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Narrative, Knowledge and Moral Character in Art and Literature

Abstract: Although the term 'narrative' has been subject to very loose usage, it should be clear that scientific theories cannot be considered as such in the same sense as literary and artistic works. But this clearly calls the latter into serious epistemic question. On the one hand, we are often drawn to saying that agents have learned or come to know (morally or otherwise) something from literary or other artistic fictions; on the other hand, their fictional status seems to preclude regarding this as knowledge. Drawing on insights from Plato's Socratic and other dialogues, this paper argues that such learning from art and literature should be deemed genuine knowledge of an epistemically uncontroversial kind.

Keywords: narrative, knowledge, moral character, art, literature

Knowledge and narrative

Despite arguments to the contrary of emotivists and sentimentalists, morality is clearly a function of rationality and not available to non-human creatures. Socrates, arguably the founder of western philosophy, identified (moral) virtue with knowledge and his great pupil Plato proceeded to give a highly influential – though not incontestable (Gettier, 1967) – account of knowledge as *justified true belief* (Plato, 1961b). On this view, knowledge needs to satisfy three conditions. First, it assumes belief: we could not say that someone knows that p, but does not believe it.

Secondly, while it is quite possible to believe what is false, beliefs need to be true in order to qualify as knowledge: one could not be said to know a falsehood. But thirdly, insofar as knowing in any substantial sense would seem to need some *understanding* of why what is known is so, it would also appear to require what Plato called a *logos* or justification.

Leaving aside (for the moment) more particular doubts about any prospects of moral knowledge, the most serious challenge to knowledge as such rests on scepticism regarding objective truth. In his dialogue *Theaetetus*, Plato addressed this challenge in the form of the sophist Protagoras' doctrine that 'man is the measure of all things' (Plato, 1961b). By this, Protagoras seems to have meant that since all perception is subjective and varies from person to person, there can be no independent way of resolving perceptual disagreements, so that any claims to objective (mind-independent) knowledge and truth are virtually idle or meaningless. In perhaps the most compelling philosophical 'knock-down' argument of all time, however, Plato (or Socrates) points out that Protagoras' argument is inherently paradoxical. The only reason we might hold that there cannot be objective truth on which to ground knowledge is the truth of this claim. But if the claim is true, then it is *ipso facto* false – precisely because, while denying that there can be objective truths, it seems to be itself an instance of such. And, of course, if the claim is false we have no reason to believe it either. For Plato, truth is therefore an ineradicable presupposition of any and all rational or meaningful human discourse and enquiry.

Despite this, the spectre of general philosophical scepticism concerning the possibility of grounding knowledge in some mind-independent conception of truth has continued to haunt philosophy – and, indeed, has been (at least in the present view) a major scourge of the last two centuries. The main drift in this direction takes off with the response to Kant of major nineteenth century German idealists, notably G. W. F. Hegel. Essentially, idealists reject Kant's 'noumenon' – construed as the objective basis of reality underpinning sensible experience — as a conceptually redundant notion. If there can be no knowledge of things in themselves beyond how they appear to us, then the only knowledge to which we may lay claim is that of appearances as variably interpreted by

human observers at different times and places. However, unlike earlier empirical idealism, nineteenth century idealists hold that human understanding of the world is not a matter of personal construction, but of social or cultural inheritance: individual agents come to believe or to claim to know what the particular social constituencies into which they have been initiated have taught them to hold. Still, what is denied is the possibility of any 'mind-independent' knowledge of reality as it is 'in itself' beyond such particular social perspectives: there cannot be, as it has been said, any 'view from nowhere' (Nagel, 1989).

It would be difficult to overstate the influence of Hegelian and other idealism or anti-realism on nineteenth and twentieth century western philosophy in both its main Anglo-American and continental European traditions. Hegelian idealism had immediate impact on Marxism and American pragmatism, the first of which reduces human knowledge to locally dominant ideology and the second of which measures it in terms of its practical utility for human problem solving. In turn, Marxism (combined with no less constructivist phenomenology and psychoanalysis) has had a formative influence on post-structuralism, post-modernism and the neo-idealism of recent British and north American moral and social theorists – for example, MacIntyre (1981) and Taylor (1989, 2007) – and pragmatism profoundly shaped the post-empiricist constructivism of modern analytical philosophy of science (into which Wittgenstein's later philosophy of meaning as use is also problematically mixed).

