



The Ethics of Ethics and Literature

Mark Kingwell

Is there something unseemly and wrong, perhaps even intolerably banal, about viewing novels as vehicles of moral instruction? A philosopher looks at this vexed, and venerable, problem in a new way.

In common with other debates that are at least as old as Plato is one that refuses to die a suitable philosophical death. Does reading fiction, being exposed to the fruits of aesthetic imagination, make you *as a person* better or worse? Each side has its distinguished advocates. Martha Nussbaum and Wayne Booth have argued, with great passion if not always matching precision, that reading fiction is an ethical pursuit, a matter of building empathy and character. Richard Posner, in his influential 1997 essay “Against Ethical Criticism,” calmly demolished most of their arguments: empathy can be felt for the devil as well as the divine; only sly special pleading makes a list of books one that will improve character, and then only if such character is in the mood for improving. To evaluate literature on ethical grounds is transparently to commit a categorical mistake, and one that can only do a disservice to the literature in the name of ethics. In the words of Helen Vendler, “Treating fictions as moral pep-pills or moral emetics is repugnant to anyone who realizes the complex psychological and moral motives of a work of art.”

The implication here is clear: anyone who indulges in the pep-pill theory is, in effect, a bad reader, insufficiently sophisticated with respect to the experience of art. Such readers may be

found in suburban reading groups, perhaps, complaining that they didn’t care for a novel because they found none of its characters likeable, but we true readers of fiction know better. There is a moral dimension in play here, Vendler suggests, but it is some kind of higher or a more refined, anyway distinct, notion of aesthetic morality, a morality that bonds writer and reader together in some manner irreducible to ethical instruction or, still more, parable-style bottom lines.

I am not unsympathetic to this line of objection; in fact, it strikes me as quite likely valid and needful, especially for challenging what might threaten to become a popular critical consensus in favor of edifying or uplifting narratives, the Oprah’s Book Club “some improving book” school of appreciation. A more recent, and more winning, version of the position can be found, for example, in Jenny Davidson’s delightful new book, *Reading Style: A Life in Sentences*. “I’ve always been bothered by the notion that literature is worth reading chiefly for what it teaches us about life,” runs the first sentence of this volume. “Of course we learn things about life from literature: it’s self-evident that a book may make its reader wiser or more philosophical in some measure consequent upon the nature of the book itself. . . . But there is also something intolerably banal about the idea that the main reward of

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ABOVE Detail of the Prudence statue, one of the four Cardinal Virtues, at the tomb of Louis XII and Anne de Bretagne, Basilica of Saint Denis, Paris, France.

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reading a novel by Leo Tolstoy or George Eliot should be my becoming a slightly better person.”

There are important nuances in this declaration. Davidson does not sharply distinguish, though one could (Poser does, for instance), between becoming ethically better and becoming wiser. To learn about life is not at all necessarily to become a better person, even slightly. In any event, the suggestion that improvement of whatever kind might be the main reason for reading literature is “intolerably banal.” Like Vendler, Davidson has another card to play: such banality about the reading experience misses a deeper, or higher, ethical point about immersion in fiction, “a form of intellectual play that seems to me ultimately as ethical as its lesson-driven counterpart.” She herself focuses on literary *style*, in particular as conveyed in fictive sentences (hence the book’s title). “By stripping literary language down to its constituent parts, I perversely gain a sense of transcendence, an emotional as well as intellectual liberation that comes by way of the most precise considerations of details of language.” It may not be immediately obvious what is ethical about this precision, except that, soon after, we find Davidson explaining why she feels “furious” with the sentimentality or paranoia of a given novel: “This is one of the ways in which morality enters into even the most stringently formalist ways of reading.”

Well, fine. One can appreciate this sort of aesthetic stringency as a kind of ethos, if not an ethical position in the way we philosophers would use the concept. And I for one appreciate the close attention that Davidson brings to works high and low, teasing out of their basic building blocks a subtle, sometimes intoxicating beauty. But after all, Davidson is a professor of literature, and I am a professor too, one who writes and teaches about art as well as ethical and political theory. We both did doctorates at Yale, for crying out loud! We are, I might say, two dandies gathered together in a finely spun secret book club of the mind. Of course we are going to feel a *rightness* beyond mere correctness in making aesthetic judgments, and a sense of *importance* to them too. It has grown unfashionable, except in certain quarters, to view style as a mark of character, but we dandies know better. (One thing I must dispute: Davidson avers that she is “vehemently” against the Oxford comma—and indeed, there is one clangingly miss-

ing from the book’s second sentence! She is clearly wrong about this, and it shows a shattering weakness of character. Perhaps she may be reformed over time.)



