

# Ethical Adventures

## Speculative Fiction's Distinctive Contribution to Moral Understanding

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September 2022

I, William Joseph Eckersley, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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# Abstract

This thesis identifies a distinctive contribution to ethical understanding made by Speculative fictions. Plausibly, written fictions bear a connection to the ethical world. But how ought one to make sense of this connection, and of that world, if one is willing to entertain that possibility seriously? Accepting and modifying one promising strategy pursued in the literature, this thesis proposes adopting a version of Neo-Aristotelian ethical investigation, here dubbed 'Ethical Adventuring'. To the Ethical Adventurer, written fictions function as guides in an experimental, experiential quest to achieve moral understanding. Which guides ought the Adventurer to consult, then, and what form does their guidance take? Early on, the choice is made to consult Speculative fictions. Several accounts of how written fictions, more broadly, may make contributions to ethical understanding are then outlined and critiqued. The decisive criticism of these accounts is that none of them convincingly identifies a distinctive way in which written fictions, of any variety, make contributions to ethical understanding. In search of a solution, the discussion turns to the experiences generated by reading fiction. Two new accounts are supplied. First, a way of enriching present descriptions of the phenomenology of fiction reading. Second, a way of accounting for a special kind of content encountered most often in the experiences created by reading Speculative fiction. Experiences with this special kind of content, it is argued, attune readers to the limits of our human mode of being in a way that encounters with quotidian qualia cannot. It is concluded that Speculative written fictions make distinctive contributions to moral understanding, and so, to an Ethical Adventure, in virtue of engendering these experiences.

# Impact Statement

Hitherto, philosophers of fiction who propose a connection between written fictions and the ethical sphere have mostly confined their discussions to the classic works of humanistic literature from the nineteenth and early twentieth century. In so doing, they have not supplied a convincing account of a way in which fiction reading can make a distinctive contribution to ethics. My project is to rectify these shortcomings. First, by engaging with and discussing Speculative fictions authored by writers from marginalised backgrounds in the last 50 years and second, by adverting to phenomenology to explain a way in which these texts make distinctive ethical contributions. This project may inform approaches in various academic fields, most notably in philosophy, psychology and literary criticism. Proposing a new way of conceiving of the ethical sphere and of connecting this with written fictions, may have consequences for the ways in which philosophers and literary critics approach written fictions and their moral contents. The choice to focus on Speculative fictions may have the effect of further elevating the status of these often-overlooked contributions to literary culture in these fields. The choice to explicate the experience of fiction reading using a phenomenology of psycho-perception may encourage psychologists to rethink their approach to describing the experience of fiction reading. Beyond the academic context, this work may bring greater attention to the contributions, ethical and otherwise, of both Speculative fictions and those produced by authors from marginalised backgrounds. To the extent that this research argues that reading fictional texts can have practical ethical benefits, this thesis may have the effect of disseminating practical advice to any person in search of serviceable moral wisdom.



# 1. Ethical Adventuring

## *Chapter Synopsis*

This chapter begins with the plausible assumption that written fictions are connected with the moral sphere. The chapter's goal is to explain how to conceive of the moral sphere, if we want to vindicate this. In her influential work on this topic, Martha Nussbaum defends a Neo-Aristotelian conception of morality. Morality isn't primarily about promoting the good, or honouring rights and duties, as Consequentialists and Deontologists say. The core question – for theoretical moral inquiry, *and* practical moral living – is about what it means to flourish, as the kinds of beings we are. 'How should humans live?' We answer this is by entertaining and evaluating different ways of life that people may pursue. Nussbaum calls this the *Aristotelian Procedure*. Reading fiction plays a special role in this process, by giving us richly-detailed portrayals of different ways of life, including the psychology of people living in those ways, and inviting us to engage in a reflective, critical evaluation of this. And this proposal isn't mere speculation. This is how many people actually read fiction, and think about it.

I find this view compelling, but I aim to improve on it. My impetus comes from Cora Diamond's worry, that the Aristotelian Procedure lacks the kind of broad appeal which, by Nussbaum's own standards, a conception of morality (and its relation to fiction) should have. As Diamond argues, much serious moral inquiry, especially by thinkers operating outside of an Aristotelian framework, pays little attention to the subtle aspects of life and psychology that novels typically emphasise and invite us to reflect upon. As an alternative, I propose that the morally important thing we get from reading fiction, isn't a portrayal of different lives, but rather – something that I gesture towards in this chapter, and



then develop further in Chapters 3 and 4 – a variety of *sui generis* experiences, that can themselves be valuable parts of a way of life. I call this alternative Neo-Aristotelian approach *Ethical Adventuring*. The underlying conception of morality in this account is still Neo-Aristotelian, because it takes human flourishing as its normative foundation. But it shifts our emphasis away from entertaining and evaluating ways of life, towards having and learning from experiences. This broadens its appeal, insofar as nearly all moral inquiry recognizes the importance of having and learning from experiences. A library of written fictions isn't a menu of lifestyles for one to browse and assess. It is a way of accessing a set of experiences, which can themselves be integrated, in various ways, into a flourishing human life. That written fictions may engender experiences of a distinctive kind, supplies a motivation for the Ethical Adventurer to want to read them. Towards the end the chapter, I briefly explain my choice to engage with certain forms of Speculative fiction, in particular, as a fruitful way of acquiring moral understanding.

## §1.1 Preliminaries

... the story is meant to show that there is something even higher than the justice which you have been filled with. There is a human impulse known as mercy; a human act known as forgiveness.'

'I am not acquainted with those words, partner Elijah.'

'I know,' muttered Bailey. 'I know.'

Isaac Asimov, *The Caves of Steel*

Your head aches, does it not?... We will not have any Dickens today... but tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that. Let us read *Little Dorrit* again. There are passages in that book I can never hear without the temptation to weep.

Evelyn Waugh, *A Handful of Dust*

The above extract from Asimov's *Caves of Steel* appears at the end a brief digression. Detective Elijah Bailey has just sought to explain to his robotic companion, Daneel Olivaw, that some moral judgements are, 'in a sense higher than any law can be' by recounting John 8:1-11. In this Biblical parable Jesus famously allows a woman caught in adultery to escape the punishment of stoning after he says to her accusers: 'He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her' (John 8:7).

Daneel's resultant failure to grasp the message of story, that sometimes moral judgements based upon sentiments such as mercy and forgiveness can outweigh those grounded in principles of justice, anticipates one of the central claims made in the first half of this chapter. For, Daneel's reaction indicates that there is a connection between one's ethical notions and the subtlety with which one can probe the moral dimensions of written fictions.<sup>1</sup> It is his robotic, rigidly deontological ethical conceptions (which are founded on the premise that a moral consideration 'higher than law'

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<sup>1</sup> I wish to remain uncommitted on the issue of whether John 8:1-11 is true, despite my implicitly identifying it here as fiction (which may lead some readers to believe that I am here assuming the parable is 'false'). This is not so. Biblical 'truth' can mean a great many things, but I believe any plausible understanding of the claim that the parable is 'true' is compatible with its being, in some sense, 'fictional'. For while, for instance, the parable could not be 'true' in the sense of being 'a completely accurate account of events' and, at the same time, be in any way

is a ‘contradiction in terms’), that here prevent him from understanding and assimilating the message of the parable. Indeed, Daneel’s view that there is no such thing as an ‘unjust law’ renders him seemingly unable to recognise that the Bible even contains anything morally substantial. He lacks even ‘acquaintance’ with a term such as ‘mercy’.

By contrast, the reader is shown that Bailey’s richer, human conceptions, which are grounded in a more transparently religious set of ideas, permit him a more lucid and fruitful engagement with the text. Because of his more expansive conception of the ethical sphere, Bailey can acknowledge both that there is something morally consequential built into the parable at John 8:1-11 and what its significance might be. In §1.3-§1.6 of this chapter, I will aim to vindicate this portrait of Daneel and Bailey, and its implicit endorsement of Bailey’s perspective. I shall do so by arguing, in line with what I take their interchange to illustrate, that if one’s goal is engage sympathetically and fruitfully with the ethical dimensions of written fictions, one would be better off adopting a conception of the ethical sphere more like Bailey’s, than Daneel’s.

The second epigraph, above, is related to the latter sections of this chapter. After falling prey to a fit of delirium whilst on a farcical expedition in the Amazonian jungle, Tony Last awakes in a remote encampment run by a man known as Mr Todd. Once Todd has nursed a surprised and grateful Tony back to health, the subject of their conversation naturally turns to the matter of Tony’s indebtedness to Todd. Todd explains that while he is keen on literature, he is sadly unable to read the books from his late father’s library. His dearest wish, therefore, is to hear Tony read some of the books from the camp’s library aloud. When Tony sees the books, he notices that they comprise the collected works of Charles Dickens. ‘You are fond of Dickens?’ Tony asks innocently, to which Todd explains that, ‘they are the only books I have ever heard... I have heard them all several times by now but I never get tired; there is always more to be learned and noticed’. Tony begins his recitals in earnest, but before long, begins to wonder when he might be able to return to civilisation. Shortly after finishing *Bleak House*, Todd invites Tony to join a party where a powerfully intoxicating, ‘treacherous’ drink is passed around. Tony falls asleep for two days straight. When he awakes, Todd is very sorry to have to tell Tony that, unfortunately, he has just missed two Englishmen who came looking for him. It is then that Todd insists on a return to his favourite *Little Dorrit*. Rarely has a request to read a work of Dickens sounded so menacing or so unhinged.

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fictional, such an understanding of Biblical truth is fairly implausible. The parable’s being ‘true’ in the sense of ‘recounting certain features of a historical event’ and/or ‘expressing a valuable moral lesson’ I take it, are not only more plausible understandings of Biblical truth, but are likewise compatible with the parable’s being fictional in some way (e.g. its being a story).

The image that Waugh draws in this moment forecasts one of the claims that I will advance in this chapter. This is that there is something troubling in the idea that continuing to return to classic, canonical, humanistic works of fiction, the kind typified by the stylings of authors like Dickens, can be instructive because ‘there is always more to be learned and noticed’ in them. Todd’s rather unhealthy obsession (‘they are the only books I have ever heard...there are passages in that book I can never hear without the temptation to weep’), hints at a need to expand the range of texts one engages with if the edification one is seeking from the stories one reads is to be truly rich and insightful. Like with Asimov’s portrait of Daneel and Bailey, I will aim, in §1.7-§1.8, to vindicate Waugh’s portrait of Todd and Tony.

As usual, then, these epigraphs encapsulate some of the themes that will be explored in the piece they introduce. However, before proceeding to the arguments, I want to claim a greater role for these epigraphic ornaments than that of simply prepping the reader’s expectations.

Waugh’s novel is set in time that he lived, Asimov’s in the distant future. Waugh’s characters are all human, Asimov’s are not. Asimov’s characters are archetypes who frequently act as vehicles for exploring novel scientific or philosophical concepts; Waugh’s characters are a pastiche who usually serve as an indictment of the vapid interwar generation. Waugh’s writing is unconstrained by the conventions of genre; Asimov’s was the progenitor of many of those associated with contemporary science fiction. Opening with quotes from works with such different contents, styles and origins reflects an important commitment at the heart of this thesis. Namely, it reflects my view that an inclusive approach gives one a better chance to explore the rich tapestries of moral significance that are woven into written fictions.

The second way in which these two passages are significant beyond their *prima facie* content is that they lend support to one of the fundamental premises on which this thesis is based. Insofar as the texts above express some of the *philosophical* views about the relationship between written fictions and the moral sphere that I will go on to argue for, this can lend support to an overarching premise from which this investigation proceeds. Namely, that written fictions are connected to the ethical sphere, at least insofar as they can, in some way, express or communicate ethical ideas. Obviously moral philosophy expresses moral ideas, and is, in this way, connected with the ethical sphere. If one can show that the novels of Waugh and Asimov contain and express some of the *same* moral ideas as will be argued for in this piece of moral (and aesthetic) philosophy, this supports the view that there is a connection between written fictions and the ethical sphere. For, here, written fictions will have been used to anticipate and illustrate the views that will be defended in this moral discourse. If the arguments of this chapter are successful, then, they may be successful

in a different way to the novels. But in whatever way each succeeds in conveying these insights, both will, I suggest, have succeeded in expressing the same thing.

## §1.2 Introduction, Outline and Clarifications

I begin from the view, then, that written fictions are, in some interesting sense, connected to the ethical sphere.<sup>2</sup> This proposition raises many questions and requires refinement. In this chapter I will both raise and answer some of those questions and finish with a more polished version of this claim, which makes the nature of the connection more perspicuous. The strategy that I shall adopt to achieve this is to answer the following question.

What conception of the ethical sphere and its contents should one endorse, if one is interested in engaging in a deep, subtle and sophisticated exploration of the moral substance of written fictions?

By getting clear about what the realm of the ethical is, what it contains, what goes on there, one will be better placed to understand what relationship it might bear to fictional texts.

In §1.3-§1.6 I will be exploring Martha Nussbaum's answer to this question. I will lay out her argument for the view that an Aristotelian conception of the ethical sphere is best placed to facilitate a sympathetic and fruitful exploration of the moral substance of written fictions. Although broadly in agreement with Nussbaum's approach, I propose some refinements to it after discussing a prominent objection raised by Cora Diamond (1983: 167). After explaining how this revised notion offers some hope of ameliorating Diamond's concern, I go on to indicate a number of further advantages associated with this reformed conception.

In §1.7, I turn to a discussion of the texts that philosophers have used to illustrate various theories about the ethical substance of written fictions. I argue that Nussbaum and most others choose to exemplify their views using a range of texts which is, at best, needlessly restrictive and, at worst, tainted by elitist assumptions. I finish with some recommendations about how to reform the range of texts that are discussed in connection with ethics in the philosophical context. In §1.8 I consider some objections to these proposals.

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<sup>2</sup> Some form of this view is expounded, explored, or explicitly argued for by many philosophers. Some prominent examples include: (Booth 1988; Carroll 2001; Cavell 1969; Diamond: 1991; Feagin 1996; Murdoch 1970; Robinson 2005)

Before getting into the arguments, a few clarifications are in order. So far I have spoken of the ‘ethical sphere’ and the connection this bears to ‘written fictions’. Throughout I will use phrases such as ‘ethical sphere’ interchangeably with phrases like ‘ethical/moral world’, ‘ethical/moral realm’ and ‘ethical/moral purview’. These phrases are meant to refer to a set of foundational concepts that are related to ethics, including methodological, teleological and substantive notions of what ethical inquiry consists in. For instance, constructing a full conception of the ethical sphere will involve answering questions about the way in which one ought to ‘do’ ethics, what kind of activity is being done when doing it and the kinds of ends one pursues as part of this activity. It will also involve specifying the content of other connected notions such as the kinds of phenomena that are taken to be the bearers of value. In talking of the ‘ethical sphere’, I do not mean to refer exclusively to the kind of thing entered into and discussed only in philosophy seminars. In addition, I hold that conversations between friends trying to decide how to act, also involve some treatment of this topic. And, although there are important differences between these activities (e.g. formal/informal discussion), I hold that they are not substantive enough to warrant a categorical distinction between them. According to the understanding I am working with, discussions in the classroom are best conceived of as more refined versions of everyday conversations about how we should live and act.

Another thing to explain, is why I am referring to ‘written fictions’ or ‘fictional texts’, as opposed to ‘fictions’, ‘novels’, ‘literature’ or ‘narrative fictions’. ‘Fictions’ is not an appropriate term for my purposes, because films and television programs are also sometimes fictions, and this inquiry is not interested in the connection these media bear to the ethical sphere. That project is for another time and for someone with a deeper knowledge of these media. The term ‘novels’, I exclude because, although the focus of the later chapters shall indeed be on the relationship between what most would call ‘novels’ and the ethical sphere, the main arguments that I will be advancing are not supposed to be exclusively applicable to what are pretheoretically identifiable as ‘novels’. The possibility that theories constructed later might apply to poetry, plays etc. is something I intend to leave open. Indeed, sometimes the lines between these styles are not particularly clear cut (e.g. *Ulysses*, *Moby Dick*). For the same reason I reject ‘narrative fictions’ too, for, while plays generally lack narratives, television programs and films sometimes have them, hence, I will use ‘written fictions’ as opposed to ‘narrative fictions’ or ‘novels’.

‘Literature’ is a term that it is more important to jettison because it is notoriously difficult to specify and, resultantly, sometimes ends up being needlessly restrictive. Indeed, what ends up counting as ‘literature’ in many discussions that use the term, is one of two things. Often it refers to whatever set of texts the person using

the term thinks of as being those of a higher order of artistic merit, or to so-called ‘canonical’ works; those that one might suppose would be judged especially worthy by someone like Hume’s supreme judge of taste (ESY I.XXIII.1-37). (Sometimes, of course, writers pretend or assume that these two things are the same). The result is that no matter what the category is said to include (or perhaps more importantly, *exclude*), the judgement is based on little more than a personal (or otherwise subjective or biased) preference for a certain kind of text (in the former instance) or on pure speculation regarding a counterfactual about a state of mind inhering a theoretical entity (in the latter case). Both methods of conceptualising ‘literature’ are prone to creating a restrictive notion of what kinds of fictional texts bear a relation to the ethical world.

What of these ‘written fictions’ then? I have said that they bear some relation to ethical concerns but what understanding of *them* is necessary, even at a very abstract level, for making sense of the claim I am going to explicate?

If one wishes to make good on the idea that there is a relationship between the ethical world and written fictions, one needs to understand these texts as being more than highbrow entertainment. One needs to begin from the view that there is a real moral ‘substance’ to such texts, real ‘dimensions’ or ‘contours’ or ‘textures’ in this kind of writing which are capable of bringing into view something connected to our moral interests. In other words, something about the written fictions’ form and/or content must be understood as being in the business of presenting something of normative salience to its readers. Much of our behaviour reflects a commitment to this idea. Reading children bedtime stories is often framed as a part of their spiritual education. The ‘messages’ of many fictional works, written or otherwise, are debated endlessly on social media and in internet chatrooms. But no matter how suggestive these behaviours are, as I have already hinted, I intend for my primary defence of this idea to emerge from the very structure of this chapter and the others in this thesis. To that end, at the conclusion of this chapter I will offer a judgement as to whether or not the fictional texts with which I began successfully express the same conclusions as the philosophical arguments to which I now turn.