For present purposes, however, the main point is that attention effectively shifts from Plato's truth criterion of knowledge to his *logos* or justification condition: the key epistemic question is no longer that of whether this or that knowledge claim is true, but of the hermeneutical or interpretative role that any such claim plays in explaining or accounting for human social, cultural or practical life and conduct. This is perhaps nowhere more conspicuous than in the preference of post-structuralist or post-modern (anti-theoretical or 'post-truth') philosophy for characterising knowledge, not as descriptive of a humanly independent reality, but in terms of (inevitably contestable) stories or *narratives* (or, in the native language of J-F. Lyotard (1984) – a prominent spokesman for this view –

as *recits*). On this view, all forms of human discourse – scientific, historical, religious, moral, literary – are best regarded as locally constructed stories that are more or less meaningful or useful for this or that identity-sustaining or practical human purpose. On this view, we might say that the texts that support (respectively) creationism and evolutionary theory in recent bitter US controversies are merely rival narratives between which one is free to choose according to conviction or taste.

While this is admittedly a broad-brush picture of latter day epistemological developments, there can be little doubt that much highly influential philosophical theorising has moved in a direction from which conclusions of this sort are derivable. In the present view, however, such drift is no less plainly epistemically confused, indiscriminate and unhelpful. Clearly, evolutionary theory – and science in general – is not at all narrative in anything like the sense of creative literature in which we might well include the great creation myths of past cultural inheritance. Indeed, it is evidently no less mistaken to regard evolutionary theory as a narrative in this sense, than it is to take the stories of the Book of *Genesis* – or other pre-modern texts – as accounts of the actual (factual) historical origins of the world and human life. Here, it is significant that evolutionary theory stands or falls – that is, it might be *falsified* if never (at least according to modern philosophy of science) proved finally true – by appeal to empirical tests and evidence, whereas it would be seriously wrongheaded to try to provide such evidence of God's agency in past or present human or worldly affairs. In brief, evolutionary and other science aims to discover evidence-based knowledge of an objective mind-independent reality, but religious texts do not.

But isn't this just to miss the point of what idealists, anti-realists and narrative mongers from the Greek sophists onwards have argued: that there simply is no mind-independent evidence or 'fact' upon which knowledge might be based; precisely, that there can be no objective Platonic truth condition of knowledge? For such anti-realists, the so-called facts of ordinary observation or scientific theory are no less subjective – or, at least, socially constructed – than anything that human imagination might invent. But this is clearly confusion on a large scale. In the first place,

all normal humans do commonly distinguish between what actually exists or materially occurs from fictions, dreams and illusions, and life would be impossible if they did not. On a more philosophical or theoretical level, however, there seems here to be serious muddle between familiar but rather different senses of knowledge. In this regard, we clearly refer to *both* the deliverances of sense perception and the theories that purport to explain these as knowledge. Thus, we may say that we know *that* caterpillars turn into butterflies or tadpoles into frogs and also claim biological knowledge of *why* this is so.

We can have clear knowledge of the facts, but be mistaken about our explanations. Our theories of why caterpillars and tadpoles metamorphose may well be quite erroneous – in which case we really do not *know* why such events occur – and, indeed, it is an inherent feature of the drift of explanation that we may never have fixed and final knowledge of the ‘whys’ of things. This is the basic truth of familiar non-realist claims that we do not or cannot have incorrigible knowledge of things. But that is far from saying that we do not or cannot have knowledge of how things are in the world. On the contrary, it is the very purpose of theoretical knowledge to explain why the world is actually as it is: for example, it is precisely the task of biological explanations to help us understand the plain fact that tadpoles turn into frogs. Of course, we can also be wrong about how the world is: but this is quite another sort of mistake from failure to explain why or how it is as it is, and there are more straightforward and familiar procedures whereby such perceptual mistakes may be corrected. But that tadpoles do turn into frogs is something we need not generally doubt.

The prospects of moral knowledge

Thus, despite liability to (in both cases corrigible) human error about how things actually are and why they are so, there can plainly be accuracy in the former case and better and worse explanation in the second – and greater correctness and objectivity in both these respects is the goal towards which scientific knowledge aims. In that sense, if it is at all useful

to refer to scientific theories as narratives, they are clearly not so in anything like the same sense as the great imaginative output of other human literary culture – such as, for example, the stories of Bible and Shakespeare. In this regard, it is common to distinguish such literatures from the findings of science as ‘fictions’. Indeed, far from being narrative mongers about scientific knowledge, many if not most people today – outside, that is, of academic philosophy seminars – are probably inclined to disregard anything other than the evidence-based findings of empirical science as credible sources of genuine knowledge. It may well be the prevailing contemporary view – at least in western economically developed liberal democracies – that while science is a reliable source of objective knowledge, most or all other cultural narratives of religion, art and literature are not.

