**Ideas and Society**

**Bendigo Writers’ Festival**

**Raimond Gaita – After Romulus**

**Robert Manne**

Thank you all for coming. Both Rai and I being naturally pessimistic, thought there’d be three people here. So it’s lovely to see everyone here. And I’d also like to say, because I’m involved with La Trobe University and we’ve been sponsoring the festival, what a wonderful festival I think it is and has been and I think the organisers have done Bendigo proud, and Bendigo is a fantastic city, the right size and I regret deeply living on the outskirts of Melbourne.

The occasion for this conversation is a new book which is a celebration of Raimond Gaita’s life and work and so I’d like to draw it to your attention for the many fine essays in it and a wonderful poem, by the man, Nick Drake, who wrote the screenplay for the film *Romulus My Father* and many other fine essays, including one by Alex Miller who was talking to Rai yesterday.

How shall I begin? Not everyone will be aware of Rai. He’s presently a Professorial Fellow at the University of Melbourne in Law and Humanities. He is an Emeritus Professor of Ethics at King’s College, London where he has been for a long time. You know, the reason I’m here is that Rai and I have been friends for a very long time and he’s the closest friend that I have from my time at university and to me, it’s been one of the great pleasures of my life. And I want to talk a bit about all sorts of things.

Rai I think has a quite unusual reputation. One part of it is in the area of philosophy and he … there are pockets of moral philosophy all over the world which regard him as one of the most significant thinkers of our time. But he’s also known, I think more broadly in Australian society and not only literary society as the author of *Romulus My Father* and so there are two kinds of audiences that Rai has, pretty unusually I think, to have such different kinds of readers and such different areas of admiration for his work. And there’s a story I always tell when I’m talking about Rai and it’s that I first encountered him at the University of Melbourne in the mid to late ‘60s, I can’t remember the exact year. We were both undergraduates, and I went to a seminar – there used to be very lively seminars and a very lively university life for undergraduates, and a relation between undergraduates and their teachers which I think is not nearly as much the case anymore.

Anyhow, it was either on phenomenology or existentialism – I’m now not entirely sure which, but there was a young, very flamboyant postgraduate, Patrick McCaughey who went on to be a gallery … a very distinguished director of art galleries in North America and Australia, and there was a lecturer in Ethics, Max Charlesworth and then there was Rai, who was an undergraduate at the time. And I was a serious young man and I had never experienced, in someone my own age, the depth, the purity of spirit, the intellectual seriousness that I saw in Rai. So I made it, I don’t know how it all happened, but I made it my desire to become friends with him, and we’ve remained friends throughout our lives.

Rai has recently written a book called *After Romulus*, which is reflections on aspects either that were left out of *Romulus My Father*, or aspects of turning the book into a film and many other things, and also an essay on his father’s great friend, Hora.

I’m going to call this *After Romulus*, but a different *After Romulus*. Many of you will know the story of his childhood, through *Romulus My Father*, and I’m going to try and take us, if we can do it, through Rai’s life since coming to university, from the time I’ve known him. Obviously, some of the questions will be to do with Rai’s philosophical viewpoint, the way he looks at the world as a philosopher, but the conversation I will inflect a bit towards politics, because as I have written about in this book, we have a friendship which is in part a political friendship and so I’m … there will be questions that will take us to the way Rai has looked at the world but also quite a lot of the questions will be looking towards our overlapping political life in the very long term.

So anyhow Rai, thank you very much for doing this. I’m going to get my daunting number of questions which we probably won’t get through, but begin with something you write about in the end of the Festschrift, which is, you went up to university after these extraordinary experiences you’d had as a child, and adolescent, and you came to study at the University of Melbourne, psychology. And you, at a certain point, changed to philosophy, and I found what you said about that very interesting and I know a little bit about it but I wondered if we could just briefly talk about why you first wanted to study psychology and why you made what was the life choice, philosophy?

**Raimond Gaita**

Well, Rob is my dearest friend and it’s wonderful to be doing this with him, and I can tell you, this is entirely unrehearsed. I don’t know what … well, I know one question, because he’s just asked it, but apart from that I have no idea, so you might find me pausing sometimes because I’ll just need to think about how to answer.

In my last year of school, at the end of my last year of school, I worked in a psychiatric hospital as a ward assistant and I did that because I had already decided at that stage that I wanted to study psychology, which I then did, when I went to university and in those days, you could do what’s called a double major, which meant effectively that after your first year when I did a number of subjects, that was the subject that you continued with until fourth year, if you did Honours. And I did it because I thought I would understand human beings by doing psychology and I’m sure the need to do that, not just understand human beings generally, but to understand human beings when they become mentally ill, was driven by my childhood, because my father was mentally ill, and so was my mother, psychotically ill, not just what some people in those days used to call a nervous breakdown.

But the psychology at the time was, in that department, was dominated by a school called Behaviourism, which I think to be a kind of intellectual folly of human history. When I think about how on earth people ever believed that you could understand human beings for example, by just looking at stimuli, that they were given and then the behavioural response to it, without making any reference to their inner life, and the reason they did this was obviously because they thought you could observe and measure the stimuli and measure the response. It was a kind of lunatic piece of scientism, it really was. I just can’t understand how ever it got off the ground. And there was a philosophical movement at the time which went hand in hand with it, called Logical Positivism, and I can’t understand how that got off the ground and thankfully, well, I don’t know, certainly the philosophy of logical positivism is long, long gone. I don’t know about psychology.