### **§1.3 Nussbaum’s ‘Aristotelian Procedure’**

Nussbaum argues that an especially deep, sophisticated and sympathetic exploration of the ethical dimensions of written fictions can be facilitated by conceiving of the ethical sphere as the context for an inquiry she calls the ‘Aristotelian Procedure’

(Nussbaum 1990: 25-26).<sup>3</sup> She introduces and begins to motivate this approach by exhorting her reader to reflect upon the intellectual climate of Aristotle's own time.

The so-called 'ancient quarrel' was a figurative stand-off between the poets and philosophers of Greek antiquity. It emerged because authors from both traditions claimed *their* style was best suited to addressing the question of how one ought to live. The result was that dramatic dialogues, hexameter poetry, rhetorical speeches, treatises, letters and collections of aphorisms and paradoxes were all viewed by those in each party as making commensurate contributions to moral understanding. It was on account of these various authors' shared aim, that they saw themselves, and each other, as producing works that bore a connection to the ethical sphere. And while Aristotle was by no means the first to raise and attempt to answer the question about the good life, his treatment of the subject endures as one of the most systematic and enlightening still available. Therefore, just as Aristotle ensured that his ethical inquiry sympathetically treated Hesiod alongside Heraclitus and Euripides alongside Xenophanes, Nussbaum suggests that we moderns might similarly treat John Rawls alongside Charles Dickens and Henry Sidgwick alongside Henry James, by adopting the same conception of the ethical sphere as Aristotle (or at least, a very similar conception).

How should this conception be characterised, then? Aristotle describes it in the first few chapters of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as being the 'highest ruling science' (1094a28-29), the pursuit which seeks the most choiceworthy of all ends.<sup>4</sup> Just as manufacturing a screw is an end and activity 'subordinate' (1094a9) to building an engine, building an engine to constructing a vehicle, and constructing a vehicle to expediting travel, expediting travel, too, must be 'subordinate' to some further aim. The activity that seeks the end to which all others (including those just mentioned) are subordinate is the 'highest ruling science' (1094a28-29). Given that its activities and ends encompass those engaged in and pursued at the highest levels of politics, as well as those at the individual level, this inquiry is 'a sort of political science' (1094b12).

This 'science' is imprecise, Aristotle stresses, reminding his reader that the 'political scientist' should not seek conclusions of a universal nature, but rather those

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note a distinction between the Aristotelian Procedure (a metaethical position concerning the best way to explore and evaluate substantive notions of ethics that are available for adoption) and Aristotle's own ethical *conception* (a substantive ethical position in itself). Although Nussbaum distinguishes the two, they are closely related and it is important to note that arguing for the adoption of the Aristotelian procedure does not imply that one endorses Aristotle's substantive ethical notions. Nussbaum does this too, but for different reasons.

<sup>4</sup> Translated by Terence Irwin.



which ‘hold good usually’ (1094b23). Nonetheless, the name, at least, of the thing pursued by the political scientist is agreed upon by all: *eudaimonia* (1095a17-18).<sup>5</sup>

What is harder to agree upon is what this ‘good life’, this ‘excellent souledness’ *really* consists of, and how it ought to be attained. In order to settle this, Aristotle suggests, one should survey and compare a range of common ideas or beliefs (*endoxa*) about what it might be, taking one’s own lived experience as one’s primary source (1095b14-15). Always beginning, then, ‘from things known to us’ (1095b4), Aristotle proposes that the ethical sphere be understood as the context for an *experimental* activity that aims at the best life explicable and attainable for human beings. (Not for nothing is the word *science* often used to translate this activity).

Nussbaum’s Aristotelian Procedure can be understood as a version of this inquiry, one which emphasises three of its central features. Each of them, she argues, can serve as separate bases for the claim that the Aristotelian Procedure is especially well suited for framing a deep and nuanced exploration of written fictions’ moral contents.

The first feature that Nussbaum emphasises is the aim of the inquiry. In line with Aristotle’s view that specifying and acquiring the ultimate good involves attaining to and describing the best life, Nussbaum proposes that one understand the goal of the activity pursued in the ethical domain as that of trying to ‘answer a very broad and inclusive question: “How should a human being live?”’ (Ibid: 25).

The second feature Nussbaum focuses on is the methodology of the inquiry. Just as Aristotle suggests that one ought to canvass the *endoxa* as they are encountered in one’s own life, comparing and contrasting them with each other and with one’s own present experience, Nussbaum says that the Aristotelian Procedure

proceeds by working through the major alternative positions (including Aristotle’s own, but others as well), holding them up against one another and also against the participants’ beliefs and feelings, their active sense of life. (Ibid: 25-26)

The third feature she focuses on is the inquiry’s dialectical appeal. The approach taken in the *Nicomachean Ethics* allowed Aristotle to sympathetically consider a wide range of views about the good (notably the *endoxa* but also those defended by ‘the

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<sup>5</sup> The term is notoriously hard to translate. It combines both notions of ‘happiness’ and ‘flourishing’ while differing from both substantively. For although Aristotle does clearly hold that the ‘happiness’ viz. the satisfaction of one’s desires, is necessary for *eudaimonia*, it is by no means sufficient. ‘Flourishing’ viz. achieving a state of natural excellence, captures the fact that *eudaimonia* is a partly objective state, but is too broad in application: rose bushes and dolphins ‘flourish’, but neither can achieve *eudaimonia*, which is a distinctively *human* form of good-souledness.

wise', especially Plato, see 1096a13-1097a14). Nussbaum suggests that by engaging in the same dialectical procedure, the Aristotelian Procedure represents 'an overarching or framing procedure in which alternative views [especially Deontology and Consequentialism] may be duly compared, with respect for each, as well as for the evolving sense of life to which each is a response.' (Nussbaum 1990: 25).

How, then, do these three features lay the groundwork for a defence of Nussbaum's view? The prefatory defence just mentioned already made reference to one of them. Recall that it was the Ancients' shared notion of the *aims* of their various literary projects, and of the activity to be undertaken in the ethical sphere, that brought their works into dialogue with one another. As I already pointed out, this shared notion carves out a portion of the conceptual terrain large enough to encompass contributions from both fictional and philosophical sources.

But there are other ways in which trying to answer the question about the good life facilitates this too. Conceiving of the end of one's activities in the moral sphere as Aristotle did also allows one, Nussbaum suggests, to explore the implicit conception of ethics which one finds in many written fictions with greater subtlety than can be managed by opting for either of the two major alternatives, namely, Consequentialism and Deontology.

Written fictions have a moral substance *qua* written fictions. For instance, a fictional text's moral substance, what it presents as morally salient, almost always includes details about characters' histories; their motivations or desires; their feelings; imaginings and musings; their inner lives as much as their public actions; the kinds of things, in short, that Iris Murdoch spoke of in terms of someone's 'personal vision' and/or the 'texture of a man's being' (Murdoch 1956:39). Given the distinctiveness of these features, their careful investigation is, perhaps, the most likely way in which one may derive any *sui generis* moral insights from such works; the kinds of insights which could make a *distinctive*, and hence particularly interesting, contribution to one's activities in the ethical sphere.

On Nussbaum's view, Kantian and Utilitarian conceptions of the activity undertaken in the ethical sphere are apt to overlook such insights. Their inquiries aim, respectively, at answering the questions: 'what is my duty?' or 'how can utility be maximised?' Adopting either of these goals implies a characterisation of 'the right or relevant descriptions for practical situations' that downplays the importance of exploring just those features of written fictions' moral substance which are distinctive of them *qua* written fictions (Nussbaum 1990: 24).

How can 'the texture of a man's being' be quantified in the way proper to answering the Utilitarian question? How can it be reduced to its empirical connections with duty in the way supposed to be essential to ethical inquiry, according to a

Kantian approach? For Nussbaum, the answer is, it can't. Choosing either of these conceptions of the ethical sphere 'would have the effect of artificially cutting off from the inquiry some elements of life that the novels show as important and link to others' (Nussbaum 1990: 24). Substantial commitments about what matters ethically are encoded into written fictions. (As the quote that opened this chapter suggests, 'a human impulse known as mercy; a human act known as forgiveness'.) In order to take *that* seriously, one must also take seriously the thought that the subtleties of personal history, emotional ties to others, and so on, are not peripheral, but often central considerations in one's deliberations concerning not just what one ought to *do*, but who one ought to *be*. If one fails to do this, one runs the risk of ending up trapped in the same perplexities as Daneel. One who cannot, or will not, even conceive of an unjust law, is much more likely to *miss out* on grasping the distinctive kinds of ethical insights written fictions may bring to view.

How, then, can one avoid this shortcoming of the robot philosophies? Nussbaum argues that one of the best ways is to conceive of the end of the activity to be undertaken in the ethical sphere along Aristotelian lines. This involves understanding the goal of one's practice to be to try and answer the question 'how should a human being live?' (Ibid: 25). For, this question does not require one to take on any presuppositions about how its subject, life, can be delimited; and, *a fortiori*, no assumption that it ought to be divided into moral and non-moral aspects (Ibid: 25). The result, for Nussbaum, is that although no conception of the practices undertaken in the ethical sphere can be *completely* neutral with regard to the phenomena that are assumed to be potential bearers of value, this teleological feature of the Aristotelian Procedure serves to broaden that range beyond what is typically recognised on a standard Consequentialist or Deontological account. Thus, adopting the end associated with the Aristotelian Procedure aids one in taking something distinctive away from one's encounter with written fictions, in a way which is generally not on offer to Consequentialists or Deontologists. In this way, conceiving of the ethical sphere as the context for a search for an answer to the question about the good life promises to facilitate a deeper, more sophisticated, more fruitful exploration of written fictions' moral contents.

That is the first advantage of an Aristotelian approach. The second advantage is related to its methodological character. Nussbaum claims that, in conceiving of the ethical sphere with a view to exploring the moral substance of written fictions with the greatest sophistication, one should not be attempting to bring written fictions 'to some academic discipline which happens to ask ethical questions' (Ibid: 24). Rather, to facilitate such a rich exploration, the conception one adopts should acknowledge

that there is a *pre-existing* connection between fiction readers' interactions with written fictions and their search for answers to practical moral questions. To honour this antecedent connection, one should therefore employ methods of inquiry which highlight the relationship that already exists between readers' practical ethical concerns and the fictional works they consume.

Nussbaum suggests one particularly effective way to train a spotlight on this relationship. This is to conceive of the ethical sphere as the context for an inquiry which proceeds via methods of investigation which mirror, as closely as possible, those used for answering practical moral questions. For, if one explicitly identifies the search for practical moral guidance as a part of the ethical domain, then whatever phenomena and practices are already connected with that search will also be included within one's conception of the ethical sphere and its contents. Given that fiction readers' explorations of these texts are already connected with our 'deepest practical searching' (Ibid: 24), these explorations will, consequently, be related to one's conception of the ethical sphere by adopting a practical conception of its contents. In this way a conception of the search to be undertaken would acknowledge that pre-existing connection, honouring the fact that, for those who read written fictions, their reading of them is already a part of their everyday search for the good life.

The Aristotelian Procedure's method of inquiry is lifted straight from everyday life. It is Aristotle's own, Nussbaum explains, and is that of:

set[ting] out the appearances and go[ing] through the puzzles. In this way we must prove the common beliefs about these ways of being affected – ideally all the common beliefs but if not all, most of them and the most important. (1145b5-8)

This technique, of comparing competing conceptions of how to live, reflects one of the ways many tackle the ethical problems one confronts in everyday life. Or so Nussbaum claims. She says

we do, in life, bring our experience, our active sense of life, to the different conceptions we encounter, working through them, comparing the alternatives they present, with reference to our developing sense of what is important and what we can live with, seeking a fit between experience and conception. (Nussbaum 1990: 25)

In other words, the method of the inquiry to be undertaken in the moral sphere, according to the Aristotelian Procedure, reflects a practical technique that is used to tackle everyday moral problems. Just as wrestling with ethical dilemmas in daily life

sometimes involves considering how one's present way of living measures up to the competing conceptions one is exposed to in many different ways throughout one's life (philosophy, written fictions and everyday experiences), so too does the method by which Nussbaum proposes one ought to aim to answer the question about the good life. Thus, the second feature of the Aristotelian Procedure serves to honour the ethical relationship that already exists between fiction readers and fictional texts. This encourages a sympathetic exploration of the moral contents of written fictions, by ensuring that the roles they already play in their readers' lives are not neglected in the inquiry.

The third feature of the Aristotelian Procedure that allows it to facilitate deep exploration of written fictions' ethical content, Nussbaum claims, is its broad dialectical appeal (Ibid: 25). Nussbaum proposes that one's conception of what goes on in the context of the moral sphere be acceptable to philosophers of various moral outlooks and persuasions (Ibid: 23). This is because:

one obstacle to any contemporary version of the ancient project is the difficulty of arriving at any account of what we are looking for that will be shared by the various parties [i.e. philosophers with differing conceptions of the moral sphere]. (Ibid: 23)

The Ancient Quarrel had an 'exemplary clarity', on account of the various contributors' shared conception of the moral world. But no such consensus exists amongst present day commentators (Ibid: 25). Therefore, in the interests of getting as many philosophers 'on board' with the idea that fiction reading has something to contribute to the ethical sphere, one's conception of the moral terrain needs to be broadly acceptable to the philosophical community, including all its prominent constituencies. If this requirement isn't satisfied, then it will be challenging to mount a plausible defence of the claim that the present project is a truly *philosophical* one.

Again, Nussbaum points to the history of philosophy to explain the sense in which the Aristotelian Procedure can meet this demand. Philosophers who adopt very different frameworks for their inquiries have, she says,

frequently appealed to the inclusive dialectical method first described by Aristotle, as one that (continuous with the active searching of life) can provide an overarching or framing procedure in which alternative views might be duly compared, with respect for each other, as well as for the evolving sense of life to which each is a response. Philosophers as different as Utilitarian Henry Sidg-

wick and Kantian John Rawls have appealed to Aristotle's conception of philosophical procedure as one that can, in its inclusiveness, be fair to the competing positions. (Ibid: 25)

By adopting the Aristotelian Procedure, as a framing device for ethical inquiry, one's proposed project is therefore likely to possess a relatively wide dialectical appeal. It will appeal to thinkers from a broad spectrum of philosophical outlooks and persuasions. This is likely to promote a sophisticated exploration of the ethical contents of written fictions. For, it does not involve making any prejudgements about whether the ethical insights derivable from fictions will include practical pointers about, for example, how to effect the maximisation of beneficial consequences or how to act from, and not merely in accordance with, duty. It does not exclude these possibilities either (as might be expected by opting for either of the two major alternatives). Instead, both are held to be possible, while the analysis of that possibility is held to be one of the central questions addressed as a part of the Aristotelian Procedure.

## §1.4 Diamond's Problem

Cora Diamond raises an objection to the Aristotelian Procedure. Taking attempts to answer the question about the good life as one's goal does not only *permit* one to explore the ethical substance of written fictions *qua* written fictions, but *requires* one to do so. And, it requires this in a way which is generally inimical to the aims pursued by Deontologists and Consequentialists. On Diamond's view, this makes Nussbaum's approach dialectically unappealing.

The teleological structure of the Aristotelian Procedure is to seek an answer to the question 'which life ought one to live?' In answering this question, everything which is a part of a particular conception of life being considered must be held to be of relevance to stating and grasping the answer it provides. The Aristotelian inquirer exploring such a conception in a written fiction would go amiss, then, if they failed to consider even the most abstruse details of the particular 'sense[s] of life' (Nussbaum 1990: 5) encountered in the text. For instance, the kind of furniture that a character in *The Golden Bowl* is described as having selected for decorating their house, must be taken into consideration as an ethically relevant feature of that work, according to this approach. In Nussbaum's phrase, the discursive practices of the Aristotelian Procedure imply that, for her and other similar Aristotelians, 'the very qualities that make the novels so unlike dogmatic abstract treatises are... the source of their *philosophical* interest' (Ibid: 29).

But this claim about the philosophical interest of written fictions stands in tension with the interest that would be taken in such works by adoptees of most Deontological and Consequentialist approaches. For, connecting the moral substance of written fictions with a pursuit of an answer to an Aristotelian question about the good life entreats one to ask, as Diamond's puts it:

How is it that *this* (whatever feature of the novel it may be) is an illuminating way of writing about *that* (whatever feature of human life)? (Diamond 1983:167)

Opposed to this, a different conception of the sphere of ethics might only require one to ask, 'how is it that *this* (whatever feature of the fiction it may be) provides evidence or data concerning the permissibility of action x according to principle y?' or 'how is it that *this* (whatever feature of the fiction it may be) provides evidence or data concerning action x's maximisation of beneficial consequent y?' And this is a problem if, as Nussbaum supposes, the inquiry to be undertaken in the ethical sphere is supposed to be acceptable to as many philosophers as possible.<sup>6</sup>

The teleological structure of a typical Consequentialist and Deontological approach will be unlikely to involve a commitment to acknowledge the ethical significance of many of the features that written fictions have *qua* written fictions. To go back to Diamond's example, this is because choices of furniture, say, are considerations rather distantly connected with most specifications of action permissibility or utility maximisation. Thus, the capaciousness of the Aristotelian Procedure, one of the very things that renders it so suitable for facilitating the kind of deep engagement with written fictions, is also an unappealing feature of the Aristotelian Procedure from the position of the average Consequentialist or Deontologist. By their lights, such a conception is simply too capacious; it includes too much to be understood as anything like 'moral inquiry' (Ibid: 167). Indeed, connecting the Aristotelian procedure with written fictions may not even appear to be a *philosophical* inquiry at all, given some of these thinkers' views. And so, the first putative advantage of the Aristotelian Procedure undermines the third putative advantage. It requires that one identify too much of the substance of written fictions as ethical substance for it to be acceptable to the majority of non-Aristotelian philosophers.

