

External Examiner's Report

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General comment

This is an excellent dissertation, and I definitely recommend that it pass, and without corrections. So now that we have that first formal question out of the way, I can look forward to a stimulating discussion at the viva voce exam!

You covered an enormous amount of ground, and produced a result of admirable subtlety and depth. I have so many comments and questions about the dissertation, but all of them are in the spirit of further exploration about fascinating topics rather than criticism. I speak from a position of deep admiration of Gaita's work, and indeed of the whole 'post-Wittgensteinian' or 'Swansea school' project with which you seem to identify. So my criticism will be made very much from within that project. Given the limits of this document and of the viva itself, I have chosen a small number of overlapping issues where I would like to hear more about your position, and where I hope my questions can prompt further work. Most of your exegetical work on Kant, McDowell, Buber and Gaita was excellent, I learned a lot from it, and there is nothing of particular import I would challenge you on. I'm more interested in the abstract questions about the nature of love, goodness, and relationships.

In passing, I particularly appreciated your close work with examples, a priority in my own philosophy as well. However, many mainstream philosophers are suspicious of the role of examples in philosophy, such as Onora O'Neill.¹

The only general criticism I might make has to do with the length: I counted 216,000 words. As an examiner, I lost my way a little too often, despite some excellent signposting throughout. There was a certain amount of avoidable repetition: Kant and McDowell had been dealt with properly in the first two chapters, yet they returned a little too often. There were a few too many asides (in the text and in the long footnotes) that were often interesting but not quite relevant enough, and this slowed down and diluted the argumentative pace. You are perhaps a victim of his own erudition.

I dare say many of your answers to my questions below are already in the text, but I lost them. Although some parts of the thesis are certainly publishable, I don't think it is publishable in its entirety because of the length. One final thought about length: it is perhaps a shame that you did not restrain yourself to half the words, with the prospect of finishing the PhD a year earlier!

So let's look at the issues, in no particular order. Sometimes I ask you an explicit question, sometime I'm just wondering how you would respond.

1. Gaita's nun and the 'possessed man'

The problems with this example were well brought out by Christopher Hamilton,² and I will summarise two of his criticisms here. First, the example is remarkably under-described for the amount of argumentative weight it is meant to carry. We do not know enough of what the nun *did*.

¹ O'Neill, O. (1986). The power of example. *Philosophy*, 61(235), 5-29.

² Hamilton, C. (2008). Raimond Gaita on saints, love and human preciousness. *Ethical theory and moral practice*, 11, 181-195.

Did she wash and feed the inmates? Did she remonstrate with the doctors to improve the conditions of the inmates, or lobby to change institutional structures? Did she raise money, did she recruit her fellow nuns to help out? It is not enough to say that whatever she did she did *lovingly*: that's a mere impression and we only have Gaita's word for it. (Gaita's discussion of Primo Levi's Charles and Ladmaker is better in this respect.)

Second: elsewhere Gaita makes similar points about Mother Teresa, a more accessible figure – but also perhaps a more controversial figure. Indeed, in describing the nun's love as *saintly*, it raises awkward questions about real saints, and their real lives, and Gaita does not discuss these. One common theme in their biographies, says Hamilton, is an obsession with their mission to the point of being incapable of friendship (and the special obligations that would generate).

More generally, I'm not sure about the nun and the later example of the 'possessed man' (254) simply because I do not know enough about the reality of mental illness and psychiatry. I worry that the examples are therefore less useful for a dissertation that is about much more ordinary situations among competent adults. Moreover, the 'possessed' example is about Jesus, and so it raises long-standing questions of what it means for Christians (or indeed for the rest of us) to learn from the life of Jesus. Are we really meant to believe that Jesus might have been 'afraid' in the way that we are afraid? That Jesus would have 'preferences' to spend his time with his disciplines rather than with the possessed man? I don't know.

2. The Good Samaritan

Continuing on from the first point, Ch. 6 has a good discussion of the Good Samaritan. (Here I think the example is secular enough to be worth discussing, and you mentioned my own brief discussion of it.) It was an interesting move to focus on the "ambivalent Levite" who witnesses the Samaritan's actions, and on his pangs of conscience for neglecting the same victim earlier.