So I spent most of the time studying psychology, either electrocuting rats or electrocuting my friends.

**Robert Manne**

Sometimes the same.

**Raimond Gaita**

Get paid a little bit and so if they got the answer wrong, press the button and … it wasn’t by the way these very infamous experiments, where people will actually up the electrocution rate … the Milgram experiments they were called … to the point where the person doing it could reasonably have thought they might actually be killing the person. We didn’t do that.

And then … I was hostile to this and I started a student magazine with a couple of friends which was really successful. We were thrown out of the Psychology Students’ Society I might say, for what we wrote in that magazine. And then I had to write an essay in my second year, a long essay of 5,000 words and I remember called it very polemically *Man or Methodology*. And there was a brilliant lecturer in that department who gave lectures hostile to behaviouralism, a man called Frank Knopfelmacher, who some of you may know in other connections, and probably talk about him in those other connections. But he marked the essay, he was the only person competent to mark it, very philosophically oriented, and I remember he said to me, oh Gaita, you’re not a political psychologist are you? And I said, well I don’t know. He said, you should study philosophy. I said, I don’t want to study philosophy. I want to change to psychology and I’d already started with this magazine. And he said, never mind, I’ve made an appointment with you with the Professor of Philosophy. Just like that, you see. And I can’t remember, just say it was Wednesday, next Wednesday, make sure you attend it. And I did. And I went over to philosophy, and then became very interested in philosophical issues, about the nature of the scientific study of human beings. What kind of study was appropriate to the study of human beings.

**Robert Manne**

I’m going to take up, I think, when you particularly found the anchor of your philosophical position when you were in England and we’ll get to that. A lot of the … I went to a great session earlier today, and the idea of place was like Bendigo or Eaglehawk or whatever, but there’s also an idea of place which is the university at a particular time, the 1960s, and I want to talk a little bit about our period as undergraduates, because I live in a sort of fear that it’s going to be forgotten and I think it’s worth being remembered as a particular time and place.

I think in part we came together because we shared an odd political identity, which I called in this essay I wrote, left wing anti-communism. Do you agree with my description of that as your identity, but also, you wrote interestingly about part of that when you were writing about Hora, your father’s friend. So I wondered if you could say a little bit about … I won’t say how I got to that position, but how you got to the position, which was at that time you were either conservative and anti-communist, or you were a left winger and you had a complex relationship to the communist movement, but nevertheless you would never describe yourself as anti-communist, and we, I think, by third or fourth year were unusual in our identity. So, if you could say a little bit about that.

Raimond Gaita

Well, a man who helped raise me with my father, who was very, very dear to me, a second father. Indeed, when he died, I felt twice orphaned. Had been a refugee from Rumania, and so in my childhood he sometimes spoke of how terrible and murderous communist regimes in Europe and obviously in Russia, well, in the Soviet Bloc were. So obviously that had an influence on me and I also had a very, very strong sense, from Hora, not so much from my father, but Hora, who was much more politically interested in things, of his great gratitude for Australian, the freedoms of Australia and Australian democracy, so I came as it were, to university, with that already intact. But I was naturally inclined to the left, and indeed, in my first year I remember writing an article on Marx and alienation, because there was always a hope amongst people on the left at that time, that there could be a humane form of Marxism and people looked to the early Marx, to the 1848 manuscript. And I became attracted also to some people on the left, in fact, two of the people who were around the magazine called *Arena*, which then described itself as the Marxist journal of criticism and discussion, but I never, never dreamed that I would be attracted to communism, because I was instinctively hostile to it.

But I was brought to a kind of seriousness by Hora in my first year at university when he and I actually shared a house in Melbourne. We were both renting rooms there, and he used to come home … oh, it doesn’t matter. But I had a guitar and a songbook and I sang him … I went to his room where he was having a cup of tea and I thought I’d sing him … I said, could I play you something and he said, yes of course. He thought I would sing a cowboy song, as he called them, but in fact I sang a song about the scabs crawl in, the scabs crawl out, the scabs crawl under and all about. It was about strike-breakers. And he just lost his temper. He said, don’t you know what you’re doing? Don’t you know what butchers these people are? Don’t you know that the unions are infiltrated by them? Don’t you know the millions they butchered? Is this what university does to you? He said. And all the first questions were rhetorical. The last wasn’t. But he knew that I knew, because he told me. And he was the kind of man who had a very deep impression on me. He didn’t talk to me, although we were in the same house and I often ventured to his kitchen, to talk to him. He wouldn’t talk to me for a couple of months at least.

And I thought at first it was because … you know when you say, people won’t talk to you any more … but it wasn’t. It wasn’t that he had sort of, in a puritanical or moralistic way, turned his back on me. It was that he thought that the conversation we would want to have, whatever it might have been that we would trivially start off talking as he cut his little bit of sausage and drank his tea, could always turn into something serious, as it did then. By virtue of my saying, hey, do you want to hear this song? And I know this because of other aspects of his life. I realised that he felt that he couldn’t converse with me because if I had become so shallow that I was prepared to fellow travel with mass murderers, how could we ever have a serious conversation? And that had a very profound effect on me.