Generally, indeed, the problem here might be said to be that of about *what* such narratives could or might count as knowledge. Essentially, this issue would appear to face two key difficulties. The first is precisely that of the epistemic role of narratives that are not directly descriptive of (empirical) reality. Leaving aside all implausible claims that the religious texts of *Genesis* or the *Mahabharata* are true accounts of historical events, it would probably be agreed by most educated people that the stories of Ovid or the plays of Shakespeare are ancient myths or imaginative fictions that do not describe any actual past events. However, the most obvious line of reply to this objection – that such myths and stories, while not literally true, are nevertheless sources of significant moral, spiritual or religious knowledge or understanding – is liable to the no less common modern objection that any such ‘understanding’ can only be ‘normative’ and/or locally constructed and therefore lack the impersonal and universal truth of genuine scientific knowledge. While some may believe that the stories of *Genesis* enshrine significant moral or spiritual truths, such truth is bound to be contested and must therefore fall well short of anything much worth calling knowledge.

Taking the former issue first, the grammatical, semantic and aesthetic aspects of non-empirical human discourses are clearly highly complex and perennial sources of conceptual, ethical and practical confusion.

While all human language – descriptive no less than non-descriptive – is rich in non-literal and figurative idioms and tropes of analogy, simile, metaphor, allegory and parable, such usage looms especially large in the imaginative constructs of culturally formative narratives (myth, legend, folk-tale and so on) and in the more obvious fictions of poets, dramatists and novelists. But insofar as such devices are general features of human language, it is not always easy to tell whether a given discourse is engaged in moral or spiritual instruction, science or history (if not just plain entertainment) – or some complex mixture of these. Thus, for example, while (educated) modern people would generally agree that Greek myths, the Arthurian legends and Milton's *Paradise Lost* are (at least mostly) human fictions, there is less evident consensus (at least in cultures of Christian heritage) about *Genesis*, the royal 'histories' of *Kings* and the (often factually inconsistent) events recounted in the Christian gospels.

Generally, however, the grammatical drift of discourses and narratives not primarily concerned with direct description of empirical reality is subjunctive, conditional or hypothetical more than indicative: it is closer to what is called, in the jargon of philosophers, 'counterfactual' usage. Precisely, such narratives either explicitly or implicitly take the form 'what if...' or 'suppose that this was the case...' and invite – again either explicitly or implicitly – hearers or readers to consider or explore the implications or consequences of so supposing. Moreover, there is usually a normative dimension to such non-empirical discourses and narratives in which moral imperatives are invariably implicated. So, a given narrative of this kind may move from supposing that thus and so is the case, to a consideration of the consequences that might be expected to follow from such supposed actions or events to some (again either explicit or implicit) moral or spiritual evaluation of both action and consequences.

We may turn to the Christian gospels for a fairly good example of this. For while there may still be much modern disagreement about whether the events of the life of Christ related by the gospels are history, myth or legend, few would disagree that the parables attributed to Jesus are stories of non-literal meaning or import. One of the most famous and popular of Jesus' parables is the story of the prodigal son in which a young man

leaves home and squanders his inheritance in 'riotous living' returning to his family home only when his money has run out and he is starving. On his return, he is joyfully welcomed by his father ('For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found'), but met with hostility and resentment by his older brother who had remained faithfully working for his father on the family estate. While in Luke's gospel this parable is apparently generally related by Jesus to his disciples and to hostile Pharisees, its meaning – and judgement on the elder begrudging son – is evident enough.