My main concern with the Samaritan parable is the implicit message that *this* is the only way to be a good neighbour to the needy, and that the Priest and Levite were 'set up' to fail, however morally important their own plans might have been for that day – and you acknowledged this in part. Again we have the problem of lack of detail: how much is the Samaritan to do for the victim? Paying for one night in the hotel was certainly admirable and generous, but how can the Samaritan justify a non-arbitrary end to his help – why not two nights, why not three? What if the wounded traveller asks for a loan, for a place to live? Not to mention (i) the sheer number of *other* victims (just as needy, if not more) who did not happen to fall into the Samaritan's path, but who could easily be discovered; not to mention (ii) other legitimate claimants for the Samaritan's time and money, such as his family dependants.

I accept your earlier response to McDowell about the fact that 'pain' is always experienced as *someone's* pain. But there is so much pain in the world. The only way to build a career or a family is to ignore – to deliberately ignore – the pain of most wounded travellers on the side of the road. Your discussion of Buber suggests an ideal of being open to the 'You' in every encounter. But that would be overwhelming. Even when I act under the conception of duty, e.g. filial duty to my ageing widowed mother, or Corder's friend's paternal duty to his disabled son -- there is a massive asymmetry of need, and at some point I have to declare 'enough' in a way that can only appear arbitrary and selfish to the needy other.

I wasn't sure about the greedy and selfish banker (194), who is suddenly struck by the beggar. How is this different from the Good Samaritan? Again, though, one response would be: we need banks and we need bankers. Very often the banker will be good at his job precisely because he is motivated by greed – and we will all benefit from a well-functioning bank.

3. Racism

This was an interesting example from p. 150, and elsewhere. You're right that this is a problem for McDowell, who relies on the community as the source of meaning: surely the slaveowner's racism fits in perfectly well with the racist values of his community. But McDowell might respond by reference to two other communities which the slaveowners participated in: the Christian community, and the intellectual community that produced the Declaration of Independence. Neither of those communities would accommodate racism, at least not officially. (There is a historical question here about the slave-owner's self-serving interpretations of Christianity and the Declaration spirit.)

In Ch. 5 you speak of Daryl Davis as your example of "loving the hate-filled other". It's a great Ted Talk, it's an inspiring message: hatred based on ignorance and fear, and racism will be defeated by communication and love. That might work for some racists, but surely not all. I think many racists are energised and oriented by their hate, rather than constricted by it; many racists can be very knowledgeable of 'lower' humans and yet be unmoved. In the end I fear that most racists will need to be neutralised and deterred by force rather than by argument or by love. Roger Kelly does not hate, he's just 'opinionated', says Davis – are we really supposed to believe that? And is there not a sense that Davis was just lucky to talk to Kelly rather than some of his more close-minded and trigger-happy colleagues.

I'm reminded here of Gaita's discussion of Eichmann, where Gaita admits that it sounds sickly to call Eichmann precious. However, says Gaita, such preciousness is what grounds our understanding of human rights, and we all accept that Eichmann had a right to a fair trial, a right not to be tortured etc.. But I would say that's a fairly thin notion of preciousness; surely Eichmann (and Kelly) had *forfeited* any claim to more substantive preciousness through their voluntary misanthropic actions.

I like your discussion of Gaita's example of the slaveowner raping the slave (302), and not feeling 'real' remorse, because the slaveowner does not believe that the slave can be, or feel, deeply wronged by the rape. Now any change in the slaveowner's concepts, says Gaita, will require *slow* historically-conditioned shifts in shared cultural meanings. You claim that Gaita cannot accommodate the *sudden* shifts of perspective that Buber's pre-conceptual You provokes. (Camilla thinks you're wrong that Gaita cannot accommodate this, by the way.) This means that the reality of the other is in principle always accessible, even if the slaveowner rapist will not be able make sense of his subsequent conscience-stricken confusion *as* remorse (but we observers *will*). I thought this was an excellent point, and worth expanding into an article. I suppose I am more sceptical than you about such accessibility; I tend to think the slaveowner will always find ways to process and explain away his pangs. Indeed, non-racist rapes in our own day are all too easy for the perpetrator to explain away.

4. The need for love?

Now I'm inclined to defer to Camilla on love, since she has literally written the book on it! But following on from the previous items, I'm wondering how much love you *need* to make your most important philosophical arguments.

I take your point that you are interested not in the feeling of love, not in on-going loving relationships, but rather in the loving *engagement* with the other; and I take your point that love is 'in between', that a person 'dwells' in love rather than 'has' it. That's fine. But it seems to me that your main focus is on 'engagement' or 'relationality', and I'm not really sure that love is essential to relationality. Or rather, if you want to declare that love is essential to it, then this will dilute the concept of love to a degree where it will no longer be able to serve in distinguishing loving from less-than-loving (indifferent or instrumental) relationality.