This leads Diamond to the conclusion that Nussbaum's approach to specifying the relationship between the ethical sphere and written fictions is 'pretty much doomed'. 'No one knows what the subject is', she writes, continuing that

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<sup>6</sup> There may, of course, be some conceptions of the moral world that would not be suited to recognising an ethical role for written fictions at all, for instance, Hegel's or maybe Spinoza's. These, however, are not adopted very readily or in a non-revised form by many contemporary theorists.

most widely agreed accounts of it depend on suppositions that are not obvious and that reflect particular evaluations and views of the world, of human nature, and of what it is to speak, think, write, or read about the world. The more inclusive an account is, the more likely that it will include what many philosophers would not dream of counting as part of their project (Ibid: 166-67).

Diamond's argument seems to suggest that the best way to persuade other philosophers to accept Nussbaum's project would be to appeal to the idea that it provides a motivation to refine or reconfigure received notions the ethical sphere.

But this line of thought only seems to push back the issue. How might the unconverted be persuaded to reformulate their methods and aims? The answer is not obvious. Someone already committed to the view that a sympathetic engagement with written fictions will be carried on best by taking seriously the features they possess *qua* written fictions will likely already be receptive to Nussbaum's proposal about how to draw (or re-draw) the boundaries of the ethical sphere. On the other hand, it is difficult to envisage how Nussbaum could persuade someone who doesn't accept this. For, now the only obvious motivation for selecting Nussbaum's investigative framework is that it will likely prove more effective as a guiding impetus for exploring the fictitious texts at the heart of the proposed project. But it now looks as though the kind of objectors Diamond is worried about are unlikely to be persuaded even of *this*. The very things which the Aristotelian procedure requires one to recognise as ethical features of fictions, are the same ones whose ethical salience is denied by the people one is trying to persuade. Nussbaum's approach seems to be left at an impasse: preach to the converted, or broadcast unwelcome invocations to the unconverted. Here, Diamond suggests that one intent on adopting a conception such as Nussbaum's will likely have to admit that one cannot answer the question I am seeking to answer in a way that does not involve some entreaty to reform received notions of the moral sphere.

## §1.5 A Modified Conception

### §1.5.1 *Resolving Tensions and Meeting Demands*

There is some truth to Diamond's appraisal of Nussbaum's approach. It is probably true that no set of foundational concepts will be entirely neutral and hence acceptable to all parties in the philosophical debate, as Nussbaum herself concedes. However,



there is an alternative way to interpret Aristotle's ethical project and the relationship it bears to written fictions. This modified conception retains many of the features of Nussbaum's Aristotelian Procedure, while building on them in a number of fruitful ways. It also represents an approach which can ease some of the tension between the need to engage as deeply as possible with the fictions and the need for one's approach to be dialectically appealing. To demonstrate this I will first offer a diagnosis of the issue with Nussbaum's approach. She says that the Aristotelian Procedure

is both empirical and practical: empirical, in that it is concerned with, takes its 'evidence' from, the experience of life; practical, in that its aim is to find a conception by which human beings can live, and live together. (Nussbaum 1990: 25-26)

This characterisation is important for our purposes. Elsewhere, Nussbaum puts it like this:

The Aristotelian procedure in ethics begins with a very broad and inclusive question: 'how should a human being live?' (Ibid: 25)

Accordingly, what seems to count as an answer to the question: 'how should a human being live?' would be a statement of 'a conception [of life] by which human beings can live'. Thus, for written fictions to serve the goal of the Aristotelian Procedure, they must be somehow expressing or 'stating' a conception, or as Nussbaum says in other places, a 'sense' or 'view', of life:

A view of life is *told*. The telling itself – the selection of genre, formal structures, sentences, vocabulary, of the whole manner of addressing the reader's sense of life – all of this expresses a sense of life and of value, a sense of what matters and what does not, of what learning and communicating are, of life's relations and connections. (Ibid: 5)

The idea that the fictions' moral contents must be so conceived, as a kind of rich 'sense' 'conception' or 'view' of life, for them to answer Aristotle's question, might be seen, I shall argue, as being at the root of the issue Diamond identifies. 'How should a human being live?' 'Like *this*', the fictions say, according to Nussbaum. 'This', in Nussbaum's view, always means a complex package of thoughts specifying the bearers of value and disvalue, of what 'communication' amounts to, of various animate connections, amongst other complexities. And this is not an altogether unappealing view, on the face of it. On this view, one must take seriously the ethical

significance of someone's choice of furniture and there is a case to be made that such things are ethically important. For, such things could indicate something about a person's values. Someone who opts for filigree cornicing, brocaded upholstery and William Morris patterned wallpaper probably subscribes to a different set of ideas about beauty, practical utility, hospitality and luxury to someone who chooses Anglepoise lamps, a polished concrete floor and Bauhaus chairs. And so, there is a reason to commit to the relevance of these choices.

However, one way to think about this is that it is this substantive commitment about what is ethically valuable about written fictions, falling out of Nussbaum's characterisation of the Aristotelian Procedure's aims, that makes the project so unpalatable to Consequentialists and Deontologists. If this is right, then one way to persuade them to adopt a version of the Aristotelian approach would be to sever this connection between the question one is trying to answer, and the notion of written fictions' normative contents that falls out of it.

One can begin to do this by reflecting on Nussbaum's phraseology. When she says that Aristotle begins with the question 'how ought a human being to live?', she makes it sound as if answering this question will be a bit like perusing a menu. There is 'way x', 'way y', 'way z'; each a relatively fleshed out option, parcelled up and ready to be chosen.<sup>7</sup> Written fictions and philosophical texts, as well as any number of other types of writing, are, then, accordingly, taken to represent (or 'state', or 'express') these rich, holistically conceived 'ways' of living to their readers. As such, anything and everything in these texts must be regarded as making an essential contribution to its expression of a certain lifestyle, including all the substance that looks largely incidental to Deontologists and Consequentialists. One good place to start ameliorating the issue Diamond discusses, therefore, is to reformulate the Aristotelian question which is taken to shape and guide the activities undertaken in the ethical sphere. What it implies about the fictional texts' ethical contents will then be accordingly reformulated.

One way to reform the question along these lines would be to state it thusly: 'how might x (in this case reading fiction) improve one's life?' This question strikes a similarly 'Aristotelian' chord to Nussbaum's. However, it is free of the implication that I have argued may be responsible for generating the tension Diamond identifies in Nussbaum's account. This is because the only claim about the texts that needs to be made, when aiming to answer this new question, is the one I have already com-

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<sup>7</sup> There is evidence that Aristotle might have thought about ethical inquiry as proceeding in something like this way. He begins the *Nicomachean Ethics* (1:5) by inspecting 'three most favoured lives: the lives of gratification, of political activity and, third, of study' (1095b16-17).

mitted to. Namely, the claim that fiction reading is more than highbrow entertainment, and that *something* in fictional texts' form and content is of moral significance (i.e. reveals something that, once grasped, offers ethical enlightenment of some kind).

Attempting to answer this question does not imply that this significant 'something' in the texts is *not* what Nussbaum terms a 'sense of life', any more than it implies that it is. Instead, the adoption of this aim implies merely that written fictions are related to the ethical sphere because their forms and contents are normatively inflected. Asking how fiction reading may improve one's life does not commit one to the kind of substantive notions about the edifying content of the fictions as Nussbaum's approach does. This revised approach *allows*, but does not *require*, that ethical minutiae (e.g. choices of furniture, clothes, small changes of body language, or one's mode of speech) are ethically significant. And, while even an allowance that these things may be important may still be too much for some Kantians or Utilitarians, asking them to entertain, rather than assert, their significance, in the service of exploring the ethical dimensions of written fictions is, I submit, likely to be more congenial to those who begin from such positions. In this way, conceiving of the ethical sphere as the context for an activity which aims to answer the question 'how might fiction reading improve one's life?' can go some way towards alleviating the tension that Diamond identifies in Nussbaum's approach.

This new framing for the activities to be undertaken in the ethical sphere should be more acceptable to Deontologists and Consequentialists. But it also retains the features of Nussbaum's account which render it capable of facilitating a deep exploration of the fictions. If one aims to answer the question 'how might fiction reading improve one's life', one must remain open to the possibility that engaging with those parts of the fiction which deal with ethical minutiae will prove to be important to answering it. Indeed, there is nothing to stop one who asks this question harbouring a strong suspicion that paying attention to the complexities which intrigued Murdoch will help to yield written fictions' most distinctive insights. Like Nussbaum's approach, therefore, asking the question about how one's life might be bettered by engaging with fiction also presupposes no theoretical division between moral and non-moral aspects of life. It *allows* but does not, as the Aristotelian Procedure does, *require*, that choices of furniture etc. be viewed as morally charged. From this position, then, it will still be advisable to take seriously those parts of written fictions which deal with such matters. But it will not be compulsory.

This conception of the activity to be undertaken in the ethical sphere is also, like Nussbaum's, a practical one. Asking how x may make one's life better is the kind of question one asks every day, about the choices one makes, and the ends one pursues. Most people do question how the addition or subtraction of a relationship or

practice from one's daily routine might enrich or diminish it, and reading fiction is, in this respect, no different from any other activity that might be considered in this calculus. Thus, just as the Aristotelian Procedure does, this approach mirrors one of the ways in which one's practical ethical searching goes on. By retaining a conception with this feature, the pre-existing connection between the fictional texts and their reader's practical questioning is honoured. For, once again, as part of this conception, whatever things are already related to one's practical search will be incorporated into the ethical sphere writ large, including, for those who read them, written fictions.

As I have already suggested, when discussing how this reformulation of the question which guides the activity undertaken in the ethical sphere can resolve some of the tension Diamond discusses, this notion should be taken to be dialectically appealing. For, while what most ethical inquirers would find acceptable is probably best established empirically, I hope to have given some grounds for concluding that the approach suggested here is an improvement over Nussbaum's, in this respect. Hence, I do not presume to claim that the reconceptualization of the inquiry to be undertaken in the ethical sphere that I have argued for here will, of necessity, solve the problem Diamond identifies for all Consequentialists and Deontologists. Instead, I more tentatively suggest that both Aristotelians and non-Aristotelians alike will probably find it less off-putting than Nussbaum's conception. This new approach should facilitate the same kind of deep exploration of written fictions' moral contents, as in Nussbaum's Aristotelian Procedure, and it should do this better, insofar as it is more appealing to non-Aristotelian ethicists.

### §1.5.2 *An Aristotelian (Re)conception*

Before I continue to a discussion of some further advantages posed by opting for this modified conception, I want to clarify some of the differences in mine and Nussbaum's conceptions, and to indicate the sense in which the new approach can rightfully be termed 'Aristotelian'. The aim of the activity to be undertaken in the ethical sphere, according to the Aristotelian Procedure, is to answer the question 'which life should a human being live?'. As Nussbaum understands it, answering this question is about conceiving of the best life. This is one way of fleshing out Aristotle's claim that the aim of the activity is understanding and attaining to 'the human good' (1094b7). But as I have suggested, it is not the only way. Nussbaum's way of describing Aristotle's goal emphasises the role that knowledge and understanding of the good play in Aristotle's project. But this potentially downplays other features of his approach.

First, it is important to understand that Aristotle *does* think that grasping the nature of the good is a necessary part of the practice that goes on in the ethical sphere:

Then does knowledge of this good [the ‘supreme good’] carry weight for (our) way of life, and would it make us better able, like archers who have a target to aim at, to hit the right mark? If so, we should try to grasp, in outline at any rate, what the good is. (1094a23-27)

However, Aristotle’s aim can be understood as being broader than this. One can make the argument that, for him, the activities of the ethical sphere do not extend *only* to gaining a conceptual understanding of the nature of the good life. He makes this point explicitly, stating that: ‘the end (of political science) is action [*praxis*] not knowledge [*gnosis*]’ (1095a5) and that ‘Our present discussion does not aim, as our others do, at study; for the purpose of our examination is not to know what virtue is, but to become good’ (1103b27-28). This suggests that while the ‘inquiry’ that Nussbaum proposes ought to be understood as an essential aspect of the practices undertaken in the ethical sphere for Aristotle, *he* may have had a more expansive goal in mind than that of only specifying and relaying a conception of the best life.

Here, the new conception that I have outlined can serve to expand the scope of the activity in line with what could be taken to be Aristotle’s broader aims. Asking ‘how might *x* make one’s life better?’, suggests a conception of the ethical sphere that is fully commensurate with one’s *own lived experiences*. How to make one’s life better, how to make *my* life better, is a question about *a* life, not about the many lives that are, to return to a previous metaphor, ‘on the menu’. Conceiving of the ethical sphere in this way returns one to a preoccupation which appears to be downplayed in Nussbaum’s specification of Aristotle’s aim(s). Namely, how is it that one can *become* a better person, not simply *know* what a better person looks like, from a conceptual point of view? Although of course, both ends are closely related.<sup>8</sup>

Before proceeding to further describe this conception, note that aiming to answer the question about how to live better does not involve abandoning the idea that there is some *ideal* of a better life, to which one ought to aspire. It is not the question which an amoral hedonist asks themselves, about how one might gain access to new and more exotic pleasures (although these may be part of living a better life for some). Indeed, without a commitment to the idea that there is a best life which it is possible, at least theoretically, to live, one ends up committed to the view that it

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<sup>8</sup> It is not implausible to hold that if I become a better person, I will know more about the good (at least from a first-person perspective); and that if I know more about the good, I will become a better person (at least in so far as I now have, at least, the knowledge of what I ought to do and who I ought to become).

is always possible to better oneself. And, while the idea of endless improvement might serve as a useful mantra in one's practical pursuit of the good life, holding the conviction that there is ultimately no theoretical *point* to one's striving threatens to undermine the grounds for the struggle. Hence, this new conception retains a commitment to the Aristotelian claim that there is a more or less specifiable concept of a truly flourishing life that can be described 'in outline at least' and, most crucially, that it can, in principle, be attained.

In line with the new aim of the activity to be undertaken in the ethical sphere, I suggest a new conception of the activity itself, of its name and of the 'methods' by which it proceeds. Rather than being understood as an 'inquiry', as Nussbaum styles it, it could be better described as an *adventure* or *experiment*. Or, more poetically, it may be styled as *an adventure with experimental elements*. This is not the kind of adventure that has a clear mission statement, or an experiment that begins with the framing of a precise hypothesis. To portray the adventure's progress in terms of the deployment of a 'method' would thus be inappropriate. This adventure *is*, in a sense, a person's own life. The events that comprise the adventure are that person's experiences.

Experiences can be hard to describe, relay, and grasp. Often, there is no clear boundary that divides one experience from another. Often, it is only in retrospect, by bringing to bear imagination, cognition and emotive forms of reflection, that one can make sense of them and their relationships as they occurred, will occur, and continue to occur, in the conscious unfolding of one's life. How does one make progress in the adventure then? How is it that one ought to go about 'hitting the target'? The answer is *practice*; practice constantly interpreted in the light of those forms of understanding which serve to clarify the nature of, and connections between, one's lived experiences. The adventure unfolds by having experiences and consulting them in light of one another, using the full gamut of one's cognitive, affective and imaginative capacities. Because all humans are enmeshed in intimate, interpersonal exchanges, and in a complex web of social relationships, seeking to understand and participate in the lived experiences of others is also a relevant part of the ethical adventure.

One important feature of experience is that it has subjective and objective components. On the subjective side, there are the psychological responses of an embodied consciousness submerged in a world of inter-relations. On the objective side stands the world and the relationship it bears to the subject that encounters it. While having experiences, both these aspects may undergo alteration, both for the better and the worse. The ethical adventurer takes a constant interest in these shifts, com-

paring them to one another, using their psychological faculties and embodied responses to interrogate them. Progress in the quest is affected by noticing and seeking out those which are to the good, and avoiding and repudiating those which are to the bad. This is something that is worked out first in reference to the particular experience being had and interpreted (as well as those already undergone and interpreted) and, second, with reference to the ideal of the best life which the adventurer seeks to grasp and emulate. Thus, for the adventurer, both the material and psychological aspects of experience are held to be relevant to the search. However, their relative importance will be a question settled by one's encounters with various phenomena and the interpretations of these happenings that emerge from episodes of lucid scrutiny of one's commitments and connections. Ultimately, Aristotle puts it best when he suggests that the thing which the person concerned with ethical progress consults are the 'things known to us'. The adventure proceeds not 'from the principles', or from the things known 'unqualifiedly', as Plato suggests in *The Republic*. It works towards them, towards the best life, to something revealed by seeking, searching, and *wondering*. In this way, the ethical adventurer seeks an overall coherence between what they know, what they do, and who they are.

While this may now seem to suggest a departure from a conception of the ethical sphere which would be familiar to many Deontologists and Consequentialists, this need not be so. First, while it is, of course, unlikely to be a universally popular conception, it should appear more amenable to those theorists than Nussbaum's. Taking the 'method' of ethics to be that of comparing conceptions of life to one another is a very theory laden approach. As has already been discussed, it requires one to make a good deal of claims about what the bearers of value are and about how it is that written fictions might relay something to their readers about them. However, exhorting one to return to and consult experience, is a method which tries to cut right to the heart of what ethics is and involves for *all* those who make a claim to stand within its sphere. In contrast to Nussbaum's Aristotelian Procedure, learning from experience is a completely open-ended approach, and something that Consequentialists and Deontologists would be hard pressed to deny they do, at least on occasion. What *they* are interested in too, at some level, is how to live better; how in particular, *anyone's* life might be improved. They are not generally amenable to the Nussbaum-ian idea that this can be worked out by comparing different concepts of life. That is, as I have suggested, the core of Diamond's criticism. But there is, I contend, a sense in which they are interested in encouraging people to choose to be, and to become, better people, both individually and as part of a community. And there is some evidence of this in the behaviour in the lived commitments of real-life Deontologists and Consequentialists: Peter Singer is a vegan and Alvin Plantinga was

a Christian. Even the most hard-core rationalist would have to admit that the *experience* of reasoning is an activity associated with the ethical sphere.