However, in Franco Zeffirelli's notable TV adaptation of the gospel story entitled *Jesus of Nazareth* (Zeffirelli, 1977): co-written with the distinguished British novelist Anthony Burgess), Jesus is depicted as telling this story to the tax-collector Matthew (soon to become a disciple of Jesus) and his riotous friends at the latter's home to which he has been (frivolously) invited. The fisherman Simon (soon to be renamed Peter) has refused to enter the home of the sinner Matthew, but eavesdrops on the parable from the doorway. As Jesus concludes the story, it dawns on Matthew and Peter that the story is about (both of) *them*: Matthew is the prodigal younger son and Simon Peter his pharisaical elder brother. The scene concludes with Peter tearfully embracing Matthew with the words 'I am such a stupid man'. But the point of this almost certainly made-up story is clear enough: all men (people) are in one way or another sinners who have strayed from the right path: and all are also prone to cast the first stone at others; to point to the speck in the eye of their neighbour, whilst ignoring the beams in their own.

All the same, it may well be said that the point of this story is epistemically questionable. In the famous (or notorious) judgement of David Hume (1985), since it does not refer to or describe any observable matter of fact (or express any necessarily related ideas), it hardly amounts to knowledge or truth in any robust sense. Moreover, even if it did, it is still not clear how it might ground the plainly normative conclusions that it seems intended to support. Insofar as the implied normative judgement of the gospel story – that it is generally proper to be non-judgemental and forgiving of others – it is evidently not beyond contest or controversy.

The story undoubtedly carries a good deal of ideological (Christian) baggage and one can certainly envisage some non-Christians – for example, Nietzscheans – taking considerable exception to any such morality as servile and spineless. But even from the perspective of secular sociological morality, it might seem reasonable to hold that morality is no more than a system of socially constructed rules for the effective functioning of human social orders. In this light, private or public censure of irresponsible behaviour might well seem indispensable for reinforcing such rules. But the key point is that it is hard to see how any essentially contestable normative judgement might be grounded in evidence-based knowledge or truth (rather than, say, local taste or convenience) as such.

A Platonic view of moral character and knowledge

Much modern ethics has followed the Humean formulation of the problem of knowledge and morality. Human reason may have knowledge of the world insofar as it can correctly distinguish truth from falsehood: but morality belongs to the sphere of action – which has its source in desire and will rather than reason – and no amount of factual knowledge can logically determine for agents what they should will or desire. For Hume, the epistemic deliverances of sense and reason are entirely limited to serving or satisfying the instrumental purposes of essentially non-rational desire. However, the first ever serious philosophical attempt to address this issue is that of Plato in his Socratic and other dialogues. Under the spell of Socrates, Plato is evidently persuaded that morality or virtue as exhibited in justice is rooted in knowledge as the grasp of truth, but he also worries about what kind of knowledge this could be. Thus, for example, many of the early Socratic dialogues consider and reject the idea that it is possible to construe the knowledge of (moral) virtue on the models of theoretical or scientific knowledge (of, say, medicine) or practical expertise (of, say, navigating or boat-building).

In Plato's *Symposium* (1961a), however, this issue is directly addressed in the context of a discussion of the nature of human desire, love or

attachment. In terms somewhat problematic to modern moral sensibilities, the *Symposium* focuses largely on the character of love and desire in the realm of local (ancient Greek) homo-erotic affairs between younger and older more experienced men. Perhaps conceding to the temper and conventions of the time, Plato's familiar mouthpiece Socrates does not directly question or condemn such associations (though one may suspect, from what seems said of Socrates elsewhere in the dialogues, that he may have taken a rather dim view of them), but apparently focuses more on the aesthetics of such relationships. Allegedly reporting the views of the mysterious priestess Diotima – with whom he claims to have had prior discussion on the topic of love and desire – there is general Socratic-Platonic agreement that human attraction has its basis in natural appetite and that human agents consider to be beautiful those things to which they are sensually drawn. To this extent, sexual attraction is clearly one basis for ascriptions of beauty.

Still, on the view he ascribes to Diotima, such attractions and/or the associations which are based upon them are not of equal merit – or to be considered equally beautiful. Indeed, those associations between older and younger men that are based only on raw animal attraction need to be considered as very inferior to those in which there is mutual personal respect and in which the characters of youths are morally improved by those of older, wiser and more experienced men. At this point, it seems fairly clear that Socrates is precisely defending the sort of educational relationship that he himself sought with his younger contemporaries and which often seems to have been crudely misconstrued by others in his circle. However, he is also more significantly arguing for a seriously revised account of beauty as the object of aesthetic sensibility. Relationships grounded in the positive moral influence of older over younger characters have to be regarded as more beautiful than those driven by naked lust, precisely because they are *morally* superior.