So though I always say I thought of myself as … I still do, actually … but always felt that I was on the left, I felt it was an anti-communist left and that’s how Rob and I, that was our common position, certainly by, I don’t know, third year.

**Robert Manne**

The other thing about that time, it would be hard for people here to believe that Rai and I were once young, and as a function of our youth, that we used to, I think, often talk or argue until three or four in the morning, smoking Drum, cigarettes, not marijuana, which I never … Drum tobacco. And my memory is that we mainly talked about the Vietnam war and its consequences and thought hard about it. For our generation, that was I think the most important issue and I’m not sure that anything since then has had the same kind of effect on a university undergraduate group as the Vietnam war had on our generation. Maybe climate change now might be doing that for the people now going through university.

I could say all sorts of things about that, or ask you all sorts of things, but perhaps the one that’s most important in the way your thought has developed, is I think, you at that time came to believe that two kinds of ethics – morality and politics, may in the end be irreconcilable and as I understand one aspect of your life’s work, it’s been trying to work all of that out. But could you say something about that and the relationship of Vietnam to that kind of problem in your thinking.

**Raimond Gaita**

The idea that these might be different roles of value was one that developed later. My first response to the Vietnam war was horror at the civilian casualties. At the time it was reported that there were two civilians killed for every combatant. I don’t know what the scholarly opinion now is about that. But that’s what we believed at the time. And so I was opposed to it on traditional grounds, that the means of prosecuting this war was unjust. I was unsure about the justice of the cause. I was never … I was, right from the beginning, hostile to Ho Chi Minh because I had read that he had massacred 30,000 peasants in land reforms. I wasn’t so sympathetic to the idea that it was just a nationalist struggle because I’d heard that he had a stranglehold on the national struggle through getting arms from communist China, so a lot of the people on the left thought it was just, essentially a civil war and they called a man I thought to be a mass murderer, and this always shocked me, affectionately Uncle Ho.

I could understand that people felt they had to support the north. That wasn’t hard for me to understand. I just couldn’t understand why they would call a mass murderer so affectionately Uncle Ho. And I’d been preoccupied with this question of … well, one of the reasons obviously, why so many civilians were being killed, apart from the recklessness of the American bombing campaign, but apart from that, one of the reasons was that the Viet Cong would, to quote Chairman Mao, was to move amongst the people as fish in the ocean. And it had become a problem for me and I still think about this a lot, how is it possible to fight a just war with an enemy that deliberately mingles with the civilian population, forcing you to choose between defeat or retreat, or into killing many, many civilians, foreseeably, unavoidably. So it’s hardly ever unavoidable.

I wasn’t going to talk about this but I’ll just give one example, because it’s like an elephant in the room, once we start talking about this. In Gaza, they now say four civilians are being killed for every combatant. And I don’t really want to talk much about Gaza, except to illustrate this point. I think there was no justification for Israel going into Gaza at all, because I think … I have a very simple-minded idea of it. You kill people only when you have to. And there was no necessity for this, because everybody knows that there is the occupation and so on, and nobody knows what would … where Israel would be now, had it been serious about dismantling the settlements. So the idea of what else could we do, I just don’t think applies. And I have no sympathy for Hamas either, who depend on any kind of political gain they get on civilians being killed. There’s no doubt about that. I’m not saying they don’t care about their people, but there’s no doubt too that they would get nothing whatsoever out of sending rockets into Israel, were it not the fact that many civilians were being killed.

So I find both Hamas and the Netanyahu government almost equally vile actually. But what I think, this is the hypothetical as it were, which connects to the theme about the Vietnam thing, suppose that Israel were to have withdrawn from the West Bank and dismantled its settlements and the Palestinians had sovereignty over East Jerusalem, supposing all that, and that the siege of Gaza had been lifted and so on, and supposing then that Hamas sent rockets and unlike this time, because of the defensive capacity of this Iron Dome, some of them actually landed, killing people in Tel Aviv and so on, in other cities, could anybody believe that Israel could then defend itself, without high numbers of civilian casualties in Gaza, if Hamas fought as it fought in that hypothetical, as it has done. I think the answer to that is, no. It’s obvious that there would be high numbers of civilian casualties.

So that is what preoccupied me, that in such a situation, where there is a genuine necessity, at least if you think it becomes necessary, actually to defend your population against rocket attacks, where there is a necessity, what do you do? When the only way you can defend yourself is to kill many, many civilians, or just acknowledge defeat. And that was what my problem then was and at a certain point in my thinking … at first I thought this was just a moral dilemma. At a certain point I began to think that politicians, one thing we just know with our politicians, that when they really do believe it’s necessary to protect a political community, but the only means available for that protection are morally terrible means, they will avail themselves of those means. Everybody knows that. It has always been so. And what I try to do is not defend it. What I try to do in my work is to try to capture what kind of responsibility this is, and I thought it to be different to moral responsibility. And so in some of my work, I’ve tried to express this, by saying, sometimes if she’s true to the very distinctive responsibilities of her vocation, a politician will say, morally I must not do this, but I must do it to be true to the responsibilities of my vocation. And so that’s how …

**Robert Manne**

And that’s actually very close to the things we spent years ago many hours, which I was much more practical and found it hard in a way to accept that. One of the things that I think was interesting about the time that we were at university, and I’ve only got really one or two more questions about that, is that at the time we were there, a thing called the Idea of the University, following Cardinal Newman, was a very live question, and we both spent a lot of time I think, talking about it, thinking about it, as did many people. I know one of the things that you’ve been preoccupied with, over the years, is the slow death of that question, not that there needs to be any agreed answer to it, but I think you felt it to be a really terrible thing that the question itself has died away.

