
Gaita (Gaita 1991, p. 69).

An instability in the concept of speech begins to emerge here – an instability that is
perhaps most apparent in the case of the pleading to be shot of the one selected to be shot.
This seems to exemplify speech at its purest. ‘He pleads because he must’ (Gaita 1991,
p. 69); and he seems to do so out of compassion for the ten, a compassion, perfected by a
proper understanding of its object, which eschews any kind of moralism: as we have
seen, he has no thoughts about what the one to whom he addresses his plea must or ought
to do; nor presumably about what anyone in a similar situation to himself ought to do.
His utterance has the irreducibly first-person character that is specific to speech. Yet to
the extent that this is so, he need give no thought to what it means for a human being to
kill another human being as a means to saving the lives of others, even though the idea of
such killing is central to the situation in which he finds himself. He need not, perhaps
cannot, take seriously what the one selected to shoot must take seriously. For the latter, it
seems, must take seriously what he for his part should do. Thus the pleader and the one

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6 Gaita does not consider one of the ten who, although not for a moment hoping that another may be killed
in order that she may live, is deeply distressed by the prospect of nine others – other, that is, to herself –
dying. Counting corpses (albeit nine, not ten), she contravenes Gaita’s sense of what she should do. Yet
she moves me as much as she who declines to add up.
to whom his utterance is addressed cannot be present to each other. And to this extent the pleading cannot be speech. In general, Gaita ties purity to presence; his own response to the ‘better one dead than many’ situation suggests that purity breaks with presence.

Relating Gaita’s discussion of the ‘better one dead than many’ case to earlier discussions reinforces the sense of its breaching the metaphor of speech. Bernard Williams invoked the case to call into question the utilitarian advocacy of shooting one to save many; to show that such advocacy ‘makes integrity as a value more or less unintelligible’ (Smart & Williams, p. 99). R. F. Holland, however, thinking it unimaginable that a saint would either shoot or consider his personal integrity, separates resistance to consequentialist morality from ‘a concern for personal integrity’ (Holland, pp. 139-41). Gaita says that Holland reveals the mediocrity of the concept of integrity (Gaita 1991, p. 66). Gaita’s response to Holland’s point is odd, I think, because it is surely just as unimaginable that a saint in these circumstances would consider his own goodness, and Gaita does not think the concept of goodness mediocre. Moreover, the concept of integrity informs Gaita’s contentions that moral understanding – the understanding tied to speech – ‘requires a kind of integration (a kind of integrity) of a moral subject who is more substantial than merely a rational agent’ (Gaita 1991, p. 57); that to stand behind one’s words and speak out of the life that one must make one’s own requires the integrity that is ‘a kind of integration in time’, ‘a truthful concern for the meaning of what is past’, ‘a fidelity to what is past’ (Gaita 1991, p. 272); and that descriptions are ‘made living and authoritatively resonant’ – made speech – ‘through the integrity of a disciplined but creative engagement with them’ (Gaita 1991, p. 126). In pleading because he must, the one selected to be shot is so oriented toward others that he seems not to think of his own past. Affirming such pleading, Gaita breaks with his
affirmations of a substantial moral subject and of the ‘mutually constitutive sense of self and other’. The text – against the author’s intention – impugns the metaphor of speech.7

Although ineradicable moral evil marks the situation forcing the indictment of the concept of integrity, this is not what disrupts conversational space. For Gaita pictures the one of the ten who grasps that she cannot share the killing’s burden with the others as saying that one for whom another sacrifices their life and who discovers that the sacrifice was not only for him ought not to think the gift’s value diminished. The gift’s moral weight being un sharable, the recipients are not fellows. And the one who gives his life so that others might live would seem no more able to make something of his beneficiaries’ ‘radical singularity’ than is the doer of the deed in the ‘better one dead than many’ situation: both must focus on the countable singularity of corpses. Though on occasion it bears even on the most saintly, the weight of receiving the gift of another’s life does not, it is true, thereby constitute their goodness. What does seem to is the way a recipient of a saint’s gift abjures fellowship with the other recipients and with the saint herself.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Gaita evokes a goodness marked by singularity. He argues that, unlike virtue, goodness in another elicits a wonder that does not glory in what our species is capable of, nor ask whether I myself am capable of it. It focusses not on empirical possibilities, our common nature (to this extent it partakes of the ‘radical