And the Ethical Adventurer seeks to encompass all of this within their specification of the adventure they propose to undertake, not by necessity, but as something that is worthy of consideration. They make no commitments, in advance, about which experiences will be especially important to its progress. Experimenting with different encounters will be important, they hold. But which are important, which are mundane, which are to the good, and which to the bad, is a question to be settled by undertaking the experiences themselves and by interpreting them, comparing them always to each other and to one's developing understanding, and lived feeling of, what it means to flourish. It may turn out that it is only the highly theoretical pursuits of attempting to conceptualise the good which make up the entirety of a true Ethical Adventure. This is a possibility the truly adventurous leave open at this stage, no matter how strong their suspicions may be that this will be shown to be at least partly mistaken. The important point is that, for the Ethical Adventurer, this cannot be *known* without engaging with the possibility that there is more to one's ethical life than *that*. And, in order to even begin addressing that question, one has to ask a question about experiences that goes beyond formal, theoretical activities. For, how else could one rule out the notion that the experience of fiction reading is among them?

### §1.5.3 *Further Advantages*

The reformed version of Nussbaum's proposed method of ethical inquiry, which I shall now continue to refer to as *Ethical Adventuring*, has a few other advantages, in comparison to Nussbaum's version.

First, by divorcing the aims of the inquiry from any substantive notion of the fictions' ethical contents, in the way just discussed, one may be able to engage with written fictions more richly and fruitfully. Doing this will permit one to develop a notion of the moral contours of the fictional texts independently of pure philosophical exploration. And this is an advantage because beginning with a substantive notion of what the ethical substance of written fictions consists in, like Nussbaum's, might encourage a sort of confirmation bias in the inquirer. One runs the risk of engaging solely with works that endorse the ethical intuitions one already subscribes to if one is fairly certain, already, of the kind of moral images these texts tend to present.



By contrast, assuming as little as possible about what the ethical substance of written fictions consists in, from the outset, promises to allow for a more open-ended exploration of the texts. In particular, it should help one's exploratory, experimental encounters with the fictions themselves to play a greater role in deciding one's ideas about what is ethically important about these works. This, in turn, should help to afford the fictions a more authoritative place in their own ethical interpretation, and allow them to tell their own tales about what it is that they contain that is morally significant. This, in turn, may foster an attitude where the texts are viewed as authorities on their own ethical resonances, encouraging a deeper, more sympathetic and more sophisticated engagement with the texts' contents, ethical and otherwise.

Second, asking 'how might fiction reading improve my life?' repositions the fictions at the heart of the project. And this shift may encourage one to take one's own encounters and exchanges with them as the primary touchstones in one's investigations of their ethical contours in another important sense. Namely, it may serve to transform the project into one that proceeds by more practical methods than the one Nussbaum proposes, allowing it to mirror practical methods of doing ethics even more closely than the procedure outlined by Nussbaum.

Despite Nussbaum's insistence that she does not wish to bring the fictions 'to some academic discipline which happens to ask ethical questions', it seems as though her attempt to specify a relationship between her brand of Aristotelian ethics and the content of certain written fictions runs the risk of doing exactly that. For, it seems that, for her to rightly call her project 'practical', she must be committed to some version of the claim that, for instance, her analyses of William James' *Golden Bowl* are records of practical exercises in critical self-reflection (Nussbaum 1990: 125-148). But this is at least a little dubious. Evidently Nussbaum's work on this subject is primarily read, and primarily *intended* to be read, by intellectuals interested in literature and philosophy, not by people looking for practical advice. Which is not to say that her work contains no practical suggestions. In fact, it does. But can this attempt to discover the good life by unearthing notions of life encoded into written fictions really be called 'practical'? In one sense, yes, it is possible for people to respond to the practical challenges of ethical living by doing this. But, the practicality of this approach is offset by those aspects of it which remain trenchantly theoretical. The practical benefits that can be derived from such an approach are only attainable by one who is also committed to seeing through a complex Aristotelian dialectic of ethical inquiry. And so, there is a basis for the claim that the mirror which Nussbaum's approach holds up to everyday ethical practices is slightly warped.

Asking, instead, 'how might fiction reading (or anything else) improve one's life?' is more like asking the questions one asks as part of everyday moral questioning.

This method is more phenomenologically familiar than the one Nussbaum outlines, and engages in. When faced with the choice to pursue one course of action or another, it is more common to reflect upon the way in which a particular choice might affect one's life, rather than on the life one might live if one makes that particular choice. Of course, the kind of choice matters. The choice to, say, convert to a new religion, join the army, or have a child, might be made according to a procedure closer to that envisaged by Nussbaum. It seems likely that when considering the practicalities of these more transformative decisions, what one is really considering is something like the adoption of a new way of living, or a fresh 'view' of life. As such, deciding well in these cases will probably involve, at some point, contemplation of whether the new life being considered, is, in its totality, a choiceworthy one.<sup>9</sup> However, more commonly, when one is considering, for example, taking up a new hobby, making more time to spend with one's family, or whether it is worth viewing the Northern Lights, the chances are that the deliberation will not be conducted by imagining whether one wants to be 'the kind of person that saw the Aurora at time t'. The more obvious question to ask when making this decision is whether one stands to enrich one's life by taking the trip. When considering whether or not to pick up a fictional text and begin to read, or when considering the insights one gleaned from finishing it, the more natural question to ask is, as experience itself teaches, the latter one. Therefore, the ethical adventurer's question seems like a more practically oriented one than Nussbaum's question.<sup>10</sup> It is certainly less demanding, asking one only to consider a part of life rather than a whole way of life.

Third, treating the ethical contributions of written fictions separately to those made in the same sphere by moral philosophy may serve to highlight certain distinctive features of the fictions that are potentially obscured by Nussbaum's approach. Nussbaum frames her inquiry as a reboot of the ancient quarrel, wherein authors as diverse as Plato, Euripides, Hesiod, Gorgias and Sophocles were making commensurate contributions to a joint project of ethical inquiry into the good life. But framing the modern project in the same way may only serve to downplay differences between the kinds of ethical understanding that such texts have to offer. Worryingly, it might even occlude certain things which render the ethical substance of these various works

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<sup>9</sup> This, notwithstanding some recent objections that have been made to the notion that choices of a similar form to these can be approached rationally see (Paul 2014)

<sup>10</sup> Additionally, there is at least one additional reason to suppose that this is a good way of understanding Aristotle's project in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. For instance, one of his most decisive critiques of Plato's account of the good (i.e. the Form of the Good) in NE 1:6 (1096a13-1097a14) is that it is 'not the sort of good that a human being can achieve in action or possess but that is the sort of good we are looking for' (1096b34-35) (my emphasis).

*distinctive*. If the contributions of written fictions are essentially comparable to the contributions of philosophy, then whatever it is that the fictions contribute, it must be fundamentally the same kind of insights as can be derived from doing philosophy. While this serves to put the two kinds of texts on an even keel, claiming that only ever express the same things threatens to lead one to ignore that there are crucial differences between these kinds of writing.

By contrast, the question about how fiction reading might improve one's life explicitly eschews, from the start, the notion that any commensurability between these various works' contributions is essential in the framing of the adventure. Again, it might well turn out that the moral insights of philosophy and written fictions are commensurate. Indeed, part of the argument of this chapter aims to establish that there are *some* contributions that fictions make to ethics which are fundamentally the same as philosophy. But avoiding any such commitment at the prefatory stage aims to secure further nuance in the approach by, again, taking the fictional texts as the ultimate authorities to which to appeal, when attempting to settle this question.

## §1.6 Deep, Sympathetic and Sophisticated

I began by proposing to answer the question: 'what conception of the ethical sphere and its contents should one adopt if one is interested in engaging in a deep, subtle and sophisticated exploration of the moral substance of written fictions?' I can now present an answer.

Through a diagnosis of the issue Diamond identifies, I have tried to describe a refined conception of the ethical sphere, building on Nussbaum's Aristotelian Procedure, but which can ameliorate some of the problems with that approach that Diamond raises. In addition, I hope to have shown that there are several further advantages posed by the adoption of this approach. The ethical adventurer seeks to understand how life can be made better, by making as few assumptions as possible about how that might be affected. Among their commitments are that there is a best life which it is theoretically possible to understand and attain, and that it can be understood and lived by having and consulting experience. The consultation consists in the effort to comprehend and affect the psychological and material shifts towards the good life, as it is grasped and lived. These are sometimes the product of happenstance. But the ethical adventurer also seeks them out, noticing them and trying to manifest them deliberately.

This part of the adventure takes an interest in the experience of fiction reading, and in the texts that supply the objective matter of the encounter. As a part of

this quest, the adventurer seeks to make sense of how their interactions with these works may affect psychological insights and material reorientations conducive to attaining and understanding the best form of life. The adventurer sets out to consider experiences of texts in the present, comparing these with those from the past, and with their developing sense of their life's progress, with a view to revealing ways of improving their thoughts and actions and those of others, where one's life touches those beyond their own in both the private and political spheres.

As such, the texts, and one's encounters with them, feature as *guides* in this part of one's adventure. The philosophical framing of the adventure is but a theoretical impetus which can be used to hold fast the goal which one is pursuing before one's mind. It is about progress towards whatever it is that makes life worth living. The texts themselves are taken to be the ultimate sources of authority, to which one should refer, when trying to describe and interpret *their* contributions to the ethical adventure. As such, one's engagement with them is taken to be the prime source of 'evidence' in the experimental adventure of one's life. This promises, on its face, to facilitate a deep, nuanced, sophisticated and sympathetic approach to the fictions and their contents and forms, moral and otherwise. However, for this to be established persuasively, one must embark on the adventure itself, something which I propose to do in Chapter 2. Before that I wish to finish by raising and answering an obvious and pressing question. If fictions are to be one's advisors in this part of the adventure, which among them ought one to consult?

## §1.7 Written Fictions as Guides

The current philosophical literature dealing with the connection between the moral sphere and written fictions usually includes some commentary on a fictional text or texts. The point of this is clear. Usually, such a commentary serves to illustrate an author's view about how the ethical contents of a work of written fiction might be fruitfully explored, concretising an author's characterisation of the process they have described. In this case they will be taken to be the culmination of a part of the Ethical Adventure. Whichever way one conceives of the ethical sphere and its relation to written fictions, however, an author who produces a commentary of this kind must make choices about which texts are suitable for the purposes of their discussion. Thus, whatever selection the author opts for, it will always, whether implicitly or explicitly, involve a commitment to a view about which written fictions, or which types of written fictions, are likely to have the richest moral content; to represent, in my parlance, particularly significant guides in one's Ethical Adventure.

In this section I will suggest that those who have thus far contributed such philosophical commentaries are typically committed to a particular view about which texts make the strongest contributions in the ethical sphere. I shall then propose reasons for taking a critical stance towards this position. Accordingly, I will recommend a revision to the selection of texts adopted in philosophical explorations of the moral dimensions of written fictions. I will finish by indicating the way in which I shall affect this revision in my own commentary in Chapter 5. But it might sound a little as though the cart is being put before the horse. Shouldn't one first tackle the question of how it is that written fictions and one's reading of them make one's life better, even at an abstract level, and *then* decide which texts best exemplify the theory?

This approach could be taken, but there are some grounds for avoiding it and, instead, addressing the selection of the texts first. I say this because it is not unreasonable to assume that different written fictions and different styles of written fictions may improve one's life in different ways. Different texts are suited to accompanying one on different parts of one's moral adventure. They will represent, at best, partial guides in one's overall journey and will, in all likelihood, guide one in different ways, using methods unique to *them*, to show the way towards improved ways of living. It is thus important to know, even at this stage, which guides one will be probing, consulting, exploring. The selection of the guides will already provide hints about the substance of the guidance they will give, and where that guidance might lead.

In many contemporary discussions, what one might call 'the canonical humanistic works of Western literature' are treated (either explicitly or implicitly) as the most fruitful sources to consult in exploring the ethical dimensions of written fictions. For instance, in *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum mainly uses novels by Henry James and Charles Dickens to exemplify her theories. On two isolated occasions she also makes use of works by Proust and Samuel Beckett and makes passing reference to Dostoyevsky and Jane Austen. When it comes to Frank Palmer's turn to exemplify his theories about the ethically edifying functions of written fictions, he discusses Shakespeare's plays *Macbeth* and *King Lear* while making a few references to *Othello* and to Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Palmer 1992:181-249). John Gibson makes a similar choice in *Fiction and the Weave of Life*, using *Othello* to illustrate his theory (Gibson 2007:79-123). Jenefer Robinson centres her discussion of the sentimental education offered by fiction reading around a discussion of Edith Wharton's novel *The Reef* (Robinson 2005:154-194). Wayne Booth, while somewhat less prone to an excessive focus on canonical humanistic literature, nonetheless uses his experiences of reading *Huckleberry Finn* as an overarching example in his discussion of the moral dimensions of literature (Booth 1988). These are just some of the monographs. Paper after paper in the academic literature on fiction and moral inquiry/education, engages with the

same authors, and the same styles, broadly construed: Dostoyevsky, Hermann Melville, the Brontës, and other canonical authors in the tradition of humanistic realist novels. The view underlying these choices seems fairly obvious. If one is to explore the moral dimensions of written fictions (or as many of these commentators prefer, 'literature'), one should stick with 'the classics', ideally, historical, realistic works which position the 'human drama' front and centre.

Before seeking to critique this position too harshly, it is worth pointing out that there are some considerations that support this approach. For instance, these works are well known, meaning that readers of philosophical commentaries on them are likely to have some familiarity with the works under consideration. This familiarity with the texts is likely, in turn, to facilitate a greater understanding of the philosophical commentary accompanying them, and hence, of the theory the commentary is intended to exemplify. Similarly, the focus on works of 'literature' most likely has something to do with the fact that academic philosophers have a taste for such texts. In other words, it just so happens that intellectuals enjoy reading 'intellectual' books, and that is not a particularly surprising or, in itself, distasteful fact. When writing about written fictions in whatever context, one will have to write about texts one has read, and so, any selection is bound to reflect the tastes of the author making the selection. Indeed, my own commentaries will be no different, in this respect, to those I am criticising here. But one can see the problems with the approach taken by these authors, by turning to some of the arguments that have been explicitly articulated in defence of it. Take this example from Robinson, for instance:

With reference to a novel such as *The Reef*, it is easy to imagine readers who would find the book as well as the main characters unbelievably stuffy and boring. Sophisticated readers who prefer the detached irony of many contemporary writers (Calvino, Coover, DeLillo) may find Edith Wharton's style hopelessly old-fashioned, and her interest in psychologically probing her characters tediously out-of-date. At the other end of the scale, unsophisticated readers may be willing to try to relate to the characters but find themselves unable to do so because they find the social mores described in the book unrecognisable. Thus many teenagers and young twenty-somethings who 'hook up' for the night at parties are unlikely to relate to Anna's repulsion at Darrow's infidelity or to Darrow's remorse at his treatment of Sophie. As Anna reflects interminably upon her passion for Darrow and whether she should yield to it, one can almost hear the cries of 'get a life!' If interpretation rests upon emotional involvement, however, *such readers cannot interpret because they cannot experience the novel emotionally in the way the author seems to intend* (Robinson 2005: 193 emphasis mine).

Pre-empting the criticism that a text such as *The Reef* may be too dated to speak to contemporary moral concerns, Robinson here chooses not to concede that the problem might lie, at least in part, with her choice of this novel for this purpose. Instead, she insists that the fault must lie entirely with *readers*. It is not that she has chosen a text that is rather 'out of date' or 'old fashioned', but that certain readers simply cannot experience the novel in the way they need to in order to interpret its moral contents. Aside from the fact that her remarks about 'unsophisticated' 'twenty-some-things' who 'hook-up' at parties are rather disparaging, the claim that those who would make a different choice would do so either because they are snooty intellectuals or hedonistic dullards ignores the fact that there might be reasonable grounds for requesting a different selection, rather than for insisting on a more sympathetic attitude from the audience. What might these reasons be, then?

According to longstanding tradition, there is something especially 'authoritative' about the language and style of works in the Western realist tradition (Thiong'o 1986). However, in recent years, many literary critics have become increasingly sceptical of the aura of 'authority' that has long been held to hover about such works. In particular, Postcolonial and Feminist commentators have argued persuasively that the persistent focus on such works in the academic sphere is motivated at least in part by cultural and historical biases against works produced in non-Western contexts and by those from marginalised backgrounds (Russ 1983). Any exploration of written fictions in the academic context which ignores such arguments thus remains open to the objection that the selection of texts that has been chosen is motivated in part by pernicious socio-economic and historical factors rather than purely by the fact that these works are worthy of re-examination based purely on their artistic merits. It is incumbent upon all commentators, therefore, to engage with contributions from non-Western, diasporic and marginalised authors. A reasonable requirement would hence be to reform the typical selection to include some works by authors whose voices have most often been ignored or silenced.

Second, the view of many of the authors in the extant philosophical debate also leads them to a focus attention on a narrow set of texts. All of the works discussed by Nussbaum, Robinson, Gibson and the rest, take, as their central subject matter, the 'human drama' and tackle it in a more or less 'realistic' style. Dickens, James, Melville etc. are part of a tradition in Western fiction which looks to render the lives of people in their day and age in exacting detail, the kind of detail that makes these lives feel *real*. But there are many other traditions (Modernist, Magic Realist, Speculative etc.) which address different things, and which adopt different styles. If one's interest is in how *written fictions* and one's reading of them might improve one's way

of life, the interest ought to be in *written fictions* at large, and not only *realist* fictions. This suggests including at least some texts from outside the realist tradition.