Say a little bit about what’s happened, not so much to the university, as to what’s happened to us because we no longer think it’s worth asking what a university is.

**Raimond Gaita**

Well, the idea of a university or sometimes people just said the concept of a university, was people would just say things like, well, hang on, let’s go back to our time. One of the things that happened in our time was that it was the left that developed a very instrumental conception of the university. People forget this because they think it’s the right now, that has done that, or rationalist economics, or liberal economics, but in those days it was the left that thought that universities served the interests, some thought, of the revolution but others have just more generally, social justice. One of the things that struck me at the time was that there were academics there that said, no, there’s something matters … if this is the only idea you’ll have, you’ll lose something precious, which is that some forms of the academic life of the mind should be pursued for their intrinsic value. And I remember thinking even then in the sixties how lame those defences sounded, because there were sort of these clichés about the pursuit of excellence, or sometimes people would just talk about the great pleasures in the exercise of the powers of the mind. And I remember thinking then, if that’s all you’ve got to say, let’s go for the revolution, because that matters more.

Issues of social justice matter more than the pleasures you take in exercising your intelligence, doing philosophical problems or mathematical problems or whatever. So, that’s one aspect and it goes right back then … I remember thinking, how can we express adequately a conception of what we called the intrinsic value of a life, a mind that has some authority and depth, such that we can really say to people, look, this matters. We can’t force you to pay for it, that is, to fund people at university, but this is why it matters, and go there and I’ve always thought actually, this is not a matter of our rights. I’ve always thought that people, when they want government, as people now say, taxpayers, to encourage your study of philosophy, you’re a kind of mendicant to the community, who need much other things, need proper health care, need this … I always say to my students, for God’s sake be serious, there are people waiting for hip operations.

**Robert Manne**

You did have to mention that …

**Raimond Gaita**

They’re in pain, and people are dying because they’re not being seen enough. This was in England where the health service … So I’ve always felt that really we were mendicants and not people who can say we have a right to this or this.

So, but I thought if we’re going to be mendicants, we had to say something serious about what we were doing, in a non-instrumental way. And that was often … people thought the concept of a university implied that, always thought that. In those days, nobody thought you could have a serious concept of a university and at the same kind say, who cares about the intrinsic value of philosophy or of law or whatever you were studying.

Well, that now I think has died out.

**Robert Manne**

And with what consequences, do you think?

**Raimond Gaita**

Well, I think the consequence is that we’ve lost … I think a lot of these ideas go together. The idea of vocation I mentioned in the case of politics. In those days there was also the idea that an academic life could be pursued in the spirit of a vocation as opposed to let’s say, a career. And people sometimes, when they talked about intrinsic value, talked about a love of truth. Well, you could say, the concept of a vocation allows you to say, that this is an obligational intrinsic to an academic life, to care for the truth in that way. It’s absurd to say it of a professional career or something like that and I would say the same about politics actually – that that very serious appeal to political necessity depends on a serious conception of politics as a vocation, not just a career or a job or even a profession.

And I think what’s gone with that is any serious sense of collegiality in a university. People talk so readily about managing, about being managers of course and if you had a serious concept of the other people in the place as your colleagues, in the sense of the spirit binding your relationships is one of collegiality, nobody could dream of managing them. The professors I had when professors were heads of department and thought that though of course it wasn’t a democratic arrangement in those days, still felt that their relations to other people in the department, lecturers, senior lecturers etc etc, were collegial relations which required a certain kind of egalitarianism, at a certain point. And they would never have dreamed of thinking that they could manage the members of their department, or their faculty if they were deans, for example.

I suppose this is the most important thing I want to say, the whole language in which we talked about what it means to live the life of the mind and to teach students became so debased that it’s become impossible both for … it’s become very, very difficult for academics and students even to describe properly the treasures that ought to be, in the case of the students, their inheritance when they study in a university.

**Robert Manne**

Now, we both went off at that time, to England to study. You ended at Leeds and studied a doctorate. When I … I can’t … this sequence might be wrong, but when I re-acquainted, when we became very close again, when we were able to spend a lot of time together, and this is in a way the biggest question to do with your career as I understand it. Or your life, really and your philosophical journey. When I re-acquainted myself with you, something new had happened in your life, I think, and that was that Plato’s Socrates had got to you, and I think changed you.

Now, because time is limited I don’t want you to say too much, I know you could spend the rest of the conversation talking about that, but can you say something about that because those that are interested in your work I think, it kind of is significant.

**Raimond Gaita**

Yeah, well I hadn’t at all been interested in Plato when I was an undergraduate, partly because I was taught badly and I think most people who are taught Plato are taught badly.

**Robert Manne**

Is it still taught?

**Raimond Gaita**

Yeah, but it’s run through republican in a sort of clichéd way. And I was really lucky to end up, up at Leeds. I was going to go to Oxford and I had been accepted, but I was really bad at filling in forms.

**Robert Manne**

This is true.