It seems to me, despite the various forms of self-congratulation one may indulge here, that this aesthetic-ethical flanking maneuver—or maybe, to switch metaphors, this kicking upstairs of the ethical stakes—does very little good in the overall dispute. It doesn’t really confront the main issue, which is whether, or how, fiction is intimately connected to our lives as ethical beings. I believe it is so connected, despite the Posner-Vendler-Davidson objections, and I want to devote the remainder of this essay to saying how.

Several years ago, I was approached by my dean to take on a new seminar course. The University of Toronto has almost 34,000 undergraduates just on its main downtown campus; there are also two suburban satellites with another 23,000 or so students, and some 15,000 graduate students. Large classes, especially in the first year, are an inevitability: I was myself, at this time, in the middle of more than a decade of teaching a 500-student intro philosophy course. The new seminar program would offer freshmen a credit where the class was capped at 25, guaranteeing at least one small-group experience in the first year, and preferably with a full faculty member. Even though the teaching would be on overload, I agreed enthusiastically to do it. The other reason for my enthusiasm: the seminar was called “Ethics and the Creative Imagination.” The idea was to broach ethical issues with fictional rather than philosophical texts as the primary source material.

Like many instructors in philosophy, especially intro, I have long included fictional material in my syllabuses: Jane Austen on virtue, say, or Doctorow’s *Ragtime* as a drama of demanded justice. Fiction brings otherwise dry material alive; it gives texture and urgency to the abstract arguments of Aristotle or Kant. This ethics seminar would be an extended exercise in this technique, and I chose the novels (and some films) for the course with great pleasure. Over the years I taught the course, we read, among others, Iris

Murdoch's *The Nice and the Good*, Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, Graham Greene's *The Quiet American*, Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth*, Henry James's *Washington Square*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, and Ian McEwan's *Saturday*.

I threw a few curves, or maybe sliders, to mix it up with those perhaps obvious choices: Evelyn Waugh's *Vile Bodies*, Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim*, and Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*. And because they are friends and were willing to visit the class—a nice bonus!—but also just because I love their work, I included novels by the outstanding Canadian writers Miriam Toews (*A Complicated Kindness*) and Russell Smith (*Girl Crazy*).

Anyone familiar with even a few of these novels can likely see the shape of the ensuing discussions. All the novels are from roughly the twentieth century, with some marginal spillage on either margin. They all, in one way or another, see individuals struggling with issues of identity and obligation. There is war, religion, family, friendship, love, aesthetic commitment, technological change, and despair. Each week we met, with great mutual pleasure, to discuss the issues as the characters acted them out.

At first, and really for quite some time, I enjoyed this thoroughly. It was, in addition to everything else, a nice break from more rigorous philosophical work. And the students, who often came from science programs in search of their humanities-breadth credit, were uniformly clever. One had the feeling that the seminar was making them more sensitive and nuanced readers, if not better people and not quite dandies in the sense sketched earlier. I never considered either of those outcomes—better moral agent, better disciple of style—at all likely, or even desirable, for the students. They had to decide on their own what the books, and the course, meant to them. But soon a different misgiving began to gnaw at me.

Was this way of going on, this subjection of novels to a rubric of ideas, however loose and in itself virtuous, a good thing? Was it ethical, in some important sense of that word, to treat novels as means to an end, rather than ends in themselves? This might sound pretentious, or perhaps deranged, but it began to seem to me that books, like persons, should not be instrumentalized. Some

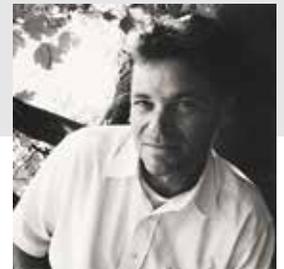
readers will recognize that the ends/means version of this unease is drawn from one articulation of Kant's categorical imperative. Was there, I thought, a duty to treat novels as *inherently inviolable*?

I don't mean, of course, that they can't be violated in all kinds of ways. One new twist in the development of this seminar is considering the issue of adapting a novel for a different medium, typically film: another series of aesthetic and ethical issues. I mean rather to ask if there is something unseemly and wrong, not just intolerably banal (to use Davidson's quite sufficiently condemning phrase), about viewing novels as vehicles of moral instruction. This, it strikes me, is a genuine point of conflict within many readers, even the voracious natural readers whose lives would be made darker, if not desperate, without another novel to open. And so the misgiving must be worked through, not sidestepped. Doing so, I hope to reach what may be a familiar conclusion in an unfamiliar way.