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7 It might be thought that Gaita’s article ‘Integrity’ (1981) will address the tension in his thinking about integrity. But I cannot see that it does so. Gaita’s has recently in effect reaffirmed his belief that integrity is a mediocre virtue in his statement that Adolf Eichmann possessed it (Gaita 2001, p. 59). Yet in Good and Evil: An Absolute Conception Gaita seems to show that Eichmann’s response to his own death lacked ‘the integrity of a disciplined but creative engagement’ with language that makes language into speech. Eichmann, Gaita writes, ‘was not interested in saying anything true but only in saying something “winged” so that his death would have a quality that he mistook for nobility. … he was not sufficiently “present” [in what he said] to be able to seriously say anything’ (Gaita 1991, p. 307). It seems odd to think of such a man as possessing the virtue of integrity.
singularity’ of remorse), nor on the good person and the way that she is an exemplar of humanity – in a sense, she ‘disappears from consideration’ (Gaita 1991, p. 206). The focus rather is on what her goodness reveals – for example (not just one among others), the otherwise invisible humanity of the profoundly afflicted. The fellowship with the afflicted that the saint thereby enables, precludes fellowship in joyful recognition of a common nature that we share with her. Inasmuch as she is good, she is not our fellow.

And goodness is perhaps more radically singular still. Gaita writes that the ‘deepest values of the life of the mind cannot be taught: they can only be shown’; ‘teachers inspire their students into a proper love of what they are doing by the manner of their attention to their subject rather than by setting out to inspire them’. His analogy of genuine charity being motivated ‘by the needs of another’ rather than by ‘the desire to do something charitable’ (Gaita 1999, pp. 231) suggests that the deepest values of human life tout court can only be shown; their exemplars cannot explicitly advert to them. Moreover, he evokes a disappearance from consideration, a self-effacement perhaps, not merely of the good person but also of her goodness, goodness which thus becomes unshowable. For he affirms the notion – Christian, Platonic, yet also commonplace – that a good deed cannot be done for ‘the sake of being or doing good’, out of ‘an appreciation of its Goodness’, in anticipation of such appreciation by another (Gaita 1991, pp. 89-90). Plato’s justice, he argues, ‘is invisible (“deprived of all seeming””) – invisible, in principle, ‘to the appreciative judgement of [the just person’s] peers’ (Gaita 1991, p. 97). The metaphor of speech, not merely that of vision, is, I believe, inadequate to such justice. Gaita maintains that ‘someone speaking out of an other-worldly understanding of the ethical’ must speak ‘out of a sense of fellowship which is conditioned by common sympathetic responsiveness to the significance of ordinary human sufferings and joys’ (Gaita 1991, p.
But as one cannot speak out of responsiveness (shared by the good person and her admirers) to other-worldly goodness, the very idea of ‘speaking out of an other-worldly understanding of the ethical’ becomes suspect.

Gaita argues that evil, unlike good, must be recognised as such. For one must refrain from evil on account not only of the natural harm the deed will inflict but also of its evil, which is something suffered in addition (Gaita 1991, pp. 89-90). We might wonder, though, if this focus deflects attention from the other and yields a return on the refraining, thereby corrupting it. Following Socrates, Gaita pictures goodness as a radical refraining from evil, the good person as one who would rather suffer evil than do it. Recognising the evil of what one refrains from in extreme circumstances would seem to risk recognising oneself as a radical refrainer from evil – and this in turn risks recognising and thereby annulling goodness.