**Raimond Gaita**

And I didn’t reply and then they said, oh, it’s too late, come next year but I didn’t want to stay. In fact I didn’t go to study moral philosophy, I went to study logic under … if I can just … this is an interesting story because it just shows how luck can come in to your life. I went to work with a logician at Leeds and he was a very distinguished logician, but when they were at seminars in England, I’m sure it’s here too now, it was often students who would organise the seminars, they’d invite philosophers from all over the country. I always thought a wonderful thing – the most distinguished philosophers in the country would come and talk to a students’ society, which of course members of staff would be present, for nothing better than a second class rail ticket and a cheap Indian … a meal in a cheap Indian restaurant, whereas in America they were taking fortunes for doing this sort of thing.

Anyway, at these seminars this man, I won’t name him, used to either fall asleep or ostentatiously read a newspaper, or both. And on this occasion a woman was giving a seminar on virtue and intelligence and saying the not very exciting thing that it doesn’t hurt to have a bit of intelligence, if you want to be virtuous. And this man, he started reading the newspaper and fell asleep …

**Robert Manne**

While reading the newspaper …

**Raimond Gaita**

And when she finished speaking, I asked the speaker, I said, look, there are many kinds of intelligence and I said, I want to ask you about this kind of failure of intelligence as I saw it. And not long before, some students had been shot in an American university, at Kent State, by national guardsmen and it was said that one of the young women who had been shot used to dance around and put flowers in the barrels of these … and I said to her, I think, from what I read about the circumstances, this showed a certain kind of failure of intelligence, but not at all the kind you had been talking about. How would you characterise it?

And this man woke up, and he said, that doesn’t excuse shooting. And I was so angry that he thought I could think that it would possibly excuse such a thing. I just lost my temper and said, you fall asleep, you wake up half cocked, and you accuse me of this. This was my supervisor.

**Robert Manne**

Not with wisest move.

**Raimond Gaita**

And I thought, that’s it. That’s it. I thought, I’m going to go off to France and be a mountain guide. That’s what I thought I might do anyway. But then someone showed me the work of one of the other professors in the department, and he’s now … I will name him … his name is Roy Holland, R F Holland, and I wasn’t at all interested in academic moral philosophy but I was interested in much the sort of things I’m interested in now. And I read Holland and I thought, I’ll ask him if I can write about these things, and would be supervise me? And if I get a PhD, that’s fine. If I don’t I’ll go to Chamonix and become a mountain guide. And he did. And he was … he had a very, very deep influence on me, not through much of what he said, he was a very shy man, stuttered in tutorials. I remember going to my first supervision and I’d given him something to read and he just said, oh, this is very, very difficult. I don’t know quite what I would say. But I went to his seminars, I went to his lectures and one of the lectures was on Plato’s Gorgias. Gorgias is the dialogue in which Socrates tells his utterly incredulous interlocutors, it’s better to suffer evil than it is to do it. And his interlocutors, they’re incredulous, because they know instinctively that what this means is that if someone is cunning enough to force you into defending yourself, by the only means that you have to defend yourself, and they actually say, and those you care for and love, that is, those to whom you have a responsibility, if the only means were evil means, then what are you going to do?

So, this became for me, the expression of those concerns.

**Robert Manne**

And that sentence has been kind of like the anchor of your life’s work, hasn’t it?

**Raimond Gaita**

Yeah, my first book *Good and Evil*, an absolute conception, was in a large part trying to elaborate what this meant, in ethics and in politics and in fact in *Romulus My Father*, if any of you have read it, I say of my father that like Socrates, he was a man who would rather suffer evil than to do evil. And so it’s an example of how a sheer accident can become so important in your life. And I’m sure if it hadn’t have been for Roy and his recommendations, I would never have got my job at King’s College, London either, and that was a great turning point in my life, where I met another really fine philosopher who influenced me greatly, Peter Winch.

**Robert Manne**

I look with alarm that there’s a clock in front of us and it says we have 19 minutes to go and I have many questions that I haven’t yet asked, but I’m going to cut through all sorts of things I was going to ask and … we connected in a very major way around 1990, or 1989 or 1990. I’d become, for my sins, editor of *Quadrant*, a magazine I now utterly despise, but it was … I was a different person and it was a different magazine I think in the 1990s, and I did something for which I was never forgiven by the inner group of *Quadrant*, which was, I invited Rai to write a monthly column, a strange thing for a philosopher to do in a way, and Rai, to my great pleasure, accepted. And it was called … I want to ask you a couple of questions about it. It seems to me when I think back on it, a lot of the columns became part of a book called *A Common Humanity* and I think it was one of the most important kind of moments in our intellectual culture that month after month, columns of length, and they had to be a certain length, deepened the public discourse.

There are a number of things I wanted to ask you about in this column called *Turnings of Attention*. One is that it was slightly paradoxical that you did it, because at that time you were very scathing about those philosophers who wrote, saying they could influence public affairs, and there was a journal – you were talking about this with Phillip Adams the other night, philosophy and public affairs, and so you had on the face of it, a real kind of reluctance to engage in that kind of stream of philosophy called practical affairs, and yet month after month, you were talking to the general public in a philosophical voice about the central issues of the day. Say a little bit about both your reluctance and why it was for a choice to write in a general magazine, not in a professional journal, about the public world.