At one point you say that you want to use love to "ground the transition from the dialogical to the moral". In the same way that I worry about diluting the concept of love, I would also worry about

diluting the concept of the moral. Could I ask how, at the end of your argument, you understand the moral? I guess I'm intuitively more confident of moving from relationality to the moral without love.

Part Three begins with the nutshell: to show that the I-You relationality simply *is* love (qua lovingness). Again, you can *call* it love if you like, but where does that get you? You stipulate (235) "there can be no engagement or encounter in which love is entirely absent." You acknowledge that this sounds absurd – I agree it does. But "one can only reject what has already *touched* one" – but now I'm wondering what you mean by 'touch'. To return to the example of the raped slavewoman: can the woman not recognise unwelcome sexual attention *without* being 'touched' *at all*? Can she not reject it *as* unwanted sexual attention (as an expression of mere power or possessiveness or misogyny or entitlement) rather than (misguided) love?

You ask (251): "why not simply say that the other is an idiot?" Lovely question. But, you say, this means simply seeing her in terms of her bad qualities, rather than the whole picture. Yes, say I: but I haven't got the time or energy to seek out the whole picture. Why can I not be *indifferent* to this other person; and when I have just cause, why can I not write him off as an 'idiot' and go on my way? This is compatible with being courteous and professional when working with idiot colleagues or living with an idiot sibling; and means I have more time and energy to spend on those I consider not idiots.

5. Infidelity and comfort

The central example of Chapter 3 involves you comforting a suicidal friend after his partner leaves him for her old flame. The pain of romantic abandonment and betrayal is real, and I appreciated your point about your comforting words and actions not being motivated at all by Kantian or McDowellian thought processes. However, I was a little troubled by the absence of three thoughts.

- Is there not a sense that heartbreak is just *not* a good reason for suicide? Of course you are suspicious of the role of reasons in interpersonal engagement, and of course reasons are notoriously impotent when persuading the other not to commit suicide – I'm not suggesting you tell your friend that his suicidal thoughts are immature or cliché. And yet surely your comforting could be *guided* by the thought that heartbreak is not a good reason, and that he is bound to get over her? There is a complex debate, of course, about whether there are *any* 'good' reasons for suicide. But I would suggest that suicidal ideation makes much more sense, and is therefore much more worrisome, in the case of intelligible guilt or shame or existential despair (i.e. not just romantic despair).
- You did not seem to have much sense of the *woman's* (L's) point of view here. No, it wasn't very tidy to sneak around behind your friend's back; but at the core of the problem is her change in affections, and of course she has every *right* to act on her changed affections. Besides, if your friend still genuinely loves the woman, then there is a part of him who wants her to be happier and wants to respect her choices, no? Again, I'm not suggesting you should say this in so many words when he is hurt and angry. But the thought could guide you.
- There is no mention of third parties who might be upset if he were to commit suicide – his family and other friends. Not to mention how their upset would be compounded by the cliché of a suicide from heartbreak. (You only mention how sorry *you* would be.)

I was struck by your concluding declaration to your friend: "You have to make a choice. To get through this or not" (153). I can see where you're going with it, but it remains a risky strategy. There is an interesting question of whether one can ever know a friend well enough to take such a risk.

On p. 313, you return to the heartbroken friend, with the twist that it was *you* who had the affair with his partner! Wow! Apart from the fact that the new relationship (and intentions) between you and the woman was not clear enough, I'm worried that your understanding of the new relation between you and your friend comes too close to a possessive masculine vanity: as if your friend was angry with you for stealing his property! Again, where is the woman's point of view in all this? Can

your friend, who still claims to love her, not accept that she found a better deal with you, and indeed that your friend can be happy not just for her, but for you (his friend) and her together.

6. Forgiveness

Still with the example of your betrayal of your friend, you speculate that your friend's choice will be about whether to forgive (i) the ex-partner, and/or (ii) you. Starting on p. 314, you make a number of claims about forgiveness:

- That the "general direction will be toward forgiveness" – you mean you are confident that the friend will eventually forgive you for betraying him with the woman? Um... why think that?
- You say: "Forgiveness points toward the recreation of love and, thus, to something which, if not distorted by sentimentality or other forms of deception but lucid, is manifestly *good*" (317). Two points: (i) Are there not cases of people who forgive too quickly, too lightly, or without sufficient understanding of the wrong done to them? (ii) does forgiveness necessarily point toward the re-creation of love? Can I not say "I forgive you, but I don't want to see you ever again"?
- You say that forgiveness cannot be willed, and that it requires a change of heart. That sounds like the victim has no control over the situation, she has to wait for the change of heart to arrive or not. There are psychological limits, true; but surely I can choose to forgive in the sense of launching and re-launching a process that I know will take time, just as I can choose to repudiate the resentment that pushes up involuntarily.
- You say that forgiveness has to be bilateral and conditional, requiring the wrongdoer's remorse for 'consummation'. But why exclude unilateral, unconditional forgiveness (whether in its Christian version or a version based on some kind of human solidarity etc.)?