Gaita himself explicitly limits, albeit tentatively, the recognisability of evil. He sees corruption in refraining because of evil’s ‘illusory teleology’, as when a man refrains from murdering his beloved’s husband because, or even partly because, the evil will yield ‘a love and a life polluted by murder’, not the desired happiness: such a motive deflects attention from the potential victim. This, I think, shows more than Gaita thinks it does: it shows ‘that a deepened understanding of the nature and reality of evil’ not merely differs from ‘a deepened understanding of the reasons for not doing it’ but can actually corrupt refraining from evil. Proper attention to the potential victim seems to mean that ‘full understanding of what [the man] is tempted to do’ cannot present itself to him at all, not merely, as Gaita puts it, that it cannot do so ‘as a consideration to be weighed alongside others’ (Gaita 1991, pp. 234-36).
And the weakness in the account of remorse emerges again here. For Gaita argues that the illusory teleology would come into view in remorse – remorse expressed in ‘the question (which asks for no answer) “How could I have done it?”’ He sees in the growing awareness of the evil ‘a movement towards necessity, of the world becoming “compulsively present to the will”’ (Gaita 1991, pp. 235-36; Gaita again cites Murdoch 1970, p. 39). Yet surely this deflects from shocked recognition of the victim’s reality as much as does focus on having betrayed rationality or on having offended ‘against the sanctity of life’ (Gaita 2002, p. 164): pure remorse seems to require being so haunted by one’s victim that one never spares a thought for the way that this has poisoned one’s own life. In thrall to the metaphor of speech, Gaita again annuls the singularity of remorse, ascribing to it a more general focus than to deliberation before the deed. That he evokes awareness of evil using a phrase from Iris Murdoch that he elsewhere uses, as we have seen, to characterise goodness belies the alleged asymmetry between good and evil.

But the idea that evil must be present to the refrainer is perhaps displaced most radically by Gaita’s response to the ‘better one dead than many’ situation – a situation to which such refraining seems essential. Gaita is moved, as we have seen, by the one who pleads to be shot while having ‘no thoughts about what the one to whom he addresses his plea must or ought to do’; and what the latter ought to do bears on the moral nature of what the pleader pleads for. According to Gaita, to plead for something evil is not always to do evil; hence it may be that the pleader refrains from evil. Yet inasmuch as he need not think about the moral nature of what he pleads for, it would seem that he does not need to recognise the evil of what he refrains from. The spontaneity of his response is tied to a certain blindness.
All this calls into question the idea that one refrains from evil because the victim would suffer its injustice – an idea upon which depend the notions, central to Gaita’s philosophy, that cruelty to those with speech radically differs from cruelty to beings without speech and that the other human is radically other, an absolute limit on one’s will and hence one’s fellow.

Even if Gaita is right that good and evil are asymmetrical, we would still need to ask: If one cannot appreciate the goodness of one’s caring for others, can this caring be conditioned by a sense that it can matter morally and spiritually to them, a sense that they can appreciate it, be grateful for it? And if its goodness is invisible to others as well as oneself, can they be grateful for the caring at all? Ilham Dilman’s suggestion that for Gaita goodness, although not making itself visible, may be visible to its recipient (Dilham 2001, p. 350) perhaps enables a response to the second question; it does not enable a response to the first. And upon such a response depends Gaita’s radically differentiating compassion for beings with speech from compassion for speechless beings that are not pitied for their speechlessness.

The difficulty pertains to Gaita’s evocation of the gift. That the donor’s sacrifice is a weight, a burden on the recipient seems to be what it is – or part of what it is – for the gift to matter profoundly to the recipient. It would on Gaita’s account be natural, I think, to say that gratitude goes deep with the recipient because the giving went deep with the donor. Yet, as we have seen, Gaita’s account implies that the donor can make little of her beneficiaries’ ‘radical singularity’, and thus can make little of the moral weight of her gift upon them. And indeed if in giving she affirms – or even merely recognises – this
burden, we might wonder if there is gift at all. For surely a gift – a true, unconditional
gift – does not merely offer a material benefit in exchange for a spiritual debt. Thus the
donor would do better to hope that the gift will not matter profoundly to the recipient,
will not be recognised as gift. The recipient’s capacity for deepened understanding, his
humanity, had better not be present to the donor. And the donor’s capacity for deepened
understanding had better not be present to the recipient – otherwise the gift will be a
burden. If goodness is tied to invisibility, so too, it would seem, is the gift: just as the
doer of the good deed cannot recognise its goodness, so too the donor of the gift cannot
recognise it as gift. The gift seems to be marked by a singularity that Gaita does not
thematise and which his affirmation of speech leaves no space for.