**Raimond Gaita**

Well, my interest in philosophy and in fact this … I’ll explain in a minute. This became true of more or less the concerns in the *Quadrant* column. I don’t know if conceptual is the right way, but let’s say instead of being concerned particularly with what things are just to do, I was interested in what particular concept of justice was operative in our community, and say for example when I wrote for Rob’s *Quadrant*, and I would never have written for *Quadrant* if it were not for Rob. I mean, not only because he asked me, but because I trusted him utterly, completely. But, I mean, there and these were columns that got us both into some trouble …

**Robert Manne**

Which I want to ask about in a minute.

**Raimond Gaita**

Oh, all right, well, I wasn’t hostile to philosophers getting involved in writing in public, on public matters, I was hostile to what was called practical ethics and it was medical ethics, well at the time mostly medical ethics, and I was against the idea that philosophers could go out and create little MA courses where they would tell people there’s deontology, there’s teleology, there’s virtue ethics, now go off and sit on a hospital committee and decide whether you pull the plug out on somebody. I’m caricaturing just a little bit, but I’ve never believed that there could be moral experts. I never thought, I still don’t think, there’s any more reason to take reason of the philosopher who sits on the ethics committee when you’re discussing whether to pull somebody’s life support machine out or not, than the nurse who might be there. And in fact I often think the nurse might, with a little bit of luck, have a more grounded wisdom than a philosopher.

But be that as it may, it is important, and people who disagree with this – it’s very important to remember that the people who become what are called practical ethicists and sit on, or teach people who will sit on, these kinds of committees, are academics and what they’re like with depend on what the discipline is like and that will often depend on what the university is like. So if as a matter of fact, the university … if the universities are as they are now, as I think, institutions which undermine a kind of meditative reflectiveness, which is the only thing that can possibly encourage people to reflect seriously and slowly about the deep assumptions in their discipline, because that takes time and it’s not the sort of thing that will get you a grant, for example, or four publications a year.

So if people ask, is it a good thing for philosophers in general to be in public life, I think you should ask yourself … my answer would be, it depends on which … not only which individual philosophers obviously, but what the discipline is like, the philosophy is like in that culture, what the universities are like. I was opposed to, as I say, a sub-professional discipline. But I was never opposed to philosophers just writing in a magazine like *Quadrant* or *Arena* or whatever it is, not donning their professional hats and being particularly aware, if you’re a philosopher, that you can frighten people, because people think philosophers are really good at argument and all the rest of it, and in a way they are good at argument, but they can have a very, very narrow idea of what counts as a legitimate persuasion. Ever since Socrates, that’s been the big question.

When are you legitimately persuaded of something, or when for one reason or another, have you been conned, by a charismatic personality, because you’re sentimental or because … etc, etc. And philosophers, as a profession, I believe, for the most part, 90% of them have a very narrow conception of what counts as being legitimately persuaded, and in this book of essays, in a discussion with Anne Manne, I talk about that and talk about the *Quadrant* columns, which I called … Anne asked me why did I call them *Turnings of Attention* and my answer was basically that I wanted to turn attention from what I thought to be the false alternatives.

Do you remember how often I came back from England and we talked, and I kept saying to you, why do people think it has to be just this or that? And my friends used to say to me, oh, Rai’s been in Pommy land too long. He sits on the fence. You know, he’s always asking why this or that. And it wasn’t because I wanted some tepid position in between. And I thought the culture wars particularly had a very poisonous effect on this. And so I wanted to turn attention away from this set of false alternatives that were constantly being proposed.

**Robert Manne**

You said quite rightly that your columns got you, and me in different ways, into hot water. And in a way it was part of my parting of the way with the magazine, and the issue I think where we both annoyed the cultural warriors who were part of the old *Quadrant* community, was that we both at much the same time, and I think for the first time in both our cases, thought seriously about the indigenous question in Australia. I mean, as young people, we’d thought a lot about the Holocaust and Stalinism and all sorts of things, but it was in the ‘90s I think that both of us started writing and thinking seriously about indigenous questions.

Say a little bit about, you wrote important essays on Mabo, in *Turnings of Attention*, and also an important work on the stolen generations as it came to be called. Very briefly, because our time is running out and I have at least one very big question still to ask you.

**Raimond Gaita**

Well, I wrote on Mabo because … the controversy was on about it and I thought I’d actually read the judgment which for me, I’d never read a long legal judgment before. I was enormously impressed. And one of the things that struck me, and I’ll just be very brief about this, because I had already written about this kind of thing in *Good and Evil*, was that it was a mistake to think that racists are as they are because they have false empirical factual beliefs about the victims of their denigration, which they can’t see past because they’re psychologically motivated to hang on to them. And I thought you’d get a much better picture of what racism is like, if you try to imagine why you couldn’t see in a face that looked to you like a black and white minstrel show face – if you don’t know what it was like, it was white people painted themselves black, big whites in their eyes, big … and you could never see any real dignity of human feeling in a face that looked like that. And I thought you’d get a better understanding of racism if you think of it like that. That racists can’t see any depth in the inner lives of the people that they denigrate. And I tried to spell out how I thought this was basic to understanding the Mabo judgment and that it gave us a conception of justice, as different from the prevailing one, even in philosophy, which is that justice is basically a matter of redistributive justice – making sure that people have equal access to goods and opportunities. And I wanted to say, no, in this case you have something far deeper, and this is … and I said, I don’t call this justice. This is law. This is the courts. It’s not as if I’m inventing … This was a case of justice being done, and justice here consisted in, and I think quite literally, recognising the full humanity of our indigenous peoples, recognising that they too had inner lives as deep as we, and that what was done in their dispossession lacerated their souls.