7. Self-consciousness and moral reproach

I like the example of Ann (p. 48), who is angry at her colleague for being late. And then (i) she talks to her kind, gentle uncle, and is now *mystified* by her previous anger: "I don't know what got into me." Then (ii) she visits a friend who complains of sexist colleagues, and this "righteous retribution" rubs off on Ann, who *confirms* her earlier anger. You conclude from Ann's two post-anger encounters that there is no outside, disengaged position from which we can articulate how we are, at some point, actively engaged in the world.

It's true that punctuality is a plausible candidate for a criterion of judgement lying on the border between the subjective and the (objective) moral, but I want to resist your sceptical conclusion. We have to return to the fact that the colleague is regularly late, and does not apologise. I call that disrespectful, I call that shirking, and I would endorse Ann's anger. And yes, maybe I'm just saying that because that's the type of moral-professional vision I *happen to* bring to my own work in my own collective.

But even if I am a type of person who shares Ann's disposition, I cannot take seriously the thought that I am *accidentally* such a type, and that I should therefore accept my colleague's non-punctuality as part of the natural world, a spirit of celebrating diversity or something. This is not to say that there is an "outside, disengaged position", but it *is* to say that there is a "*more* disengaged position" from which to contemplate and endorse my past emotional responses.

There is also the example of Jay and Lin (242), and Lin's annoyance with Jay's persistent carelessness, and the meaning of the annoyance within the loving relationship. And I accept that what one person calls careless, another calls carefree. But when the carelessness causes damage (the broken window), and the damage is *repeated*, then again, I would side with Lin's annoyance. One more thing: you do not mention the fact of Lin's annoyance building over time, to the point that this broken window might constitute a last straw.

8. Shame, guilt and conscience

I take your point about conscience focusing on the unique other, while guilt and shame are self-oriented, the first focusing on the infringement of a moral rule and the second on the failure to meet a social standard. You call shame and guilt 'spurious' forms of conscience (349). Two comments.

First, there does not seem to be quite enough of a distinction between your account of conscience and Gaita's understanding of remorse – which is also about being haunted by the other. On p. 302 you say that Gaita does not understand remorse as a response in which love manifests. Given my scepticism about the role of love in relationality, then your explanation just seems to be about labelling.

Second, we're down to definitions again: *some* guilt is about infringing a rule, yes, but other guilt is entirely focused on the other. I don't much care for birthdays (i.e. I don't really respect the rule), but I know that she does, and in forgetting her birthday I feel guilty, and my guilt is very much focused on her. Perhaps paradoxically, I tend to see conscience primarily in terms of a reluctance to infringe some rule, i.e. what you call 'guilt'! (I'm thinking of Hamlet's "conscience doth make cowards of us all".)

As for shame, yes, some of it is about a failure to rise to a standard, and therefore egocentric. But surely some shame is rightly prompted by my treatment of another who deserved better, some shame is focused on my failure to fulfil the rightful expectations of a moral exemplar or an identity-conferring group, and both kinds of shame are phenomenologically focused on the other. Finally, shame can be a motivational force for other-directed goodness: if I am ashamed of having cheated on my spouse, then shame can guarantee a faithful commitment *to that spouse* into the future.

9. Two translation points

Small thing about your discussion of *Mensch* on p. 83. Surely "human being" is *not only* a stale natural-scientific term, but is *also* a perfectly good moral term, one without any gender implications.

It's interesting that you went with 'you' rather than 'thou' to translate Buber's *Du*. Of course 'thou' is archaic, but it's so important for Buber that the other is a single person, rather than a group.

10. Two examples I did not understand

The long discussion of the Kafka story was a bit strange. I mean, it's a striking story, but a little too extraordinary to help you make sense of ordinary cases of love.

And I wasn't sure of your example of asking someone the time (297), and then experiencing the pang of conscience that you were not polite enough in asking for it. As far as I can tell, you were not *impolite*, were you?

Final word: an excellent thesis, well done!

Christopher Cowley