

Book Reviews

Raimond Gaita, *The Philosopher's Dog* (London: Routledge, 2003). 214pp. ISBN 0415309077 (hbk). Hardback/Paperback. £14.99/£-.

In this book, Professor Gaita does two things. First, he tells us about himself, describing, for example, his sense of the natural world and his passion for climbing and who his intellectual heroes are, about his family, including Romulus his father, who is the subject of another book by Gaita, and his thoughtful and caring daughter Katie, about some of his friends, but above all about some of the animals he has known. Thus, in the first chapter, we learn of Jack, the cockatoo, who flew with him as Gaita rode to school; of Orloff, the black greyhound, another childhood pet who slept in his bed; and about Zac, the 'good dog' of his daughters. The animal about whom he most writes is Gypsy, a 'German shepherd bitch' as she is described, who was very much part of Gaita's family, and who had the terrible misfortune to be crushed, but not killed, when a huge drunk fell on her. She is the philosopher's dog. We hear about Tosca, a cat of the family, whom Gypsy, who is described as 'killer', almost kills. We are told, too, of other animals and other people's encounters with other animals, including, for example, that between an unnamed butterfly and Walter Bonatti, a famous European climber.

Gaita says, of himself (p. 1), that he discovered that he likes telling animal stories when writing about his father. This we should be pleased about because what he likes doing he does with great skill. He selects his stories well, and tells them in a clear, unsentimental, and beautifully paced way. I was engrossed by them.

The second thing, though, that Professor Gaita does is to formulate and discuss philosophical issues which his encounters with animals, and other parts of nature, have inspired in him. These reflections are not easy to summarize because there is no continuously developing argument or thesis, but rather a sequence of different discussions of different issues, though there are certainly recurring themes. Further, these reflections are not always cut and dried, but amount to an inconclusive and interesting development of ideas, in which issues are deepened if not resolved. The discussion covers first what might be called ethical issues. For example, was Gaita wrong to contemplate killing Tosca the cat, when she had been seriously injured by Gypsy, by hitting her on the head with a shovel? He concludes that he thereby dishonoured the cat because of her role in the family. He remarks, too, that it is significant that honour, and dignity, can be talked of in relation to household pets. He stresses, though, that there are options for behaviour towards animals that cannot be regarded as open towards people (for example, hitting them with shovels). A

second type of issue concerns the epistemology of animal mentality. As Gaita remarks (p. 45), it is often asked whether we are justified in thinking that animals are sensate? Gaita responds by developing Wittgenstein's suggestion, as he interprets it, that our unhesitant responses to animals, which amounts to treating them as sensate, is not based on belief, and hence issues of justification do not arise (p. 50). In the next chapter, this is developed into the idea that it is in no way anthropomorphic to ascribe beliefs and intentions to animals, and this is because 'our concepts...are formed in response to animals and human beings together' (p. 60). Gaita allows too, referring to another of his intellectual heroes, Coetzee, that Gypsy has, in some sense, a knowledge of death, but only because her understanding is 'entirely active' (p. 71).

A third theme is metaphysical. What is the difference between such animals and ourselves? Gaita's answer is that such animals have 'attenuated' individuality (p. 77). They are not properly unique in the way that each of us is. 'The attenuated nature of this kind of individuality in animals shows most clearly perhaps in the fact that we do not write biographies of animals' (p. 77). This, then, is a difference, and it accounts for differences in our moral status, but what we share is something that Gaita calls 'creatureliness'. In explaining this, Gaita does not stress, as many would, the idea that we are simply one evolved animal life form, sharing fundamental processes with, and linked in our development to, other animals, some, of course, now extinct. On the contrary, he criticizes the value of what used to be called socio-biology, which he seems to think is an expression of the idea that we are 'animals in our essence' (p. 174). Rather, as he puts it, in elucidating creatureliness we should focus on 'the body's part in the constitution of our concepts and on what we have made of the body in the realm of meaning' (p. 184). In illustrating the role of the body, Gaita talks of the pleasures and proneness to personal complexities in sex as we know it, and of our relation to a foetus inside the body of its mother.

But the talk of meaning in the last quotation takes us onto another important and fourth theme in Gaita's reflections, which is meta-ethical. Gaita seems to think that we can divide discourse and thought into a realm of what he calls meaning and another part. Into the other part he places, for example, history, philosophy and science, and calls it objective. There is, though, a contrasting form of discourse—that of meaning—to which some are blind. However, we can speak of genuine understanding and of falsehood in the realm of meaning, and it can be described as 'the understanding of the heart' (p. 106). In Gaita's heart it means something to father a child in the normal way, but it does not mean anything, or at least it means something different, to donate sperm (p. 188). Gaita, not surprisingly, suggests that it is hard to 'say what can and what cannot find its way into the realm of meaning' (p. 187).

I hope that these remarks convey the scope and to some extent the content of Gaita's reflections. Just as his stories are fascinating, so are his reflections. They are serious, deeply considered, and, as with his stories, I wanted each time to reach the denouement. For me, however, they too often lacked two important qualities of good philosophy. First, I was not persuaded by them, and second, I felt that in their development the dissenting or sceptical voice was heard too rarely. To take one example, how solid are Gaita's thoughts about animal minds? Gaita's position is that there is no problem as to whether animals are sensate. He does not mean that