In short, entirely consistent with larger Platonic metaphysics, beauty is not a 'natural' deliverance of 'sensible' experience, but a rational or 'intelligible' ideal which is also subject to further development and refinement in the light of ongoing reflection. At the early stages of development,

under the delusive impact of sense experience, human agents are attracted to and take to be beautiful experiences and actions that are not really so, insofar as outward glamorous appearances all too often conceal or belie what is morally suspect. Indeed, such Platonic aesthetics might be supported by reflection on the time-honoured human art of portrait painting. Much past portrait painting flourished under the patronage of the rich and privileged who desired painters to depict them in the most glamorous possible light – and this is precisely what many such artists did. However, those we invariably regard as the greater portrait painters more often sought to depict the true – often less than flattering – characters of those they painted as precisely vain, arrogant or cruel. Indeed, a great literary work that might be said to express Platonic aesthetics to perfection is Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (Wilde, 2012) in which the main character's portrait becomes increasingly grotesque as his conduct in life is more and more depraved.

Hence, to whatever extent this view may seem at odds with looser popular usage, a Dorian Gray could not be considered beautiful, even if his admirers considered him to be so. On the Platonic view, serious aesthetic judgement has an indispensable moral dimension and for those – or the associations to which they are party – to be considered beautiful or admirable, they would need to possess something approximating to good or virtuous character. But now, what is moral or virtuous character? Precisely, for Socrates (and largely also for Plato), in order to have virtue one must possess *knowledge*. So, back to square one, we need an answer to the question of what such knowledge might be or look like. In the terms of previous discussion of this topic, in what respects would any knowledge presupposed to moral virtue resemble or be related to the more familiar senses of knowledge as justified true belief or observable fact so far recognised in the present paper?

On the one hand, as Plato rightly appreciates in the 'divided-line' epistemology of his *Republic*, such knowledge is of a significantly different logical order from that of empirical theory and inherently normative to the extent of requiring a distinctive kind of moral, though no less objective, evaluation. But, on the other hand, with all charitable allowance for

Plato's antiquated epistemology (according to which no genuine knowledge can be grounded in the uncertain deliverances of empirical experience), the knowledge required for the wisdom of Socratic virtue – and hence for the cultivation of such particular virtues as temperance, courage, justice and respect for others – may be considered no less empirically factual than the knowledge of scientific theory. On the Socratic-Platonic view, what is epistemically needed for clear apprehension of virtue, justice or 'the good' is significant *freedom* from various (empirically and socially conditioned) personal delusions or prejudices about oneself and others, and from consequent *ignorance* of the *truth* of such matters. It is a general and persistent theme of Plato's work – from Socratic dialogues such as *Symposium* and *Republic* to such later post-Socratic dialogues as *Laws* – that the major obstacle to the wisdom of virtue is the vanity and prejudice to which the self or *ego* is prone in the Platonic cave of illusory sensible appearance (Carr, 2016).

The key present point is that for Socrates and Plato morality is essentially connected to the truth of knowledge or wisdom through the idea of virtuous *character*: virtuous character – which needs also to be beautiful or admirable character – is the site of that knowledge and truth that sets us free from the Platonic cave of vanity and delusion. The key difference between Plato and reductive empiricists such as David Hume is that the reason which affords access to knowledge of reality and truth is not merely an instrument for the satisfaction of basically animal needs and desires, but a defining feature of human – as distinct from non-human animal – desire. What it is to be a *human* person or 'soul' – as distinct from some beast of the field – is to have access to that Platonic 'intelligible' world in the light of which the false values of the sensible world may be weighed in the balance and found wanting. Moreover, it is largely this conception of the human person or soul that is implicit in the words of the founder of Christianity when He replies to his Roman interrogator that His kingdom is not of this world and His mission is to testify to the truth; and this is just the conception of human soul that Pilate calls into doubt when he asks: 'what is truth'? But the other-worldly truth to which Christ testifies may be considered plain old-fashioned factual truth

none-the-less: Matthew and Peter are both plainly mistaken in their estimates of themselves as well as of each other and need – for the moral and spiritual good of their souls – to get or see things right.