A good deal, maybe everything, turns on what we mean by “moral instruction.” Posner suggests that only someone holding a Socratic conception of moral psychology, where vice is simply a function of ignorance, can accept fiction as moral instruction. That is, the standard claims of enlarged empathy, knowledge of the other, and so on—bulwarks in the Nussbaum-Booth position—only run if acquiring such expanded consciousness necessarily entails improved action. Posner thinks it does not, because like Plato he knows that the soul is capable of self-deception, compartmentalization, weakness of the will, and a host of other avoidance mechanisms that make an expanded mind and a dark soul entirely compatible. Thus the proverbial music-loving Nazi; or, as Alexander Nehamas reminds us in his book on beauty, *Only a Promise of Happiness* (the title is drawn from a remark by Stendhal): “Beautiful villains, graceful outlaws, tasteful criminals, and elegant torturers are everywhere about us.” Indeed. Hannibal Lecter adored, just as I do, Glenn Gould's 1981 version of *The Goldberg Variations*.

The error here, I think, is to imagine that Plato has the last word on moral psychology. It is he, after all, who is forever linked to the position



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that fictive art has a discernible ethical effect, albeit in his case a negative one. (The issue is complicated by the fact that the allegedly deleterious effect of fiction is a function of Plato's metaphysics, whereby imitations are necessarily deceptive and impoverished of reality.) Let us suppose for a moment that our moral natures are not fixed, but also not as prone to self-torture as Plato sometimes suggests. Yes, we *can* ignore or bracket the lessons of experience, whether in real life or as depicted in vivid aesthetic forms, but for the most part we do not. That is, we take seriously what we see and feel, and it affects how we see ourselves and the world. Even the most hardened criminal, Adam Smith averred in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, is not immune to the tug of empathy, the experience of another person's suffering.

In itself, I grant, this is thin soup; and the critics are right to note that there is no *necessary* entailment here. But the link between fiction and empathy is more than adventitious. Novels, at least those with the kind of supple, free-indirect narration that are the high-water marks of the realist tradition, offer an extended reply to the epistemological skeptic. On Cartesian principles, we cannot directly know the mind of another; but words printed on a page give us the best possible chance at coming close, better even than interacting with others. "We see person-like shapes all around us," Nussbaum writes, "but how do we relate to them? . . . What storytelling in childhood teaches us to do is to ask questions about the life behind the mask." And just as with other persons, reading novels as morally instructive is part of what it means to take them seriously, to treat them as ends in themselves. This is not an exclusive goal—we don't judge people just on their moral instructiveness, either—but it *is* an essential part of fiction's peculiar public-private contract.

Moral instruction is thus much more like a conversation than it is like an algorithm. On the Posner view, it would have to be granted—maybe he favors this conclusion—that works of ethical theory have no more ethical bearing on the people who read them than do novels. And of course it is a truism among philosophers that experts in ethical theory are hardly among the most reliably virtuous of people. My own view is that this is correct, if by bearing we mean that they will

directly change behavior. No, they won't. But reading Kant on duty or Mill on general happiness gives us insight into our moral worlds. They excite the imagination as well as reason. They are no more dispensable from the general discourse of how to live than the Ten Commandments or the Four Noble Truths. We may call such enumerations lessons or imperatives or rules, but they are really narratives of interior possibility.

So much more so, then, the great works of fiction. Not because they lay out coherent systems of effects, nor because reading them will make you or me behave better now, or tomorrow, or next week; but because this is one of the essential ways by which we humans reflect on our own possibilities—and failures. Attempts at strict formalism aside, a novel really is different from a sculpture or a painting. Reading a novel is the blessed burden of consciousness in action, two hopeful-monster souls communing via text, the evolutionary miracle of language enjoying one of its highest expressions. "Without good examples such as preserved in literature," a young character muses in the course of Sebastian Faulks's 2007 novel *Engleby*, "there would be nothing to live up to, no sense of transcendence or of our lives beyond the Hobbesian." *Engleby* will soon murder this same character, a twenty-year-old Cambridge undergraduate: the novel is an elegant, appalling, and finally moving first-person narrative by a casually erudite psychopath who is fastidious about grammar and literary style.

Two concepts, somewhat surprising ones, gather all these thoughts together: (1) play and (2) cliché. As Martin Amis has said, the war on cliché is not just a matter of stylistic vigilance, for there are also clichés of both the mind and the heart. The last of these is the most serious: falling into moral inattention. Great literature makes new skirmishes along all three fronts of this never-ending war. But it does so, even when utterly serious, using the free play of images, characters, and ideas. We might say, with Aristotle, that this contemplative mode of being is, rather than simple ethical action, the most divine part of ourselves, that which underwrites everything else. What could be more serious than that?

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