In his acknowledgments at the beginning of this book, Raimond Gaita thanks his publisher for ‘his preparedness to publish into the general market a book whose discussion ranges from the plight of the Aborigines to Wittgenstein’s remarks on sensation’. He goes on to note, in his introduction, that as fewer academic philosophers write for the educated public, that public gets less practice in thinking philosophically. It gets less practice in the kind of sustained and patient thinking that is required, if we are to address responsibly some of the big questions that face our society and that face us as individuals. He suggests that his readers take Wittgenstein’s advice concerning how philosophers should greet one another, the advice to ‘Take your time’.

The scope of this book is indeed remarkable as is the depth of response, both intellectual and moral, that it asks of its readers. Unlike some philosophical writing in practical ethics, whose tone suggests that the philosophers approach their subject as an expert and their readers as lay folk in need of instruction, Gaita asks that we think philosophically with him, that we bring our own experience, our own sense of life, to a rigorous and responsible engagement with what confronts us all. In reading him, I find that another of Wittgenstein’s remarks, made in the preface to his great work *Philosophical Investigations*, comes to mind. Wittgenstein said that he would not like his writing to spare others the trouble of thinking but, on the contrary, to stimulate them to thoughts of their own. Gaita, whose kinship with Wittgenstein is evident in many ways, demands the same responsible and individual engagement from us.

The book may be divided thematically into three sections. In the first section, Gaita explores our concepts of good and evil and the kind of moral reality or moral meaning that is marked out by those concepts. He argues that they are interdependent with a particular understanding of the human individual which has been central to the western moral tradition. They are interdependent with a sense of each individual as unconditionally precious or as sacred, unique and irreplaceable. It is the preciousness of each individual that informs our understanding of the distinctive evil of serious moral wrongs such as injustice. And that preciousness is in turn revealed by the kind of love which is a form of Goodness.

In the second section, Gaita deploys those interrelated concepts, of good, evil and human individuality, in an interpretation of racism and racist injustice. Racism, he suggests, consists in the denial that certain others possess the kind of human individuality that would make them intelligibly able to be wronged as ‘we’ can be wronged, and hence able to suffer as ‘we’ suffer. In the light of that understanding, he asks us to think about racism in the Australian context, about Mabo, about the Stolen Generation, about the charge of genocide in *Bringing Them Home* and about the relationship between the concept of genocide and our understanding of the Holocaust. He calls us to a deepened understanding of the meaning of our history and of the moral landscape that we occupy as its heirs.
Finally, in the third and perhaps most philosophically demanding section of the book, Gaita reflects upon thinking itself, upon what it is to think well and badly, and upon the relationship between what is morally and rationally unthinkable. His discussion ranges from David Irving, Holocaust denial and the concept of free speech, through the life of the mind and the concept of the university, to an exploration of what it means to say that truth is a need of the soul.

All of this deserves and repays detailed attention. In particular, what Gaita has to say about the Stolen Generation, the relationship between guilt, shame and collective responsibility, and his fine and careful exploration of the concept of genocide in relation to that part of Australia’s history, is the best discussion I know of these matters. We are fortunate, at this point in the life of our community, to have such a writer among us.

In this forum, however, I think it appropriate to focus not so much on the content of these discussions as upon a more general thread that runs through the book as a whole. It concerns the relationship between Gaita’s conception of morality, of concepts of good, evil and of the human individual, and what may be called a religious or spiritual sensibility. I think that this thread in Gaita’s work is likely to prove unsettling for both the secular temper of contemporary society and philosophy, and equally unsettling, though for different reasons, for more orthodox religious believers. I will try to explain why that is so.

Gaita’s challenge to secular philosophical accounts of morality lies in his insistence that there is something essentially mysterious both about the nature of human moral fellowship and about moral meaning. That mysteriousness shows itself in numerous ways. It shows itself, for example, in the fact that human beings have a power ‘to affect us in ways we cannot fathom’. That another person’s absence can make our lives seem empty, that an individual whom we have wronged may haunt us, are features of human life deeply offensive to reason. Yet, Gaita argues, it is because we can affect one another in such ways, that we can mean such things, that human beings limit our wills like nothing else in nature.

It is important not to misunderstand Gaita’s point here. He is not claiming that moral responses are the same as emotional responses. Nor is he saying that we have obligations only to those we love, only to those whose lives mean that much to us. Rather, he is claiming that the reality and individuality of another human being that is revealed in the shock of a lucid remorse or love or grief is the object of morality itself. He is claiming that we could not derive our sense of the unconditional preciousness of individuals, which is the ground of our sense of the seriousness of moral harms like violation and injustice, which is interdependent with our understanding of good and evil, unless human beings could mean what they do to one another. He is saying that the very concepts through which we mark out moral meaning, through which our understanding of moral reality deepens, are conditioned by our human form of life, by the mysterious power we have to affect one another.