To elaborate further on this Platonic (and no less evidently Christian) conception of human soul or personhood, while human desire has inevitable origins in the sensible attractions of that part of human nature that is sensual, there is never a moment – at least in the development of the human child beyond first language acquisition – when it is *entirely* sensual and devoid of the powers of critical reflection and evaluation that define any and all serious human growth and progress. From this viewpoint, as already seen from Plato's *Symposium*, the human child or youth is not forever stuck with the initial attractions of childhood and youth, but is able – with further reflection and the good influence of elders or peers – to put away childish things for adult and higher purposes. So, again, insofar as beauty is the proper (logical) object of aesthetic contemplation, it is more than what is merely sensually attractive and is subject to critical re-evaluation in the light of the further knowledge and understanding that human education makes possible. A Dorian Gray can no longer be the object of attraction we formerly took him to be once we have sight of his corrupted soul in the portrait.

But isn't this view that our knowledge of beauty or of our own and other's characters is never complete and always liable to continual re-assessment and re-evaluation much the same as what non-realists or idealists claim about the essential inconclusiveness of human enquiry? It is evidently not the same. Aside from the fact that this view is not (like non-realism) sceptical about the prospect in principle of knowledge of reality – on the contrary, it holds that there is a truth of things regarding which we are humanly prone to be deluded – our moral mistakes are not inadequate theoretical explanations of how things are, but more basic failures to *perceive* how things are through the fog of our own self-deception. They are less like failures to understand fully why tadpoles metamorphose into frogs and more like refusals to accept that this creature is a frog (and not, one might say, a prince). When Peter and Matthew recognise that they are the main characters in the parable of the prodigal son,

they come to see themselves for what they *really* are: in the case of Matthew, not the clever, successful and cynical manipulator and exploiter of his inferior and despised brethren, but a miserable sinner; in Peter's case, not the righteous judge of others, but the self-righteous, hypocritical and resentful pharisee.

Understanding character through narrative

By way of brief rehearsal of the story so far, we began by re-affirming a time-honoured philosophical view that moral agency is fundamentally an aspect of rational human nature: creatures without rationality are incapable of the kind of reason-responsiveness and agent responsibility required for moral life. However, while we have also resisted the no less time-honoured scepticism concerning the possibility of knowledge as such – arguing specifically against non-realist and idealist claims that the findings of empirical science are of no greater epistemic objectivity than other human narratives – we have also basically acceded to the common ethical complaint that the normative knowledge and understanding of moral experience is not to be sought or found via empirical scientific enquiry. Nevertheless, following Socrates and Plato, we have continued to insist that agents who may have formerly behaved badly through ignorance, vanity or self-deception, but who have now seen the error of their ways, have acquired something like genuine moral knowledge and understanding. The question now, however, is that if such appreciation does require justification or explanation in the usual manner of knowledge, and this is not obviously best available through empirical scientific enquiry, from what source is it derivable?

In fact, it would appear that this question was fairly well answered by the end of the last section. In Zeffirelli's film *Jesus of Nazareth*, Matthew and Peter learn morally – more precisely they acquire genuine moral knowledge and understanding – by hearing and grasping the normative import of Jesus' parable of the prodigal son. This parable gives hearing to the deaf and sight to the blind as part and parcel of the truth of

Christ's kingdom that is not of this world, but to which Jesus came to bear witness in the kingdom of this world. These key disciples of Jesus acquire (Socratic) knowledge of themselves, the world and their relations with others by means of a narrative that, while not an empirically grounded theory, nevertheless gives access to genuine truth of which they were formerly unaware. Actually, in the context of Zeffirelli's movie, what we have is a narrative (the parable) within a narrative (the movie), and the learning intended is not that of the actual Matthew and Peter, but that of the spectators of the film if they have eyes to see and ears to hear. But to be moved by the scene in the film (which it is hard not to be) is to imagine what the moral impact of this parable on the real disciples might have been had this event historically occurred (which it might well have done).

There is much more, of course, to be said about the precise status of such revealed truth and its implications for moral character in such narratives. To begin with, one may still be troubled by the role of imagination in and the fictional character of such narratives: we need not suppose either the story of the prodigal son or Zeffirelli's account of events in the life of Jesus to be true in any literally descriptive sense. However, apart from the point that imagination plays a no less indispensable role in rational scientific than in moral enquiry, the key point for moral learning is the *teleological* structure of normatively significant narratives: precisely, the possibility of their interpretation in terms of acts or actions with evident implications for human good or ill. From this viewpoint, while it is not clear that there might be any significant normative implications from an empirical account of the natural world couched entirely in terms of efficient causation – such as (for example) evolutionary theory – there may well be normative or moral learning from accounts that *are* factually true, such as those of history or news coverage.