Finally, the assumption adopted by all the philosophers I have pointed to leads them to focus their attention on works primarily written before the twentieth century. Now, of course, some of what these older texts treat as morally salient is unarguably of timeless importance. But the fact that these works are from an earlier period in history inevitably means that what they present as morally pertinent will sometimes be irrelevant to contemporary concerns. Similarly, works written before the twentieth century, in particular, will be unable to bring to view certain ethical concerns which are pressing for those living in the current socio-political climate. For example, Dickens' concerns about poverty in *Oliver Twist* are probably as relevant now as they always were. This is a part of the work's moral substance that secures its timeless importance. By contrast, however, Dickens' anti-Semitic moralising around the character of Fagin looks hopelessly bigoted to twenty first century eyes. Similarly, despite describing the London smog, he could never have presented this as morally concerning due to the way it contributed, even then, to the Greenhouse Effect. Thus, while some of the ethical substance of *Oliver Twist* is perennially valuable, some of it no longer seems worthy of in-depth consideration. Further, some of the moral content that is omitted from the work is of a kind which it is critical for one to engage with in the contemporary context. If one is interested, then, in exploring moral problems that are not only timeless, but of immediate relevance (as it seems one should, if one's adventure with the texts is to have a claim to completeness), a selection of texts which includes some more modern works seems to be a reasonable requirement.

The texts I will be exploring in detail are non-realist written fictions, from the twentieth century, by authors from historically marginalised backgrounds. In particular, I take my selection from the tradition Donna Haraway (1991) calls 'cyborg' fictions; works by authors such as Vonda Macintyre, Joanna Russ, James Tiptree Jr., Ursula le Guin, Octavia E. Butler and Samuel R. Delany. Apart from fulfilling the criterion I have just articulated (and my own preference for Speculative fictions), there is another reason for my focus on these texts. As Haraway says, the

Cyborg monsters of feminist science fiction define quite different political possibilities and limits from those possessed by the mundane fiction of Man and Woman. (Ibid: 65)

Exploring texts which deal with subjects as remote as possible from those addressed in the works philosophers have previously discussed, stands to raise the odds in favour of discovering overlooked and unexpected ethical insights. The more radically the input is altered, the more dramatically the output will be affected. By choosing



works ‘where characters refuse the readers search for innocent wholeness while granting the wish for heroic quests, exuberant eroticism, and serious politics’ (Ibid: 62), the opportunity to discover new, unexpected guidance will be more readily seized. As a result, I believe, the adventure will be richer and more rewarding. In Chapter 5 I will be discussing three major cyborg fictions of the last century: Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, Butler’s *Dawn* and Delany’s *Dhalgren*.

## §1.8 Objections

In this section I consider two objections to my approach. First, the concept of ‘written fictions’ might be claimed to be overly inclusive. Some may wish to press the worry that connecting this broad class of texts with the ethical sphere runs the risk of including *too many* works within the ethical purview. Ought one really to accept that Mills and Boon, or tacky crime novels, can act as guides in a complex ethical adventure guided by Neo-Aristotelian metaethics?

Second, if it is ‘written fictions’ which are held to be connected with the sphere of the ethical, does this not imply that a very wide reading will be necessary to improving one’s life? And would that not, then, stand in tension with the *practical* aspect of an Aristotelian conception of the moral sphere? The proposed understanding might be taken to imply the need to cloister oneself away and devour as many written fictions as one can, something which lacks the intuitive appeal of practical advice.

There are ways of getting around both of these potential problems. In making use of the phrase ‘written fictions’, and suggesting that one explore their moral contents, one does not, thereby, assume that the moral substance of all the texts in this class will be equally significant or worthy of exploration. Nothing about the project I have outlined requires one to accept that, say, E.L. James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey* contains ethical content that runs as deep as that found in works like *The Left Hand of Darkness*, or *Dawn*. Hence, while my use of the phrase ‘written fictions’ is permissive, it is not indiscriminately so, either by necessity or design. In fact, the reverse is true. It should be clear to anyone that has read at least a few different kinds of fictional texts, who has embarked upon a part of the Ethical Adventure already, that there will be some variance in the quality of their composition. This variation in the quality of works’ technical execution (sentence structure and variety, word choice, pacing, characterisation, descriptions of *mise-en-scène* etc.) typically bears a relation to the vividness of the insights that can be yielded from engagement with such texts. As such, even if

one holds that all written fictions, are, in principle, within the sphere of proper ethical concern, one need not hold that all written fictions make *equal* contributions within it. My position is underpinned by a similar thought to that which seems latent in Audre Lorde's remarks about farmers in the USSR when she visited there in 1979:

even amongst those miles of cotton being harvested in the Uzbekhi sun, people are reading and no matter what you may say about censorship, they are still reading and they are reading an awful lot (Lorde 1984: 23).

My suspicion is that while some novels will discharge only a somewhat limited ethical function, on account of their compositional shortcomings, there will remain a relevant question to ask about whether reading any fiction might contribute to the improvement of one's present way of living. Admitting that does not amount to a denial that discriminations of taste or quality are important.

Of course, such a position raises the question of which heuristics ought to be brought to bear in distinguishing the texts which possess greater depth. This is not an issue that I will seek to settle by offering *a priori* recommendations. For, I expect, further, that any such attempt would be in danger of specifying another restrictive class ('morally deep fictions'), that either ends up being covertly identified with, or falling prey to the same kinds of issues as, the already rejected categories of 'literary fictions' and/or 'canonical fictions'. Instead, in keeping with the spirit of the adventure, the way to go about sorting between more edifying and more mundane works is to make this a *part of* one's Ethical Adventure. In keeping with the open-ended spirit of the proposed project, on this view, a fairly wide reading within the class of 'written fictions' is likely to reveal which texts, or types of texts, offer the best opportunities for a sophisticated probing of the moral contours of the class writ large. By engaging with written fictions, one discovers not only *what* ethical substance they contain, but also *how much* and *how valuable* it is, and the ways in which a text's form and contents contribute to bringing ethical insights into view.

This recommendation also highlights something of an important theme that will be developed in the chapters to follow, and which has already been mentioned in §5 of this chapter. In the ethical exploration of written fiction, the fictions, and the reader's responses to those fictions, ought to represent the ultimate authorities in the debate about what it is that they contribute to the ethical sphere. The adventure, as I have conceived of it, is a partly experimental one, but one where one's hypotheses are not, and cannot be, precisely pre-formulated. Rather, they must be prefatory and vague to begin with, and indeed, to some extent, in their final expression, for, 'our discussion will be adequate if we make things perspicuous enough to accord with the subject matter' (1094b13-14). Every turn away from the subject at

hand (written fictions, life, and their connections) towards abstract speculation is akin to requesting strict demonstrations from a rhetorician or accepting merely persuasive arguments from a mathematician (1094b16). All such moves are incongruent with one's lived sense of the norms that govern these domains, and are inimical to the spirit of the investigation that Aristotle recommends. By contrast, any turn to the fictions themselves for 'evidence', or guidance, underscores the fact that the adventurer ought to aim at discovering philosophical contributions made by written fictions, and not fictional contributions made to philosophy. This is in line with my earlier suggestion that Asimov and Waugh (and others), have *philosophical* contributions to make, not that they have fictional contributions to make to philosophy.

Turning to the second objection: if one is to undertake an adventure which involves 'fairly wide reading' within the class of written fictions, wouldn't this plunge my own claim, that the proposed adventure is a genuinely practical one, into even greater jeopardy? How ought one to solve the second worry in light of the solution to the first?

To answer this question, it is worth returning to the overarching question that guides the Ethical Adventure: 'how might x make one's life better?' And, although, in the present context, this 'x' is being filled in with the phrase 'written fictions and one's activity of reading them', this does not imply that written fictions alone will provide any special answers to this question. Much less does the use of this question imply that one should ask this question *only* of written fictions, nor that one must or should be a heavy consumer of written fictions if one is to find a satisfactory answer to the particular form of the question posed here. Of course, it may turn out that a very wide reading of written fictions is necessary for this, but the use of the question as a theoretical motive for undertaking a part of one's Ethical Adventure does not itself imply this. Indeed, in its most abstract form, the motivating question actually involves assuming that any terms which describe any part of the human or natural world might provide a question which could be used as a good theoretical stimulus for a different part of one's adventure (e.g. how does appreciating visual art, practicing cookery, travelling, working etc. make one's life better?). To that end, the question rather assumes that the contemplation and appreciation of every artefact of human creation and every natural phenomenon is, in principle, a potentially useful appendage to one's Ethical Adventure. Once this is realised, the worry is seen to take on a slightly different, and more dialectical form. If it is true that any natural or human product might be a worthy companion in one's Ethical Adventure, why focus, here, then, on written fictions? What is *special* about them?

This trickier and subtler form of the question is harder to answer. Some appeals can be made to historical trends and contemporary academic practices, but

these considerations are not particularly persuasive. Just because many people have taken a special interest in written fictions throughout history, whether in connection with ethics or not, this does not prove that they have been right to do so.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, the fact that those in the academy find written fictions interesting (in connection with ethics or otherwise) provides a similarly contingent basis for taking one's forays with written fictions to be a significant part of one's overall Ethical Adventure.

At this stage, the best answer that can be given is that these texts have some *distinctive* part to play in the ethical sphere. This is a view that I will defend in Chapters 2 and 4. For now, this commitment can provide a schematic answer to the question that frames one's ethical adventure. Written fictions may improve one's life because reading they can make *distinctive ethical contributions*. In Chapter 2, I will try to develop a promising description of the distinctive contributions that these texts might make, and employ it as a criterion of a successful theory of how it is that fiction reading may improve one's life. I will then discuss and critique a series of theories which have a claim to meet this criterion. These theories all purport to explain written fictions' ethical contributions with reference to their playing a part in a process of something one might call *ethical education*. The questions for the next chapter, therefore, are: what roles do written fictions play in the process of moral education? And how is participation in this process related to the progress of one's Ethical Adventure?

## §1.9 Conclusion

Having spent this chapter edging closer to a return to the texts themselves, I now suggest a full perambulation to the starting point: to our friends Tony and Mr Todd; Daneel and Bailey.

First, I hope to have shown that Waugh's image of Mr. Todd is well drawn. Returning to the same texts for the purposes of 'instruction' is, at some point, impotent. Repeat the same thing enough times and one is unlikely to yield any further benefit. Certainly, Todd has not benefitted from the readings of Dickens he has listened to over the years. His denying Tony any means of escape, his spiking of Tony's

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<sup>11</sup> Indeed, one of the earliest treatments of the connection between fiction and ethics, namely, Plato's in *The Republic*, is notoriously ill considered and ends up with a recommendation for widespread state censorship of art (see especially: 377a-403c). More modern examples such as Theodor Adorno's diatribes against Jazz music (Adorno: 1936) provide equal testament to the claim that academic discussions of aesthetic creations are often plagued by short-sightedness.

drink, his domination of the indigenous population with the threat of violence are all testament to that.

But there is a further poignant irony in this story. For, it is fitting that Tony should be consigned to his particular fate. Tony's failed adventure in life as a whole is reflected in the conclusion of his actual 'adventure' to the Amazon. Tony's slavish acceptance of the social mores of the *ancien regime* is part of what makes him incapable of negotiating the moral world around him. To be reminded of the 'importance' of those mores through his eternal reading of Dickens at the conclusion of his very real adventure is, then, highly apt. Just as in Dante's *Inferno*: the punishment fits the crime. Thus, to avoid Todd's madness, to ensure one's life's adventure goes better than does Tony's, a new approach is required. With a new selection of guides to consult in this part of the moral adventure, I hope to reduce the risk of the expedition being tainted by cultural chauvinism, narrowness and irrelevance. What should hopefully be clear from the latter sections of this chapter, is that, when I do seek the guidance of the cyborgs, the kinds of advice *those* works will turn out to offer, and the way that they will be found to offer it, will be strange, unfamiliar; unlike anything so far discussed; more truly *adventurous*.

Likewise, I hope to have shown that Asimov's image of Daneel and Bailey is accurate. There is, as Nussbaum, and myself suggest, a connection between one's conception of the ethical world and the degree to which one is capable of meaningfully probing the moral depths of written fictions. Further, as I have pointed out, modifying Nussbaum's stance, Deontological (and Consequentialist) approaches to ethics both tend to leave certain things out of the moral sphere that an adventurer intent on exploring these moral contents would be well advised to consider including within it. Like with Waugh's text, something further that can now be drawn out from my use of this work.

Once the killer is caught and apprehended, Bailey lays out the evidence to Daneel. Once Daneel is persuaded, something very interesting occurs. The killer, while malicious in intent, killed the victim by accident in a classic case of mistaken identity. In addition, for complex political reasons, it turns out that the killer would be better left free, with Bailey's and Daneel's knowledge of his guilt used as leverage to secure a more worthy aim than individual justice. Surprisingly, Daneel accepts this verdict straight away, before pausing and, 'almost as though he were surprised at his own words', intoning, to the murderer: 'Go, and sin no more.'

So, there are two further morals to the story here. First, that one's interactions with written fictions, interpreted in the light of experience, can rightly serve both to set, and reset, the parameters of one's conception of the ethical world. For, it is Bai-

ley's reading of the Bible, and Daneel's interpretation of it compared against his experiences in the caves of steel, that teaches him to take seriously the 'human impulse known as mercy' and to include it within the ethical purview. Second, and most importantly for what follows, interactions with written fictions can act as sources of transformative ethical insights. Consulting the texts themselves is the best route to grasping the nature of their ethical contributions. For, this is Daneel's first step on an adventure which leads him to transcend the limitations of almost all living creatures. While initially bound to the maxim that he 'may not harm a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm', his grasp that a higher principle of justice is necessary is his first step towards deriving the further principle that he 'may not harm *humanity* or, through inaction, allow *humanity*, to come to harm'. It is his first step towards becoming a true Ethical Adventurer, one who takes the substance of their experiences as the ultimate touchstones in the quest for moral progress. His injunction to 'go and sin no more' reveals a new concern, one not limited to the protection of individuals by strictly specifiable laws, but with how *anyone's* life, the life all humans share, experience and live together, may be made more choice-worthy.

## 2. Cognitivism and Neo-Cognitivism

### *Chapter Synopsis*

The primary aim of this chapter is to provide a critical overview of theories which have a claim to answer one of the questions raised at the close of Chapter 1, namely: what roles do written fictions play in the process of moral education? I subdivide these theories into two main classes: *Cognitivism*, and *Neo-Cognitivism*. The latter I further divide into two sub-classes, labelling them *Conceptual* and *Phronetic* Neo-Cognitivism.

I begin by laying out the commitments of Cognitivism. I then explore various critiques of this theory that have been offered in the philosophical literature. First, I consider an unsuccessful objection that has been offered by Lamarque and Olsen. Despite their argument's failure, I suggest that it proceeds from a critical basis which can largely be vindicated by adverting to an alternative set of arguments. These alternative ways of substantiating Lamarque and Olsen's intuition are the so-called 'no-evidence' and 'no-argument' arguments. Ultimately, I argue, these arguments, while representing an improvement over the one offered by Lamarque and Olsen, remain insufficient to completely see-off Cognitivism. Turning next to the so-called 'banality' objection, I again propose that this argument does not offer decisive grounds for dismissing the Cognitivist's answer to the overarching question addressed in this chapter. Instead, what emerges from this critique is a restricted version of Cognitivism. Following Dorothy Walsh, I then present what she and I take to be a decisive objection to Cognitivism's claim to be able to answer the primary question addressed in this chapter. This final critique of Cognitivism leaves the restricted view intact but supplies a basis for rejecting its usefulness in the present dialectical context. Two important criteria emerge from this critical overview of Cognitivism. First, that the ethical

contributions of written fictions ought to be, in some sense, deep, significant, or revelatory – that is, truly worthy of being called ethical *insights*. Second, that the contributions of these texts in the moral sphere ideally ought to be *distinctive* of those texts, *qua* written fictions.

In the long expository section that follows, I outline the commitments of the Neo-Cognitivist family of views. Starting with an explanation of the how these alternative theories have the resources to meet the demands of the account being sought, I then offer an overview of different ways in which the sub-classes of Neo-Cognitivism, the Conceptual and Phronesis views, have been fleshed out in the literature by authors including Noël Carroll, Catherin Elgin, John Gibson, Martha Nussbaum, Jenefer Robinson and Iris Murdoch. I then critique their proposals. My main objection here essentially reiterates Walsh's decisive criticism of Cognitivism. In essence, this objection is that the Neo-Cognitivists fail to identify a distinctive way in which written fictions can play a part in improving the reader's life. I then hint at the direction in which my own account will be developed in the following two chapters. This is to adopt a phenomenological approach. I conclude by first outlining how this represents a departure from the thinking that underlies typical Neo-Cognitivist accounts. I also discuss how a phenomenological approach better aligns with the conception of the ethical sphere that I articulated and defended in Chapter 1.



## §2.1 Introduction

Poetry, fiction, drama – I am interested in the arts of incident only so far as fiction touches life; oh no, not in any vulgar, autobiographical sense, rather at the level of the most crystalline correspondence. Consider: If an author, passing a mirror, were to see one day not himself but some character of his invention, though he might be surprised, might even question his sanity, he would still have something by which to relate.

Samuel R. Delany, *Dhalgren*

Here the unknown journalist, who is a stand-in for Delany himself, expresses their preoccupation with the relation that written fictions bear to life. As they make clear, their interest is not in the simplistic ‘autobiographical’ way that these texts might, in some sense, relate information about the events one witnesses or persons one encounters. Instead, the source of their intrigue is the way in which written fictions may be taken to, in a different and more direct way, relate to life as if by holding up a mirror which reflects a ‘crystalline’ (though, of course, inverted) image of it. Hence, this sense in which written fictions may relate to life gestures towards the idea that one’s experiences of these texts can engender distinctive insights. It isn’t possible to pass by a real mirror, in real life, and see a character from a novel looking back at you. But the idea that one’s encounters with fictional texts might offer an experience like *that* hints at these texts’ ability to engender new relationships with life – with how it is understood and lived.

Nevertheless, explaining the aptness of Delany’s vision of written fictions’ relationship to one’s lived experience, and hence, to one’s Ethical Adventure, is not the aim of this chapter. That will not be possible until the conclusion of Chapter 4, where I will present my own account of a distinctive way in which fiction reading may make one’s life better. There I shall interpret Delany’s metaphor and explain how the theory I defend there can make sense of that interpretation. Instead, the aim of this chapter is to explore and critique theories which seem to have a claim to explain something like the relationship Delany seeks to characterise in the quote above.