Simone Weil, of whom Gaita (2002, p. 201) says ‘no-one has written so beautifully
and hard-headedly about justice’, is more attuned than he to the problematic nature of
gratitude. In a passage that he quotes, she writes: ‘the just must be thanked for being just,
because justice is so beautiful a thing, in the same way as we thank God because of his
great glory. Any other gratitude is servile and even animal’ (Weil 1977, p. 78).
Understandably, Gaita seems to interpret this as saying that the pure gratitude is for the
justice of the deed, the servile for the material benefit it renders. Yet perhaps more is
going on than this. In the same essay Weil (1977, p. 87) writes: ‘Compassion and
gratitude come down from God, and when they are exchanged in a glance, God is present
at the point where the eyes of those who give and those who receive meet’; and she
pictures this moment of exchange as one of the times ‘when thinking of God separates us
from him’, when ‘the presence of God in us has as its condition a secret so deep that it is
even a secret from us’. Thus she affirms a gratitude for what comes from God in which
one does not, cannot, know that it comes from God. Perhaps, then, servile gratitude is
that which is knowingly rendered to the donor of what one is grateful for; it becomes
servile by being immediately caught up in the economy of the exchange. A certain
invisibility, secrecy and non-presence marks the justice that is the object of the pure
gratitude and the relationship between donor and donee. The secrecy and non-presence
here may not ultimately be radical enough to prevent the reduction of the gift to the
exchange; but Weil more squarely than Gaita addresses the kind of tension that we have
seen emerge in his text.

Nevertheless, Weil’s influence perhaps underlies Gaita’s arguing in all of his
philosophical books that ‘one can lucidly respond to life as a gift without asking who
gave the gift’ (Gaita 2002, p. 138). The ‘gratitude for the gift that has been [one’s] life’
(Gaita 1991, p. 200) seems to be outside reciprocity, outside the circle of exchange. Yet
Gaita seems to return the gift without a giver to presence by linking it to the idea of a
vocation of which we cannot say ‘who it is who calls’; in both cases he would, I think,
say that we are claimed in response to a situation that speaks to us, a situation to which I
must be fully present, a presence that is captured by the metaphor of speech. We might
wonder, though, how adequate such a metaphor is to a speaking in which we are not able
to say who it is who speaks.

4.

The best known contemporary challenge to the privileging of speech over writing
(phonocentrism) has come from poststructuralism – from Derrida’s deconstruction in
particular. Perhaps less well known is the extent to which Derrida’s desire to testify to
the miraculousness of goodness informs this challenge. On the one hand, he argues that
inasmuch as the gift must not be represented, must not become an object for consciousness, it cannot be governed, saturated by intention: ‘The simple intention to give, insofar as it carries the intentional meaning of the gift, suffices to make a return payment to oneself’ (Derrida 1991, p. 13) – a return payment which reduces the gift to an exchange; ‘everything stemming from the intentional meaning also threatens the gift with self-keeping, with being kept in its very expenditure’ (Derrida 1991, p. 123). Derrida’s point here is similar to Gaita’s point that a deed done for ‘the sake of being or doing good’ cannot be good. On the other hand, Derrida argues that the gift cannot be a sheer accident: ‘[t]here is no gift without the intention of giving’. His point here could lead into the kind of claim that Gaita makes to the effect that goodness must go deep with the doer in order to be goodness. For Derrida, the paradoxical relationship of the gift to intention means that in the gift ‘[t]here must be chance, encounter, the involuntary, even unconsciousness or disorder, and there must be intentional freedom, and these two conditions must – miraculously, graciously – agree with each other’ (Derrida 1991, p. 123). In thematising the paradox of the gift, Derrida is, I think, attempting to address a question like that which, I suggested, Gaita cannot address – the question of how goodness must be invisible to the good person yet go deep with them. And in doing so, he rejects the notion that the gift is saturated in presence – ‘If the gift appears or signifies itself, if it exists or if it is presently as gift, as what it is, then it is not, it annuls itself’ (1991, pp. 26-27) – and thus the notion that goodness is bathed in speech. That a phonocentric account of justice as rigorous, subtle and resourceful as Raimond Gaita’s cannot escape double bind, perhaps indicates the force of the Derridean gesture.

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