The mysteriousness of moral meaning shows itself also in certain experiences of goodness and of evil. Gaita tells, for example, of a nun who visited a psychiatric hospital at which he worked as a young man. The patients at the hospital were judged to be incurable and, Gaita writes, ‘they appeared to have irretrievably lost everything which gives meaning to our lives’. They had long since ceased to receive visits from friends, wives, children and even parents; often they were treated brutally by the
psychiatrists and the nurses. A small number of psychiatrists, however, worked devotedly to improve their condition, and they spoke ‘against all appearances, of the inalienable dignity of even those patients’.

One day a nun came to the ward, and everything in her demeanour towards the patients, writes Gaita,

> the way she spoke to them, her facial expressions, the inflexions of her body—contrasted with and showed up the behaviour of those noble psychiatrists. She showed that they were, despite their best efforts, condescending, as I too had been. She thereby revealed that even such patients were, as the psychiatrists and I had sincerely and generously professed, the equals of those who wanted to help them; but she also revealed that in our hearts we did not believe this.

Why does Gaita say that in showing up the behaviour of himself and the psychiatrists as condescending, the nun thereby revealed the patients to be their equals? I think it is because one can condescend only to those to whom it is possible not to condescend. The concept of condescension has no application in our relations, say, to rocks and stones, to birds and animals. One treats one’s pets as not fully one’s equals, but one does not thereby condescend to them. Condescension requires that one sees the other as sharing the same life, but sharing it only to a limited extent. It is true that one can fail to respect the independent life of animals, but that is a different failure of respect than is expressed by the notion of condescension, by the condescension that may be expressed by adults to children, sexist men to women, or racist whites to blacks. Condescension is a mode of response that partly reveals that its object is conceptually within reach of full respect. In revealing the psychiatrist’s behaviour as condescending, therefore, the nun’s demeanour revealed that the patients were conceptually within reach of full respect. It revealed that they were of a nature to be fully the equals of those who wanted to help them, but that those who wanted to help them did not fully believe it.

That, as Gaita emphasises, is an astonishing thing. It is astonishing that the love the nun showed those psychiatric patients should have the power to reveal what their affliction had obscured, the power to reveal their full humanity and moral equality. It is astonishing that even such human beings should be limits to our wills. That they may be, however, shows that attempts to ground or justify our moral responses to one another by appeal to the self-evident respect-worthiness of rationality, or by appeal to things such as inalienable dignity, are misdirected. They are attempts to make secure to reason something essentially mysterious, something fundamentally offensive to reason. It shows also, then, that the language of rights and of dignity, through which Kant hoped to secure the moral assent of all rational beings, is parasitic upon the language of love.

These features of Gaita’s conception of morality will, I think, be congenial to those of religious or spiritual sensibility. I said earlier, however, that I thought his work might be equally unsettling for certain forms of religious understanding. In this final section of the review, I will explore briefly why that might be so.

Gaita emphasises that what was revealed by the nun’s love was something mysterious, something not fully discursively explicable. He also acknowledges that if the nun were questioned about her behaviour and her love, she might have told a
religious or theological or metaphysical story about the people to whom she responded. She might, for example, have said that the patients were all God’s children and equally loved by him. Her behaviour, then, might be thought to be explained by her belief in the existence of God, and our assessment of its truth or appropriateness to be likewise dependent upon our acceptance of the same proposition. If we did not believe as she did, then why should we believe that the nun’s behaviour revealed something true about the patients, instead of revealing merely her speciesist preference for her fellow human beings, no matter how little difference there was ‘in reality’ between them and other non-rational animals?

Gaita argues, however, that what the nun revealed and our assessment of its truth is no more dependent upon the acceptance of metaphysical or theological propositions than it is dependent upon rational justification. As I said earlier, Gaita does not deny that the nun might understand how she behaved, and the rightness of that behaviour, in those terms. But, he says, ‘whatever religious people might say, as someone who was witness to the nun’s love and is claimed in fidelity to it, I have no understanding of what is revealed independently of the quality of her love’. In other words, no proposition, religious or otherwise, explains or underwrites the fact that her love could have that revelatory quality. The truth of what was revealed by the nun’s love is a truth to which Gaita, who witnessed it, is claimed in testimony. In testifying to its truth, Gaita must judge himself worthily trusting of what he is claimed by. There is no independent guarantee to which he, or we, could have access.

As I read him, then, Gaita aims to reveal the mystery that is internal to our notions of good and evil, to our understanding of what it is for others to be our fellows. That is a mystery which is not explained, however, by appeal to the truths of religious propositions any more than it is explained by appeal to human capacities for rationality. The language of religion may make room for the mysteriousness of what the nun revealed, but the mysteriousness of what she revealed does not prove the truth of any religious faith or doctrine.

This will not suit those who want to find a grounding or justification of our moral responses in reason, in the empirical facts of human life. Equally, it will not suit those who want to find such grounding in the truth of metaphysical propositions affirming the existence of God.