All the authors discussed in this chapter seek to explain the complex relationship between day-to-day life and the images of it encountered in written fiction, in terms of the texts playing a role in a program of *ethical education*. Ethical education can be treated as a distinctive and fairly formal learning process in which the student (in this case the reader of fiction) engages in various mental activities, which yield

*moral insights*. The mental activities involved could be various. Prominent suggestions from the philosophical literature include: the imagination, cognition, and affect. The moral insights delivered via the deployment of these mental processes are harder to specify in a manner which is non-reductive or presumptuous. In the most general sense, however, they are usually held to consist in forms of affective reorientation, cognitive apprehension, and imaginative grasping, which in some way clarify, transform or elevate one's modes of interacting with, interpreting, and relating to the world of human thought and action – in short, with life.

There is, then, a close relationship between the ethical education these authors suppose is provided by fiction reading, and the role that is supposed to be played by those texts in Ethical Adventuring. All those thinkers who style the ethical functions of fiction reading as broadly 'educative' hold that one's interactions with these texts can affect ethical transformations in their readers' lives. Thus, for them, as well as for the Ethical Adventurer, the experience of fiction reading is supposed to yield forms of insight or understanding which serve to alter, refine and/or elevate one's modes of comprehending and interacting with the world of human thought and action. Where exactly the two notions part ways is something that I will explain in §2.4. There I will suggest that the principal shortcoming of the theories discussed here finds its source in the narrowness of the program of 'education' to which the fictional texts are seen as making contributions. But to see this, it will help to consider what use this model of ethical education can serve on its own. Once this is achieved, its expected results will be more clearly analysable with reference to the Ethical Adventuring that I am trying to describe and endorse.

For now, then, the question to address is: 'what role might fictions and fiction reading play in a program of ethical education?' §2.2 begins by introducing the answer that a *Cognitivist* might give to this question. Following that, a series of criticisms that have been levelled at this sort of account are explored. Discussing these criticisms serves two aims. First, to reveal an acceptable (though very minimal) version of *Cognitivism* that can make sense of written fictions' morally educative roles, and second, to set the stage for the more sophisticated *Neo-Cognitivist* positions that will be explored in §2.3. §2.3 begins by describing *Neo-Cognitivism* and explaining how it overcomes certain problems that arise for a *Cognitivist* account. Following this, two varieties of *Neo-Cognitivism* – the *Conceptual* view and the *Phronesis* view – are described and distinguished. In §2.4 I argue that the *Neo-Cognitivist* accounts described in §2.3, while plausible as far as they go, do not fully explain the nature of the guidance that written fictions can offer to the Ethical Adventurer. I conclude by gesturing towards my own account, the development and defence of which is the subject of the next two chapters.

## §2.2 Cognitivism

Cognitivism is the view that cognitive engagement with artworks, including written fictions, can deliver *cognitive benefits*, and that such benefits are usually of central importance in understanding the value of art more generally. These cognitive benefits are generally understood to consist in some kind of *propositional apprehension*, e.g. the formation of new beliefs, or propositional knowledge (hence its having sometimes been called the ‘Propositional view’, in connection with written fictions) (Lamarque and Olsen 1994; Mikkonen 2015). The propositional apprehension that is supposed to be brought about, through one’s interactions with artworks is thus held to be *cognitively beneficial*, at least insofar as it augments one’s stock of epistemic goods.

There is a fairly trivial sense in which Cognitivism about written fictions seems true. (My discussion in what follows is about the merits of Cognitivism as a thesis pertaining to the value of written fictions. But from this point, I’ll just refer to ‘Cognitivism’, instead of ‘Cognitivism about written fictions’.) While reading fiction, it is not uncommon to encounter propositions and form true beliefs about their contents as a result of cognitive processing. For instance, anyone who has read Butler’s novel *Kindred* will have read the following sentences.

There were two important slave children right here in Maryland. The older one, living here in Talbot County, would be called Frederick Douglass, after a name change or two. The second, growing up a few miles south in Dorchester county was Harriet Ross, eventually to be Harriet Tubman. Someday she was going to cost Eastern Shore plantation owners a huge sum of money by guiding three hundred of their runaway slaves to freedom. And further down in Southampton, Virginia, a man named Nat Turner was biding his time. There were more. (Butler 1979: 153-54)

It seems reasonable to suppose, as the Cognitivist does, that the reader of these sentences, or other similar sentences, may end up forming some true beliefs about their contents. For instance, the reader of the sentences above may learn something about the history of the US abolitionist movement, provided they have engaged in a suitable kind of cognitive processing.

In a similarly straightforward way, the Cognitivist may say that people also learn *moral truths* while reading fiction. Thus, they may claim, written fictions play a distinctive part in one’s moral education by engaging one in forms of cognitive processing which lead to the formation of (true) ethical beliefs or knowledge. There are

two primary ways in which this might happen, according to a typical Cognitivist position. The first is the one just outlined. The reader encounters a portentous sentence in a novel, such as this one, from a few pages later in *Kindred* – ‘repressive societies always seemed to understand the dangers of ‘wrong’ ideas’ (Ibid: 155) – and comes to believe, or know, that it is true. This way of coming to moral insights I will label cognitive processing and apprehension of *explicitly thematic* propositions. I call these propositions ‘explicitly thematic’ because they are those which are baldly stated within the text itself, and because they become candidates for belief or knowledge simply based on their presence in the text, the cognitive attitude adopted by the reader, and the alethic status of their content.

The second way that a Cognitivist might suppose fiction reading can yield a grasp of ethical truths is a little more sophisticated. They might propose that, in addition to simply *encountering* and apprehending explicitly thematic propositions, a more subtle kind of cognitive processing allows readers to extract truths that are ‘implied’ (in a weak sense) by a text. The idea, roughly, is that through one’s encounter with a text as a whole, or large portions of it, one can build:

a chain of interpretation, of which the individual dramatic events are links and through which a claim is developed, a point pursued, until a structured insight is yielded. (Gibson 2007: 90)

For instance, they might say that by engaging in a harder and more complex kind of cognitive processing of a written fiction – what one might term ‘interpretation’ – one may be able to derive a true proposition with morally significant content from the text or a large portion thereof. This moral ‘message’ may then become a candidate for belief or knowledge. Trying to make sense of the narrative in *Kindred*, for instance, might lead one to derive a moral insight from it, which is never stated in the text – something like: ‘it is shockingly easy for people to recreate abusive patterns of behaviour, and this is part of what makes abuse so morally heinous.’

A Cognitivist-style answer to the question about written fiction’s role in moral education has some *prima facie* plausibility. Despite this, there are many issues with answering the question in this way. In giving their answer, the Cognitivist seems to have to hold the view that evaluating the *truth* of the claims contained in or derived from written fictions is a valuable pursuit. For, without appraising the explicitly or implicitly thematic propositions contained in, or expressed by, a work of fiction, according to some standard of alethic assessment, how could one claim one’s mere grasp of them to be cognitively *beneficial*? After all, it is not obvious that the mere *formation* of new beliefs ought to be regarded as epistemically beneficial, much less so that it should be viewed as in some way ‘illuminating’, morally or otherwise. For

example, reading a written fiction might expose readers to propositions which are false and thereby encourage them to entertain claims which are corrupting or vicious. It seems that some form of alethic assessment must be brought to bear on the explicitly and implicitly thematic propositions one encounters or derives from a reading of the novel, if the Cognitivist's account is to be satisfactory.

Peter Lamarque and Stein Olsen advance this point, suggesting, additionally, that if the assessment of the truth value of the propositions apprehended from reading fiction really is a valuable pursuit, then one should be able to find some evidence of this activity being undertaken by expert analysts of written (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 331-332). In particular, they suppose that one should be able to find clear evidence of this in the writings of literary critics (Ibid: 332). For, it is *they* who are most qualified to appraise written fictions, and, accordingly, the propositions contained in or expressed by those fictions (Ibid: 333). But to the contrary, Olsen and Lamarque contend, literary critics rarely appraise the truth value of explicitly or implicitly thematic propositions (Ibid: 332-333). Thus, they conclude that a Cognitivist-style theory about written fiction's morally edifying functions fails to capture the best way of exploring the ethical dimensions of written fictions and, hence, to explain the role that this activity plays in a program of moral education (Ibid: 334).

There is something *prima facie* attractive in this argument. But there are also reasons to doubt its decisiveness. First, taking the discursive practices of literary criticism as paradigmatic of the most valuable, and thus most appropriate, way of assessing explicitly and implicitly thematic propositions, leads to a restrictive understanding of proper scholarly practice, *vis-à-vis* these texts. For example, the following lines from the *Pardoner's Tale* might be taken to imply that 'pardoners were viewed as engaging in corrupt practices':

Is al my prechyng, for to make hem free  
To yeven hir pens, and namely unto me.  
For myn entente is nat but for to wynne,  
And nothyng for correccioun of synne. (401-04)

However, a historian who derived this implicit thematic proposition from the text and then proceeded to assess its truth would be doing something inappropriate with the text, according to Olsen and Lamarque's view. For, assessing the truth of whether these lines imply a critique of church practices in late medieval England is not something that would typically be done by a literary critic. Hence, to that extent, the historian's treatment of the text would be less than ideal in Olsen and Lamarque's view. But this seems restrictive. The fact that the *Canterbury Tales* is primarily regraded as a literary text ought not to mean that it cannot be analysed by methods more common

to a historian than a literary critic. It seems reasonable that two commentators might bring to bear different norms of interpretation in their discussions of a text (e.g. a philosopher and a classicist offering readings of Plato's *Symposium*) and yet neither produce a treatment of the text that is fundamentally more or less 'appropriate' than the other.

Second, the view that written fictions are assessed most appropriately according to the standards of literary experts seems to raise problems for fringe cases. For instance, it seems to force one to ask the question about whether it is more appropriate to engage in a literary or philosophical analysis of Plato's dialogues. One might then wonder: 'what about the narrative sections in Kierkegaard and Nietzsche? Or, what about Sartre's novel *Nausea*, Olaf Stapledon's *Starmaker* and *First and Last Men*, Borges' philosophical short stories, or the works of Kafka?' In short, without supplying at least a rough criterion for establishing whether these works, amongst others, are really 'philosophy' or 'fiction', an objection like Olsen and Lamarque's generates more problems than it solves. What these cases seem to reveal is that there are ways of divining moral messages in certain texts, that are treated as respectable even in the academic context, but which, unlike the approach taken by many literary critics, match up fairly broadly with a Cognitivist theory of the role that these works play in ethical education.

Third, Lamarque and Olsen's claim that literary theorists rarely analyse the truth of the messages contained in written fictions seems only to apply to some schools of 'literary criticism'. It is not a totally heterodox methodology in, for instance, Feminist and Post-Colonial studies, to analyse the truth of ethical ideas that are expressed or implied by works of fiction.

These points supply a good basis for rejecting Olsen and Lamarque's argument against a Cognitivist-style account. However, before moving on, notice that Olsen and Lamarque's argument is motivated by a critical stance against the Cognitivist's *epistemological* claim. Their criticism is based on the *prima facie* plausible intuition that it is in some sense improper to try and understand written fictions as texts designed to impart propositional truths. And, while an appeal to the standard practices of literary criticism is insufficient to ground a rejection of the view that written fictions should be valued as vehicles for true beliefs or knowledge, other, more plausible grounds can be supplied in order to vindicate this intuition.

These other grounds are discussed by Noël Carroll in his 'no-argument' and 'no-evidence' arguments (Carroll 2002:4-7). The no-evidence argument begins from the premise that neither the explicitly thematic propositions that a written fiction contains, nor the implicit ones that it expresses, are accompanied by *evidence* to back them up. As Hillary Putnam puts the point:

no matter how profound the psychological insights of a novelist may seem to be, they cannot be called *knowledge* if they have not been *tested* (Putnam 1976: 89, latter emphasis mine).

This supplies a reason to conclude that written fictions are not texts which are designed to impart truths. For, they do not offer support, in the form of evidence, for the truth of the propositions they contain or imply. On this basis, it seems, one would be entitled to conclude that written fictions cannot furnish their readers with the epistemic benefits that a Cognitivist might claim. If written fictions contain no evidence to support their propositions, then they cannot supply their readers with assuredly true beliefs or knowledge in morally significant propositions.

Evidence is not the only thing that supports propositional knowledge. Arguments might also lend rational support to propositions in a way which makes their apprehension epistemically beneficial. Do written fictions offer *arguments* for explicitly and implicitly thematic propositions, then? In the case of the former kind of proposition, the answer is 'probably not'. As for the latter kind of proposition, the answer is slightly more complicated.

The no-argument argument as applied to explicitly thematic propositions begins with the point that these claims are very rarely argued for by either the narrator or any of the characters in a fictional text. Indeed, as I glossed the concept earlier, explicitly thematic sentences are those which are *baldly stated* in the text. For example, it is not clear why, after reading *Catcher in the Rye*, one should accept that 'The mark of the immature man is that he wants to die nobly for a cause, while the mark of the mature man is that he wants to live humbly for one.' After all, this proposition may be false. And, even if it is true, this isn't established by its bald statement in the text. Working that out requires something more, an argument, and that argument isn't given. This supplies another reason for thinking that reading explicitly thematic propositions should not be understood as a route to assuredly true propositional beliefs or knowledge.

The no-evidence and no-argument arguments offer compelling grounds for dismissing the possibility that one could gain epistemic benefits amounting to moral insights from reading explicitly thematic propositions. If the fictions supply neither evidence nor arguments in support of these claims, then it is hard to see what they *could* be supplying that would make up for the shortfall in rational support.

However, the picture is more complex when one tries to advance the no-argument argument against *implicitly* thematic propositions. For this argumentative strategy to be successful, one would have to begin by claiming that while a fiction

may, in some sense, express or convey a claim of some sort or other, it does not do so in a way which amounts to *arguing* for it.

But it is not clear that this is right. For while it is fairly clear that written fictions do not offer 'evidence' for the implicitly thematic propositions they express, it is less clear that they do not, in some way, 'argue' for them. This is contentious, of course. Clearly, the process of dredging up a chain of interpretation from the depths of a narrative is slightly different to following a deduction stated in premise and conclusion form. But the former is more closely related to the latter than to the process of empirical testing that Putnam makes reference to in the no-evidence argument. It is for this reason that some plausibly maintain that, suitably interpreted, certain fictions can be found to, in some identifiable sense, 'argue' enthymematically, for some proposition or propositions. They suggest, for instance, that written fictions lend some support to the themes they explore by drawing attention to, vivifying or animating considerations through imaginative engagement and, that in this way, they can lend rational credence to a particular view or views latent in the work. For instance, the interplay of the characters in *Kindred* might be taken to function as a kind of 'argument' for the view that: 'it is shockingly easy for people to recreate abusive patterns of behaviour, and this is part of what makes abuse so morally heinous'.

Thus, applying the no-argument argument to implicitly thematic propositions does not uncontroversially warrant the conclusion that written fictions cannot bestow the kinds of epistemic benefits a Cognitivist might suppose are enjoyed by readers of fiction. It still seems possible for the Cognitivist to maintain that reading a work of written fiction can result in one gaining access to assuredly true moral beliefs or knowledge, on the basis that these works can fulfil the same functions as arguments. Hence, the Cognitivist can still supply an account of the way in which written fictions might play a role in one's ethical education.

And this is not an account that I will reject. Indeed, in the first chapter, I suggested that my readings of Asimov and Waugh were able to convey certain plausible moral claims, and I heavily implied that such conveyance might count as something like moral learning. Indeed, to that extent, both of my interpretations and associated claims arguably stand as *examples* of cognitively processing texts and deriving (arguably) true implicitly thematic propositions from them, which I myself believe. I am not, therefore, in a position to deny this Cognitivist style claim. At least not without rejecting some of the claims made in Chapter 1.

In what follows I will therefore begin by seeing off an argument that purports to establish the falsity of this view. However, I will suggest that this restricted version of the Cognitivist's answer to the central question of this chapter still has some shortcomings. The central problem with offering a Cognitivist account of the role that



written fictions play in moral education is that this falls short of, in some sense, explaining the way such works can bear a ‘crystalline correspondence’ to life.

The most promising argument for rejecting the restricted version of Cognitivism under consideration is the so-called ‘banality’ argument. This argument has been variously explored and endorsed by a number of authors including Peter Lamarque, Noël Carroll and Jerome Stolnitz (Lamarque 1997; Carroll 1988; Stolnitz 1992). The essence of the argument is that most examples of implicitly and explicitly thematic moral propositions which Cognitivists could draw attention to are banal. For instance, the examples I have used when discussing *Kindred*: ‘it is shockingly easy for people to recreate abusive patterns of behaviour, and this is part of what makes abuse so morally heinous’ and ‘Repressive societies always seemed to understand the dangers of “wrong” ideas’. Propositions like these are such ‘threadbare truism[s]’, Carroll claims, that it hardly seems likely that one needs to read a novel of the complexity of *Kindred* in order to discover them (Carroll 1988: 130). Indeed, the chances are, he continues, that by the time one has reached the level of mental maturity necessary for understanding a text like *Kindred*, one will have *already* come to believe some version of these claims (Ibid: 130). For, and this is an important point to which I shall be returning shortly, other more readily available sources of ethical instruction such as school lessons, religious sermons, everyday advice and one’s day-to-day experience of the world are more likely to serve as the origins for one’s belief in propositions such as these (Ibid: 130).

Therefore, the banality argument puts pressure on the idea that written fictions play even the minimal educative role ascribed to them by the restricted version of Cognitivism. But does it totally discredit the idea that written fictions deliver moral insights by instilling true beliefs or propositional knowledge in their readers? There are reasons to think that the banality argument would be overstated if it were taken to establish such a strong conclusion. While it does seem highly *likely* that *most* readers of a novel such as *Kindred* would already have come to a belief in the explicitly or implicitly thematic propositions the text contains or implies, there is nothing in the banality argument that, in principle, rules out the possibility of a reader coming to believe or know the propositions that a written fiction such as this contains or expresses.