Still, while the prodigal son parable and the Zeffirelli movie exhibit the required human purposiveness of morally or spiritually significant narratives, they are not literally but *counterfactually* teleological. Like many other great cultural narratives and works of creative and imaginative fiction, they suppose that such and such actions or events *might* have

occurred – in, as philosophers say, some *possible* world – explore the consequences for human good or ill of such actions or events and make, either explicitly or implicitly, normative judgements on these. Insofar as such narratives are moral, however, their prime focus is on *character* as the psychological and moral source of human agency and the site of responsibility for action. They show not only how human lives may come to grief through vicious character (the tragedies of, for example, Euripides and Shakespeare offer rich examples of this), but how good characters may fare well in adverse circumstances. In this regard, the great narratives of cultural and creative literature disclose the very logical form of human moral self-understanding: as the modern moral theorist Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) has argued, human agents understand themselves very much as characters in stories in which actions have normative consequences for human good or ill. From this viewpoint, arguably the first place to turn for insight into human moral agency is not to natural or empirical science, but to serious works of human cultural and creative (mythical, religious, fictional and so on) literary heritage.

To be sure, this may seem to raise a large question about what precisely counts as *serious* creative and/or imaginative work. Still, while this is certainly a significant question, it is not too hard to answer in general terms – though there is clearly much that is devilish in the detail and one should not expect complete consensus on the matter. To begin with, not all literature (or related narrative art) that we should not consider to be empirically scientific but as creative or imaginative is — or is intended to be – of serious moral import. Clearly, much of such literature (for example, in the present view, the spy novels of Ian Fleming or the romances of Barbara Cartland) is written to entertain or to sell books or movies and would not merit serious moral scrutiny. Further, however, it is not clear that all great literature is especially concerned with the exploration of moral themes or character. In this regard, while the comedies of an Aristophanes or Shakespeare may have some moral point, this may not be their *main* point; and though James Joyce's *Ulysses* clearly ranks as a great (according to many, the greatest) of twentieth century novels, it is not (in the present view) notably concerned with the exploration of moral

themes or character – and certainly not to make any (either explicit or implicit) moral judgements.

Just as clearly, however, there is not only much past and present human literature that *is* so concerned, but also much consensus – certainly among educated people – concerning which and what sort of literature should be so regarded. In this light, the first place to turn is to the generally accepted ‘canon’ of not just western but world literature. The list is endless, but clearly great poets, dramatists and novelists from at least Greek antiquity, via Milton, Shakespeare and Cervantes, to such modern writers (as well as other artists) as Jane Austen, the Bronte sisters, Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Emile Zola, Victor Hugo, Thomas Hardy, Henry James, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Virginia Woolf, John Dos Passos, Graham Greene, George Orwell, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Thomas Wolf and Sebastian Faulks have all been primarily concerned to explore moral themes and character. Character and moral action, as MacIntyre (among others) has argued, are just the prime stuff of such literature. Of course, all such authors were products of their times and cultures, and we should not today expect to share all their values and inevitable prejudices; but it would be foolish to deny the enormous insights into the implications for human good or ill of better or worse human character to be found on every page of a Jane Austen or Charlotte Bronte novel.

In line with the general Platonic theme of this paper of the dependence of good moral character on honesty and truth, however, it might be added that the reason why a great novelist such as Jane Austen (for example) is a rich source of moral insight is that her artistic imagination is clearly grounded in close observation of human nature and of the very real implications of better and worse character for good or ill. Like a great portrait painter, Austen gives us – despite the rather contrived plots and happy endings of much nineteenth century romantic and other literature (given that it is also hard for novelists concerned to make a moral point, not to ensure that villains get their ‘come uppance’) – a remarkably accurate picture of human individual and social psychology, particularly of the vanities, conceits and delusions to which human flesh (as long ago indicated by Plato) is heir. From this viewpoint, as argued by the modern

Platonic British philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch (2003) – a prominent modern advocate of the moral purposes of great literature – the imagination of great literature and other art is not to be confused with wild or unbridled fantasy. In a similar vein, the great modern American novelist Tom Wolfe (2010) has also argued – at some odds with more experimental modern approaches to story writing – for an essentially *realist* conception of good fiction: that great novelists are precisely those who – even at their most literarily rhapsodic or rhetorical – try to paint the truest possible picture of how human beings are, so that readers may come to see how they might with clearer vision become (morally) better.

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