So that was … it also gives you an indication in that those columns I was interested in exploring the big concepts like justice. But then the second thing was about the stolen generations, and when I heard about it, I hadn’t read the report, but I heard Mick Dodson, I just heard him say on television, it’s genocide. And I thought, oh, that’s stupid. The Holocaust, that’s genocide. How can you call this genocide? Anyway, so then I read the report and I read why Ronald Wilson who was the distinguished judge who was doing the report, said it was, because there’s a convention which I’d never read, called the 1948 Convention for the Prevention of Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, and there was no doubt whatsoever that according to this convention, which had been law for fifty years at that time, there’s no doubt that there was a case for saying it was genocide, according to that convention, to which Australia was a signatory.

So that was one big thing. But the other thing was that I could understand why people might think the convention is wrong, that it was drafted at a certain point in turbulent times and all the rest of it and that maybe the Holocaust should indeed be our paradigm for genocide and if it our paradigm for genocide, it might be hard to see how something in which there is not one single killing in the service of a genocidal intent, I’m not talking about the indigenous issue generally but in the case of the stolen generations, how that could be genocide.

So I spent a lot of time exploring just that. And over two columns I think, one was just trying to spell out what I thought was going on in the report, and the other addressing very specifically , I think it was called *Genocide and the Holocaust*, very specifically addressing those people who wanted to say, as even someone as distinguished as Inga Clendinnen, who wrote a really fine book called *Reading the Holocaust*, which won the New York Times book of the year, even someone like Inga would say, the concept of genocide is vacuous without murder. So I wanted to take that seriously, and on the other hand, say there’s a convention you ought to take seriously. And we both got abuse, abuse.

**Robert Manne**

It was a sort of the parting of the ways.

**Raimond Gaita**

It was just sheer abuse.

**Robert Manne**

This is a pitiless bit of technology in front of me which now says to my horror, five minutes, and I have one more question. Like the Socrates question, it is *the* question for Rai. I can’t remember what year it was that your father died, can you remind me?

**Raimond Gaita**

1996.

**Robert Manne**

1996, anyhow I was still editor of *Quadrant*, but I now know, coming to my end. Rai wrote a speech, a eulogy, which he just asked me very modestly whether I might publish in *Quadrant*. I read it and said, of course, it’s a wonderful thing and that led to *Romulus My Father*, which was the transformative event in your writerly life, I think.

The question, there’s only now four minutes, but anyhow my final question to you will be, a most difficult question, which is how far the story you tell in *Romulus*, of your childhood, has been at the centre always of your philosophical life? It’s a simple question but the answer can’t be simple, I don’t think.

**Raimond Gaita**

Well, I think it was. When I say in *Romulus My Father* that like Socrates, my father, believed it was better to suffer evil than to do it. I don’t think that it’s the adult philosopher imposing something that was false. So I think it goes the other way. If someone asks, how come you were so receptive to this thought, once it had been presented to you in something like its proper light by Roy Holland, and why have I spent so many years in one way or another unpacking it in this context and that context and another one, then I’m sure it was because of the way my father … it wasn’t just my father, it was his friend Hora, the lives they led. And I say in *Romulus* that nothing mattered more to them than to live decently, and when I say nothing, I really mean, nothing. And they were both very morally intense men, and when I became … my first years in academic life in King’s College, London, there was a particular philosopher, I won’t mention, it doesn’t matter, but moral intensity was treated with a certain condescension if not disdain, because urbanity was what people admired most.

Anyway, it wasn’t just a feature of English life, it became part of moral philosophy itself. Their very conception of what morality is, was infused by this tone of urbanity. I sometimes parodied it by saying that morality is an important thing of course, but in its place, you know. And this was foreign to me, from the way …

**Robert Manne**

The intensity of Hora and Romulus …

**Raimond Gaita**

Yeah, the intensity of my father and Hora, and in some other ways too. The academic life. I was a student in a life I enjoyed, it was very intellectually intense, an intense life. And we were morally intense about the nature of the intellectual life. It wasn’t just that there was moral intensity and both … my father and Hora were like that, and so it had a really fundamental effect on my sensibility as that developed and worked out in so many of my writings, whether they were more academic like *Good and Evil* and *Absolute Conception* or the essays in *After Romulus* where I go back and very self-consciously actually, take it back to my father and Hora. That is, take back the roots of my philosophical sensibility to them.

**Robert Manne**

Now I think I might ask one question. I think we should open the floor up a little bit to questions, if that’s all right. The audience have been wonderfully attentive and I’m sure there are questions that people here would like to ask. My final question is, you gave a lecture a few nights ago at the University of Melbourne and there I thought I saw that something new was going to preoccupy you, which is the thing that now preoccupies me, which is to put in simply, we are sleep-walking our way to the possible destruction of our earth, which seems to me a bigger theme than anything, including the Holocaust, that we’ve had to think about in our lives. Can you say a little bit about the question of climate change, which in other words, the potential destruction of the conditions of civilised life and also the destruction of many species in the longer term, where you think that might fit into your way of thinking.