One can imagine a few examples which illustrate this point. Suppose that someone living in an isolated community of strict cultists who forbade the reading of anything save the words of their great leader were one day to chance upon some fiction and begin to read it. They might find this text dealing with a subject matter which they had previously had little occasion to contemplate. The rebel cultist might

form a whole series of beliefs with morally significant content, which most free-thinking people would label as platitudes. Take another example, this one a little less speculative. Suppose an uncultured person, who has read no fiction since early childhood, and is on the whole rather unreflective, were one day, on a whim, to open a novel and begin to read. They might find the text dealing with themes they had never thought to consider. In doing so, it again seems reasonable to suppose that they might come to new beliefs in propositions with morally significant content which most other people would nonetheless dismiss as platitudinous. Finally, consider the position of a child who has recently reached the age where they are able to read a relatively complex novel without assistance. Again, it could be argued with some plausibility, that a child in this position can achieve moral insights in the way that the restricted Cognitivist view suggests.

What I take these examples to show is that while Carroll, Lamarque and Stolnitz would be right to press the worry that *most* readers are unlikely to acquire moral insights from apprehending explicitly or implicitly thematic propositions, their arguments do not conclusively demonstrate that *no one* learns moral truths from written fictions in this way. Rather, the more reasonable conclusion to draw from the banality argument is that while it is *possible* for one to receive moral enlightenment by coming to believe propositions while reading written fictions, this is not the most significant way in which *most* people achieve such illumination. In establishing this, the banality argument helps to point towards the conclusion of this section. If this Cognitivist theory only accounts for a fairly rare and/or inconsequential role that written fictions can play in moral education, it is doubtful that it can account for something that written fictions are *distinctively* equipped to impart to their readers. In *Literature and Knowledge*, Walsh puts the point the like this:

If it be the case that literary art has some intimate engagement with knowledge, will it be appropriate to find this in the form of some warranted claim for which the work of literature is a vehicle? If, in speaking of literary insight, revelation or disclosure, we have in mind something which literary art is *distinctively* equipped to provide, then the answer must be no. (Walsh 1969: 46)

A Cognitivist account cannot assign a morally educative role to written fictions *qua* written fictions. It can only assign them the same role as that played by everyday advice, school lessons and textbooks on ethics. But this is not the kind of role I am looking to discover for these texts. Because, without looking for a distinctive role for these texts to play, the motivation for taking a special interest in them becomes rather obscure. Further, if one's claim about the fictions is that, in general, the best these works can do is inculcate moral truisms through covert 'argumentation', then their

role in disclosing moral insight appears to be rather attenuated. On this view, one runs some risk of viewing these texts in a deflationary or reductionist fashion. Indeed, it sounds as though adopting a Cognitivist view might involve viewing these works as relating to life in something like the ‘vulgar, autobiographical’ sense that Delany dismisses. On such a view, fiction reading imparts mere *information* about life. But written fictions can disclose something deeper, more insightful, more distinctive than that. As I will maintain, taking the texts seriously, exploring them deeply and sympathetically, involves taking that thought seriously, too. Walsh’s argument therefore provides a sound foundation for the conclusion that a Cognitivist theory cannot provide the full account of how fiction reading may improve one’s life.

## §2.3 Neo-Cognitivism

In this section I begin by laying out a schematic definition of Neo-Cognitivism and explain the improvements it makes to the Cognitivist theory. Next I provide an exposition of a number of Neo-Cognitivist accounts that have been offered in the literature. I do this by dividing them into two sub-groups – the *Phronesis* view and the *Conceptual* view – before tracing some of the similarities and differences between the various positions that have been defended.

Neo-Cognitivism is the view that *various* ways of psychologically processing written fictions can lead to increases in one’s (moral) *understanding* (Goodman 1978; Elgin 1993, 2000, 2002; Kieran 1996; John 1998; Carroll 1988; Gibson 2007; Mikko-nen 2015). For example, on this view, the epistemic result of consuming written fictions:

often amounts, as when I place a piece in a jigsaw puzzle, not to arrival at a proposition for declaration or defence, but to finding a fit... An increase in acuity of insight or in range of comprehension, rather than a change in belief, occurs when we find in a pictured forest a face we already knew was there, or learn to distinguish stylistic differences among works already classified by artist or writer, or study a picture or concerto or treatise until we see or hear or grasp features and structures we could not discern before. (Goodman 1978: 22)

So, the Neo-Cognitivist begins from the view that written fictions are in the business of imparting something more than, and/or different to, a cognitively beneficial grasp of a true proposition. What such texts convey must be spoken of in more abstruse terms. It is something more like a gain in overall lucidity, or, as Goodman puts it above, an ‘increase in acuity’ (Ibid).

Additionally, despite the name *Neo-Cognitivism*, this view is generally associated with the claim that various psychological processes, beyond those traditionally labelled as ‘cognitive’, play a part in promoting the requisite increases in lucidity. For instance, some Neo-Cognitivists, most prominently Robinson, claim that some of the *affective* responses evoked by written fictions can enhance understanding (Robinson 1995; 2005). Similarly, others, such as Eileen John, Mathew Kieran, Gregory Currie, Susan Feagin and Alvin Goldman propose that imaginative processing of written fictions can impart understanding which sometimes amounts to a moral insight (John 2001; Kieran 1996; Currie 1995; Feagin 1996; Goldman 2006). Finally, others including Noël Carroll, R.W. Hepburn, Jerrold Levinson and John Gibson suggest or imply that cognitive processing of texts can lead to increases in understanding, but through a process different to that of forming true beliefs or coming to propositional knowledge (Carroll 2002; Gibson 2007; Levinson 1997; Hepburn 1980).

It is on account of these different epistemological and psychological commitments, that Neo-Cognitivism can avoid falling prey to the issues that arise for the Cognitivist account examined in §2.2. First, Neo-Cognitivist theories can avoid the epistemological problems associated with Cognitivism. If, as the Neo-Cognitivists suppose, reading fiction enhances one’s understanding via participation in imaginative, emotional and non-propositionally directed cognition, then the mental reorientations effected by such mental processes will (generally) not consist simply in the formation of propositional knowledge or true beliefs. As such, Neo-Cognitivist views bypass any concern that the epistemic and moral benefits accrued from fiction reading will need to be supported by argumentation or evidence, or that they will likely turn out to be banal. The ‘understanding’ of the form that Neo-Cognitivists suppose is supplied to fiction readers is immune from demands for evidence or argumentation in the relevant sense, because its standards of demonstration differ from those of propositional knowledge. The refinement of one’s emotional, imaginative and cognitive capacities is not demonstrable via the articulation of propositions. Rather, such understanding must be demonstrated in *practice*. To demonstrate understanding, one must *show* that one has learned to respond with greater sensitivity; imagined the world from a new perspective or found the fit between the two pieces of a conceptual puzzle. Thus, Neo-Cognitivism’s more sophisticated psychological commitments render it immune to the no-argument and no-evidence arguments. In the way in which it does so, it would also seem to have a more credible claim to identify a way in which fiction reading may result in the acquisition of something more truly ethically *insightful*.

Second, Neo-Cognitivist theories are better placed to ascribe written fictions a distinctive role in moral education, thus avoiding the second issue with Cognitivism. For example, Neo-Cognitivists can appeal to the idea that written fictions engage one's reasoning, imaginative and emotional capacities in ways that are distinctive of such texts *qua* tools of moral pedagogy. This would suffice to assign these texts distinctive roles in moral education. Additionally (or alternatively), it is open to the Neo-Cognitivist to claim that the understanding derived from reading written fiction is of a kind which cannot be accessed via other means, as propositional knowledge certainly can. This would likewise supply an account which views written fictions as playing a distinctive role in moral education. Hence, although it depends on the particular way in which any version of the view is fleshed out, a Neo-Cognitivist account does at least have the *resources* to ascribe written fictions distinctive roles in moral education in a way that the Cognitivist one just discussed, does not.

Having given a schematic definition of the view, and explained the theoretical advantages it poses over Cognitivism, it is now time to investigate some of the particular ways in which Neo-Cognitivism has been fleshed out in the philosophical literature. I do this in the following subsections, §2.3.1 and §2.3.2, by distinguishing between two varieties of Neo-Cognitivism. The distinction I draw is one of my own invention. The way in which I differentiate between the two versions of Neo-Cognitivism largely comes down to a matter of what various proponents have *emphasised* in their accounts, rather than what they have openly stated. In other words, the views defended by Neo-Cognitivists have simply tended to be more Phronetic or Conceptual in nature, rather than straightforwardly and exclusively being one or the other. Nonetheless, authors have generally displayed some preference for one of these positions over the other.

### §2.3.1 *Conceptual Neo-Cognitivism*

Conceptual Neo-Cognitivists place a particular emphasis on the claim that written fictions communicate moral insights by enhancing their readers' *conceptual* understanding. These enhancements to one's conceptual scheme are supposed to occur when the stock of concepts one *already* operates with are in some way mobilised; brought into a new light and/or questioned or problematised. That is, Conceptual Neo-Cognitivists do not suppose that reading fiction can allow one to engage in 'conceptual engineering' of the kind described by Herman Capellan (2018). According to the account defended by Conceptual Neo-Cognitivists, fiction reading does not result in the invention of *new* concepts, but rather mobilises and transforms one's

existing stock by highlighting fresh connections, revealing new conditions of application and so on.

In the philosophical literature various accounts have been offered, both of this mechanism of mobilisation, and the sense in which the conceptual understanding it supposedly gives rise to can count as the acquisition of a moral insight. Carroll proposes that reading fiction can enhance one's conceptual understanding because written fictions are structurally analogous to thought experiments (2002: 9). Evidence for this can be found in the fact that written fictions can be, and indeed, *have been*, used in/as enthymematic arguments by philosophers in the same way as thought experiments can be and have been so used. For instance, he points to Arthur Danto's claim that a juxtaposition of Cervantes' original version of *Don Quixote* with the version produced by the character of Menard in Borges' short story *Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote*, can lead to greater 'conceptual discrimination' that allows a reader 'to isolate certain of the conditions in accordance with which we individuate works of art' (Ibid: 11). He also endorses S. I. Benn's claim that Milton's Satan and Shakespeare's Iago stand as counterexamples to Socrates' denial of *akrasia* in the *Protagoras*, demonstrating how a fiction may also reveal a moral insight through its capacity to impart conceptual understanding (Ibid: 9).

Carroll further argues that there is a special kind of thought experimental model that is often encoded into written fictions. These he calls 'wheels of virtue'.

A virtue wheel or virtue tableau comprises a studied array of characters who both correspond and contrast with each other along the dimension of a certain virtue or package of virtues - where some of the characters possess the virtue in question, or nearly so, or part of it, while others possess the virtue, but only defectively, or not at all, even to such an extent that the lack of the virtue in question amounts to the vice that corresponds to the virtue. In this way, a virtue wheel is a comparable structure to the studied, polarised array of contrasts found in philosophical thought experiments such as Danto's that, by systematically varying possible contributing factors, enable us to identify conceptual dependencies and other relations. (Ibid: 12)

By containing this kind of structure, a written fiction can, in a particularly sophisticated way, set up a series of counterexamples to, and/or exemplars of, a particular notion, mobilising and forcing one to question, revise or refine one's conceptions.

As an example of this particular mechanism, Carroll suggests that *Great Expectations*, if read under a plausible interpretation, can be seen to contain a 'virtue tableau' that clarifies the ways in which the concept of virtuous parenthood should be applied (Ibid: 11). According to Carroll, Pip's Sister, Joe Gargery, Miss Havisham

and Abel Magwitch exist at different points on a 'wheel' of virtuous parenthood which serves to mobilise our latent conception of virtuous guardianship. Only Joe can have the concept of 'virtuous parent' fully and truly applied to him as he displays genuinely selfless love towards his charge, a feature of his character that is highlighted by the contrast he draws with the other characters who are all, in various ways, deficient in this quality. For instance, Pip's sister regards him as a chore while Miss Havisham and Abel Magwitch use Pip as a vessel through which they vicariously channel their wish fulfilment fantasies. In each instance, Carroll supposes, the rightful or wrongful application of the concept to relevantly similar persons in the actual world is revealed through one's imaginative encounters with the various characters and their situations.

Similarly, Catherine Elgin suggests that written fictions can disclose moral insights in the form of enhanced conceptual understanding by playing the same morally educative roles as thought experiments:

Just as thought experiments are fictions in science [or philosophy], works of fiction are thought experiments in art... Freed from the demands of factuality, fictions can separate constant companions and commingle traditional rivals. By doing so, they may transform our understanding of features and the conditions of their realisation (Elgin 1993: 25).

Elgin argues that, like thought experiments, written fictions can reveal instantiations of qualities which are *prima facie* contradictory or impossible through a process of 'exemplification'. For instance, she suggests that Pierre Bezuhzev in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* 'exemplifies' of a commixture of resolution and a failure of action (Ibid: 24-25). This may lead one to abandon or refine a Behaviourist conception of emotion, by demonstrating how someone's outward behaviour is not a reliable indicator of their psychological state. Another example she appeals to is *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, which she claims 'exemplifies' a similar *prima facie* conceptual contradiction in the form of an admixture of love and hate. This can reveal, she says, the possibility of these feelings being experienced together and thus produce a more refined conception of the range of experiential possibility (Ibid: 25).

Gregory Currie argues that reading fiction can lead one, in a fairly direct way, to a recognition and revision of one's conception(s) of value (Currie 1995: 54). Rather than building his account around features of fictional texts as Carroll and Elgin do, Currie instead offers an account that focusses more on the way in which readers' *psychological responses* to written fictions play a role in delivering moral insights. Along with Susan Feagin (1996), Currie is especially interested in the way in which a certain

kind of imaginative response to fiction may lead readers to increases in lucidity.<sup>12</sup> Their central claim is that written fictions can do this by inducing episodes of *simulative imagining*. In Currie's parlance, simulative imagining involves 'taking on' the beliefs and desires one assumes (with reason) someone else would have in a particular (imagined) situation so that they temporarily become one's own (1997: 51). This assumption of another's states of mind must be disconnected from the ordinary perceptual inputs and behavioural outputs that are part of ordinary belief and desire formation. They must run 'offline' (Ibid: 51).<sup>13</sup> Once offline, the simulation can be used as a model that informs one about what values one does or could accept. This is because one way to deliberate about what is valuable is to speculate about how oneself or others might flourish by imagining the inputs received from, and the outputs generated by, certain projected circumstances. In so doing, Currie claims, 'we can undergo moral learning; we can learn something about whether a goal is worth pursuing, for ourselves and for those we care about' (Ibid: 52-53).

Fictions enter the picture because they act as guides which can initiate particularly intense simulative episodes. However, Currie insists that the things which the fiction directly exhorts one to imagine, 'primary imaginings', are not especially relevant to the process of recognising and revising one's value concepts. Rather, it is the 'secondary imaginings', the parts of the simulation which the reader *themselves* must create based on the primary imaginings, which are especially germane. These secondary imaginings might include the 'thoughts, anxieties, visual and auditory experiences and bodily sensations' of a character walking down a dark street when these are not explicitly described, but in some sense evoked by the descriptions in the text (Ibid: 55). It is by paying close attention to the fiction's imaginative 'homework', so to speak, that one learns about what one does, or could regard as 'putative values' (Ibid: 56). By attending to the internal experiences of the character in the dark alley, for example, one may gain insights into the value of escape routes or of planning one's journey more thoroughly, something that might well be relevant to one's experience of the world beyond the text.

While agreeing with authors like Carroll, Elgin and Currie that written fictions have a role to play in altering the *content* of the conceptions in readers' conceptual repertoires, John Gibson has proposed that, in addition, one important contribution that written fictions make to readers' moral education is a more fundamental

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<sup>12</sup> It is worth noting that Feagin thinks the understanding is more phenomenological than conceptual (1996: 110-12) and is silent on the issue of whether the understanding may count as what I am here calling a 'moral insight'.

<sup>13</sup> Currie offers this clarification to avoid an obvious objection to the effect that (for instance) someone reading about a character in a war zone will not dive out of the way when the character is described as noticing a grenade soaring towards them through the air, even if the reader is simulating the character's beliefs.



*grasp* of the concepts they operate with (2007: 119). Similarly to Currie, Gibson takes an approach which focusses attention on the mental processes that the text engages (although Gibson focusses attention on capacities more often understood as ‘cognitive’ than Currie does). Gibson calls the mental process which is supposed to yield moral insight while reading fiction ‘acknowledgement’ – a term that he links to Stanley Cavell’s work (Ibid: 114).<sup>14</sup> Central to this notion is the thought that grasping concepts, and in particular, ethical concepts, in the fullest sense not only involves an apprehension of a concept’s informational content, but also a recognition of its normative ‘force’; of the kind of *demands* that are made on fully competent users of a particular notion.

To illustrate this contrast, Gibson refers to two examples of incompetent users of particular concepts: the Simpleton and the Sadist (Ibid: 105-07). In both cases, one is supposed to imagine these characters discovering someone who is grievously injured. Both the Simpleton and the Sadist are supposed to have apprehended the *content* of the concept of serious harm, and possess all the requisite practical knowledge to respond to the situation appropriately (how to call an ambulance etc.). Yet, the Simpleton does nothing and the Sadist simply laughs at the injured person’s plight. What the Simpleton’s inertia and the Sadist’s mirth reveal, Gibson claims, is that these characters have failed to *acknowledge* the concepts they possess; to see that they are, in some way, ‘in play’ and that, being so, certain demands are made on them in the present situation. Hence, the Simpleton and Sadist do not fully grasp the concepts they operate with, even in spite of having, in some sense, apprehended their content. Neither is a competent user of the concepts they possess. They lack appropriate understanding of the *role* such concepts play in a community of moral agents who genuinely, fully, grasp them (Ibid: 107).