**Raimond Gaita**

Well, I think this is true, that for both of us, we’ve been brought there, brought to this point by our children, and I have nothing whatsoever to contribute of a factual or empirical kind about this. I’m just not that kind of person. But what has preoccupied me and relatively recently I have to say, is that I share with Rob a pessimism about our political will to do something about climate change. I mean the world, in the world, the political will to do something before it’s too late. By which I mean, I don’t mean that nothing can be done, but nothing … but I fear nothing can be done unless authoritarian measures are adopted, because that will still be too much to … politicians will realise they can ‘t afford to tolerate this. That’s what worries me a lot, and especially since the issues about climate change cover every aspect of your life. It’s not just one part of your life.

So there’s that. I’ve also been preoccupied for a long time with the debasement of our political language and I mentioned to you before that I thought there are serious consequences for us in thinking about politics, that we’ve lost the idea of politics as a vocation. We just think of it as a career and a job. And I think what’s gone … this was the point of my lecture the other night, is, what’s gone on with that is … what we’ve lost with losing that is the serious concept of citizenship, which is why it’s now got to the point but this has been a long time coming, it’s not this government that has done it. But it’s been a long time coming and now we hear all the time, the responsibilities we owe to one another and politicians say to us, as taxpayers, and constantly in political context, where there are so many other dimensions of citizenship, which you would think … and expressions of responsibility to one another, which are far more important than the fact that we’re taxpayers. So, and this is what the lecture was about at Melbourne University, was how are we going to protect ourselves against the possibilities of an authoritarian climate change understandably triggered by the desperation over the catastrophic effects of climate change, when our language of citizenship and politics has become so debased?

So this was a lecture which is part of a series I run and the whole series is called *Whatever Happened to Democracy?*

**Robert Manne**

Now, we have the clock is now not only saying nought, but blinking very angrily at me, but I think we do have time for say two or three questions.

**Question:**

Rai, if you had your time over again, despite the various pains you’ve suffered over your personal journey, would you change a thing?

**Raimond Gaita**

Oh, no. Not a thing. I mean, I was so … I know people always say it was a hard childhood and all that, but the first thing I want to say is, there are people in this country who’ve suffered the most traumatic things and Melbourne’s a city of Holocaust survivors. So I think that has to be really put into perspective. That’s one thing.

The other thing is, despite the pain in my childhood, I was very lucky to have such good men look after me, and I was also very lucky, I think, although this is a psychologically fraught issue, I feel that my father’s response to my mother and his constantly compassionate response to her, prevented me … enabled me, as I put it somewhere, to love her without shame, even though I knew there was, in the community, people treated her with disdain because she didn’t look after me and so on. And because she was promiscuous. So in that respect I think I was incredibly lucky.

But there’s also something else, which is one of the reasons I wrote this essay in *After Romulus* and I called it *A Summer-Coloured Humanism* a tribute to Hora, I was just so lucky to grow up in the country. And also to have such an indulgent father who allowed me to ride his motor bike when I was eleven, all around the place, and his car when I was fifteen. It meant I ended up in the Children’s Court and all that. But still, that was just a wonderful sense of freedom.

And it’s strange, earlier today Anne Manne and Bill Garner were talking about place, a sense of place, and it was ironic that just this morning as we were coming, we have a house near where I grew up, I said to my wife, there’s something about today that takes me back to my childhood. I don’t know whether it was the wind, or what it was. Everybody has this experience, ironically it should have been today and then I hear people talking about just that sort of experience at a panel. But I would never, never change.

**Question:**

This might take a while but it picks up on your point about climate change and with apologies to Sigmund Bauman, does ethics stand a chance in Abbott’s politic of Team Australia?

**Raimond Gaita**

Well, no. I really abhor this government. But I think it’s really important to recognise that these kinds of problems I’ve been talking about go back a very, very long way and the only reason it seems to me is there’s the things I dislike about Abbott’s government are possible even, it’s because the language has become so base, and long before him. So I think that’s important. If it were just a question of Abbott’s government I wouldn’t worry. I mean, the government’s going to go some time. Maybe not next time but it will go. But I don’t think … we almost certainly have got that the language will become even more debased by the time it goes. And this is an interesting thing, when a certain way of speaking goes dead on us, even though you recognise that it’s going dead and you wish you could revive it, you can’t. This is the Humpty Dumpty lesson. You can’t make words mean what they … you can’t put life … it something that happens in a whole community, not a small group of people can do it.

So, even though I don’t want to hide the fact that I find … in fact I find this the worst government I have ever lived under. But still, it’s a malaise that goes a long way back and my point about the election, that there’ll be a time when he goes, reminds me of a very dear mutual friend we have, Martin Krygier, whose Boyer lectures … he gave a Boyer lecture a few years ago in which Martin kept saying, when you think about politics, you always have to remember the question, compared to what? And when you look at the world around us, it’s still a blessed country. It’s not hard to understand why many people still find it, compared to other places in the world, including places in Europe, paradise.

**Robert Manne**

Well,I’ll do something unconventional which is to thank you, the audience. You’ve been a wonderful audience.

And I was going to then say, and can you thank Rai.