Fictions can help one avoid being a Sadist or Simpleton, because they are particularly suited to instilling acknowledgement of ethical concepts. They present features of the world through the characters and situations they describe and bring to life. They do this by embodying thoughts one already has epistemic access to, revivifying them, giving them ‘life’, ‘shape’, ‘vitality’ and ‘structure’ (Ibid: 114). For instance, Othello embodies jealousy in a way that animates one’s knowledge it, (literally and metaphorically), placing it on a stage where its connection to the norms of the human community are brought to the fore in their connection with action. This active contextualisation makes the fictional presentation of jealousy *dramatic*, in the same sense in which an act of acknowledgement is dramatic. That is to say, both involve an understanding that fully possessing certain concepts in certain situations demands one take certain courses of *action*. Thus, acknowledgement requires just

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<sup>14</sup> For Cavell’s discussion of this notion, see (Cavell 1969)

what written fiction are in an ideal position to provide: a ‘narrative, a story of human activity’ (Ibid: 114). As such, reading fictions can give rise to a truly fuller grasp, a deeper conceptual understanding, of the demands that moral concepts make on agents; of how they operate in the context of a shared moral universe.

### §2.3.2 *Phronetic Neo-Cognitivism*

The other major version of a Neo-Cognitivist view that has been defended is the Phronesis view. Defenders of this position emphasise the idea that written fictions play a role in moral learning by enhancing one’s *skills*. In particular, they claim that fiction reading offers a training in the skills that are integral to phronetic understanding. ‘Phronetic’ is a term I adopt from the Greek *phronesis*, meaning ‘practical judgement or wisdom’. It is the form of understanding which Aristotle and other ancient authors claim is involved in making moral judgements. The Phronesis view says that fiction reading can make one a more sensitive, judicious, and skilful judge of situations and persons which call for moral evaluation.

In *The Concept of Mind* (1949), Gilbert Ryle offers an account of the distinction between practical and theoretical knowledge, by distinguishing knowledge-that and knowledge-how, and this version of the distinction, and its associated terminology, has since been deployed widely in analytic philosophy.<sup>15</sup> The former is propositional knowledge, the kind of knowledge which the Cognitivism claims can be derived from fiction reading. The latter kind of ‘knowledge’, however, is the kind of epistemic insight that proponents of the Phronesis view tend to claim is imparted to fiction readers. Not being reducible to a set of propositions which can be grasped and articulated, the acquisition, refinement, demonstration, and ultimate perfection of technical know-how, including Phronetic forms of understanding, requires *training*. Proponents of the Phronesis view claim that written fictions provide an arena in which this kind of training can take place. Accounts in the philosophical literature offer varying explanations of both the nature and style of this training as well as of the kinds of phronetic understanding that might be yielded by reading fiction.

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<sup>15</sup> Of course, there are more kinds of ‘knowledge’ or ‘understanding’ than just these, and analytic philosophers also usually acknowledge this too. Indeed, the conceptual understanding which proponents of Conceptual Neo-Cognitivism suppose is delivered to fiction readers is something that cannot be reduced to either propositional or skill-based knowledge. Other forms of epistemic insight that are excluded from this simple distinction include knowledge by acquaintance and phenomenal knowledge, amongst others. I make reference to know-how here simply in order to connect the Phronesis view with other epistemological views in the extant literature in a way that hopefully makes the nature of its commitments more perspicuous.

One important influence for proponents of the contemporary Phronesis view is Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good*. Her version of the Phronesis view emerges from two features of the ideas she presents there. First, from her critique of anti-realist ethics and second from a positive thesis concerning the relationship between the beautiful and the good. As I will go on to show, a version of this positive thesis was later picked up, strengthened, and defended by Martha Nussbaum. Although Murdoch herself, with some plausibility, traces its origin to Plato (Murdoch 1970: 40).

As a part of her critique of anti-realism, Murdoch argues that accurate moral judgements require a refined capacity for 'attention' (a term she borrowed from Simone Weil) (Ibid: 17). To defend this view Murdoch draws on the example of a mother, M, whose internal monologue concerning her daughter in law, D, slowly transforms from one in which D figures as an object of mere forbearance to one in which D appears as someone to be straightforwardly embraced, if not truly loved (Ibid: 16-18). Murdoch urges us to think that the internal change effected in M is not only a moral change but a moral *achievement*. In attending to the world more closely, Murdoch claims, M has, in a sense, uncovered some special moral feature or features of it which she was previously oblivious to. In making this discovery, M has practiced and refined the capacities one uses when accurately thinking about and judging aspects of the world which bear a moral significance.

Murdoch then connects the capacity for internal shifts in attention, and the ethical achievements they are supposed to engender, with the work of the artist and attitude of their audience (Ibid: 40, 63-65). Just as M's moral achievement consists in her apprehending and perceiving previously occluded features of the world, aesthetic achievements, of both the creator and appreciator, require the same kind of sustained attention to, and recognition of, certain inconspicuous features of reality (Ibid: 64). So much so that, in fact, an aesthetic achievement, one in which one's attention to the world reveals something of its true nature, is, for Murdoch, more or less the same thing as a *moral* achievement:

It is obvious here what is the role, for the artist or spectator, of exactness and good vision: unsentimental, detached, unselfish, objective attention. It is also clear that in moral situations a similar exactness is called for (Ibid: 64).

The artist and appreciator need to *attend*, in Murdoch's sense, because only this capacity can uncover reality (including moral reality) as it is. Failures of attention in morality and art tend to be merely seductive and lifeless fantasies (Ibid: 63). Hence, in both producing and consuming artworks, including written fictions, one's attention, the capacity involved in forming more accurate and sensitive moral judgements,

will be guided and honed. Specifically, one will have honed one's phronetic skills through having gained an increased understanding of the nature of (moral) reality, provided one has engaged with the right kind of fictions.

More recently Mathew Kieran has proposed that imaginative processing is involved in phronetic understanding and that it can be adduced and trained by fiction reading (1996: 342). He begins by distinguishing two commonly recognised processes that are implicated in forming practical moral judgements. On the one hand there is the 'theoretical' process which involves judging cases on the basis of abstract moral principles, while on the other there is the 'imaginative' process which involves a fine-grained sensitivity to, or 'perception' of, the particularistic features of the case(s) being judged. He illustrates this difference with the example of two thieves, one who steals a packet of cigarettes and another who steals a widow's only picture of her deceased husband (1996: 341). The theoretical process involved in practical judgement delivers the same verdict in each case: both thieves have violated the command 'thou shalt not steal'. However, the imaginative processes reveals that the act of the thief who stole the photo should be judged to be more unconscionable. Artworks, including written fictions, 'prescribe' their audiences or readers to imagine the world in certain more nuanced ways, e.g. *The Island of Dr Moreau* urges one to imagine that non-human animals are moral subjects. Written fictions can thus provide a context where the capacities involved in forming nuanced moral judgements – capacities related to imaginative skill – may be exercised and refined (1996: 337-42).

Through the power and vivacity of the imaginings they promote, artworks may engage our imaginings about subjects and people to which our imaginings, on their own, would remain inadequate (Ibid: 342).

Jenefer Robinson develops the claim that *affective* responses to written fictions provide a context for enhancing their readers' phronetic understanding (2005: 159).<sup>16</sup> Her approach to defending this idea is similar to that taken by Currie in his account of simulative imagining, insofar as she also begins with a detailed account of the psychological processes that are supposed to underpin the morally educative process in which she supposes written fictions play a role. Another feature of her account that it is important to bring out at this stage is that it is more explicitly conservative than the others that have so far been described. Robinson claims that only a very limited

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<sup>16</sup> Robinson does also develop theories about the ways in which, for instance, written fictions can lead to the apprehension of certain moral beliefs, especially a belief in moral particularism, however, for the sake of maintaining a disciplined focus in the present exposition, it will probably serve the present discussion if these features of her view are passed over here.

sub-set of written fictions are fitted to providing what she dubs 'a sentimental education' (Ibid: 159). In particular, she claims that these fictions are the novels in F. R. Leavis's tradition of morally serious 'Jamesian' works. In making this claim, she does not seem to want to imply that written fictions in general are incapable of 'stirring the emotions'. However, she does seem to want to suggest that only works from the great tradition are able hone reader's emotive responses in a way that can refine their phronetic understanding (Ibid: 159-60).

Robinson primarily identifies and discusses ways in which she thinks the reader's own emotional responses to written fictions play a part in enriching their phronetic understanding.<sup>17</sup> The main explanation she offers for this is that the emotional responses elicited by written fictions cause the reader to (re)focus their attention in a way that prompts deeper reflection in response to situations which call for ethical assessment (Ibid:158). The idea that phronetic understanding is refined by this kind of reorientation of the reader's attention falls out of Robinson's account of emotional response in general. Analogously to the way in which the material world is an external environment, fictions function as a kind of internal 'environment' which can likewise produce emotional reactions which produce morally edifying shifts of attention. The emotions elicited in both contexts function as morally educative in the same way: by inducing pre-cognitive assessments of situations and persons/characters that appeal to the reader's desires and preferences; these then affect the reader physiologically, and provoke the formulation of thoughts from the reader's/subject's own point of view (Ibid 2005: 156). Writing of her experience of Edith Wharton's *The Reef*, for example, Robinson claims that:

It is the series of emotional episodes... that little by little changes my focus of attention, my points of view, my thoughts about the characters, my wants with respect to them, and so on (Ibid: 177).

This raises questions and prompts deeper reflection about particular cases like those described in a novel like *The Reef*, something which can carry over into relevantly similar cases in everyday life (Ibid: 178). The reader's shifts in attention will therefore provoke more sensitive reflections in response to situations which call for ethical evaluation.

One of Nussbaum's theories about the ways in which written fictions figure in moral education is a version of the Phronesis view which is similar to the one

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<sup>17</sup> Robinson also makes the claim that 'the reader watches the education of the characters' emotions and is thereby given a lesson in how the emotions function as teachers' (Robinson 2005: 158), but she does not, so far as I can tell, undertake the task of connecting this 'observational' model with phronetic understanding in any very explicit way.

proposed by Robinson. For example, both thinkers hold that the situations, characters and events that are portrayed in the great realistic novels of the nineteenth century bring readers into contact with paradigms of ethical conduct (Nussbaum 1990: 148; Robinson 2005: 178). They also both agree that the result of readers interacting with these paradigms is an enhancement to their powers of moral reflection and judgement (Nussbaum 1990: 162). Nussbaum's view also shares some similarities with Kieran's in that she makes space for the idea that the imaginings prompted by fiction reading train the imaginative capacities involved in forming fine-grained moral judgements. Nussbaum, however, goes slightly further than Kieran. In agreement with a version of Murdoch's positive thesis about the relationship between beauty and goodness, and inspired by William James' ideas in the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, Nussbaum proposes that 'the work of the moral imagination is in some manner like the work of the creative imagination, especially that of the novelist' (Ibid: 148). In coming into contact with a paradigm of creative imagination, as expressed through a great novel, she claims, one can come into contact with, and participate in, a kind of moral achievement which contributes to one's phronetic understanding. Nussbaum calls this kind of ethical/creative act of imagination and feeling 'perception' (after Aristotle) (Ibid: 152).

Nussbaum draws on passages at the end of *The Golden Bowl* to make this case. She begins with a lengthy exegesis of the text which she is careful to stress, is, in some sense, inadequate, for it is unable to capture the true 'precision of their [the character's] indefiniteness' as they achieve their great acts of perception (Ibid: 149). In the relevant passages, Adam Verver resolves to allow his daughter, Maggie, to marry her beloved, Prince Amerigo, after Adam engages in a revelatory act of imagination.<sup>18</sup> Nussbaum contends that the description of this act of imagination, where Adam envisages Maggie as a free-floating opalescent sea creature 'is a perception of her [Maggie's] situation as that of a free woman who is not bound by his [Adam's] wish [that she remain unmarried]' (Ibid: 152). As one reads the passages where Adam engages in his act of imagination, a careful reader comes to participate in Adam's act of perception, in his 'loving scrutiny of appearances', because the reader comes to truly care for the characters and their predicament (Ibid: 162). The reader therefore strives to perceive like Adam does in his moment with Maggie; to be, in short, the kind of agent that attends perceptively, 'in intellect and feeling', to all the subtleties of a situation which calls for moral assessment (Ibid: 162). This participation in, or even identification with, a character's journey makes one more responsive to the subtleties

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<sup>18</sup> See: (James 1904)

of situations which ought to be accounted for in one's ethical calculations, thus enhancing one's phronetic understanding (Ibid: 162).

### §2.3.3 *Summary*

The insight which all Neo-Cognitivists share is that the moral enlightenment that one stands to gain from reading fiction extends beyond propositional knowledge or true beliefs. According to Neo-Cognitivists, fiction reading can impart an increased lucidity or acuity, with respect to the moral sphere, in perceiving the ethical demands to which one is subject.

In order to appreciate the breadth and depth of the Neo-Cognitivist approaches that have been defended in the literature, and to move towards an assessment of their prospects, I believe it is helpful to distinguish them according to the schema that I have adopted here. Some Neo-Cognitivists (proponents of the Conceptual view), place a greater emphasis on the ways in which reading fiction can inject a sense of vitality into the moral concepts one has inherited from the linguistic community. Other Neo-Cognitivist approaches (proponents of the Phronesis view) emphasise the way in which reading written fictions can improve one's capacity for discerning the complexities of situations which call for moral assessment and for responding to those situations in a way which is sensitive to the demands they make on moral agents. I have endeavoured to present both of these approaches sympathetically, as I believe each of them contains insights into how reading fictions can have the potential to improve one's life by figuring in a program of moral education.

Nevertheless, I am now going to argue that identifying a distinctive ethical contribution made by written fictions requires one to seek an approach that goes beyond the commitments of either of the strands of Neo-Cognitivist thought discussed here. In the next section I will outline the shortcomings of Neo-Cognitivist accounts which, so I shall argue, motivate a consideration of an alternative approach. This view borrows from and builds on some of the central insights of Neo-Cognitivism but is nonetheless best understood as an alternative to the Neo-Cognitivist family of views, rather than as a novel sub-variety of it.

## §2.4 Worries and the Way Forward

First, there are specific issues with certain versions of Neo-Cognitivism canvassed above. For instance, in response to Currie's theory of simulative imagining, Carroll

argues that it is relatively rare for readers to simulate the mental states of characters when reading fiction. Much more commonly, he notes, readers' mental states tend to be like those of someone *observing* the events and persons described in a narrative rather than those of a character described *by* it. The upshot is that once this is admitted, Currie's account is rendered incapable of accounting for a central instance of how fiction reading can deliver ethical insights. There may be instances where readers do simulate characters' perspectives and these may be revelatory. But if this is a rare phenomenon, then Currie's account can only be taken to describe an outlying instance of a way in which reading fiction contributes to ethical understanding (Carroll 2001: 306-16).

There are also some specific worries that can be raised in response some of the versions of the Phronesis view explored in the previous section. For instance, accepting the loose identification of moral and aesthetic values defended by Nussbaum and Murdoch might lead to some implausible consequences. Murdoch's claim that both moral and aesthetic progress are achieved by audiences and creators who 'attend' keenly to hard-to-see features of reality seems to suggest that the most perceptive creators and appreciators of artworks will possess greater depths of ethical understanding. It seems to imply – interestingly, *contra* Plato's contentions in *The Republic* (476e) – that 'culture vultures' and artistic prodigies are likely to possess a more advanced understanding of the moral world. But there are many counterexamples one could draw on to dispute this. Clearly, at the very least, many great artists have had serious ethical 'blind-spots' – T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound to name but two famous examples. Meanwhile, the Nazi's habit of hoarding artistic treasures seems to put pressure on any view that might suggest that those who have a strong appreciation for art are, *ipso facto*, more ethically perceptive.

The obvious rejoinder to this critique is to suggest that, for instance, Eliot and Pound were not really great artists. One might maintain that these authors did produce *some* good work, but that whatever they produced could never be as great as that produced by a more ethically enlightened counterpart. For, so this line of thinking goes, given their prejudice, their work betrays some degree of inattention to the true nature of ethical reality. I will not commit to any position about the relationship between the quality of an artist's work and the tenability of their ethical stance, as this would require a lengthy digression concerning topics which are largely outside the scope of the present discussion. I have treated it briefly here simply to show that accepting a version of the identity thesis that Murdoch and Nussbaum subscribe to may be a disadvantage, insofar as it may force one to also adopt a position in this contentious debate.



Another specific concern that ought to be raised in relation to the Phronesis views of Murdoch, Nussbaum and Robinson relates to the way in which all these authors place restrictions on the range of texts to which their respective accounts are supposed to apply. Murdoch is the vaguest in this respect, commenting simply that her theory is only supposed to apply to ‘non-fantastical’ works. She does cite some examples (Shakespeare and Tolstoy) but given these, her talk of works which are ‘true to life’ being the only ones which are morally serious ends up sounding like a sophisticated way of veiling the claim that only humanistic ‘literature’ can be morally serious; a view which I confronted and rejected at the end of Chapter 1 (Murdoch 1970: 63). The same thing seems to be true of Robinson’s explicit restriction of her theory to nineteenth century realism. Finally, Nussbaum’s commitment to explore only ‘certain novels’ which have ‘built into’ them ‘a certain conception of what matters’, suggests that whatever kinds of ethical instruction she proposes can be gained from fiction reading, it is only the kinds of humanistic texts which she discusses which can deliver it (1990: 26). These limitations to the scope of some of the Phronesis views discussed above thus threatens to make them inadequate to account for the ethical contributions made by the kinds of texts which I have argued philosophers of fiction ought to take more seriously. For, it is not so clear that reading cyborg fiction necessarily leads one, in the same way as reading humanistic fiction might, into ‘breaking ethically with Grandgrind, Mrs. Newsome and Agnes’ (Ibid: 26).

Setting aside these specific issues, however, I think there is a more general shortcoming with both varieties of the Neo-Cognitivist approach discussed above. To appreciate this, it is helpful to return to Dorothy Walsh’s compelling criticism of Cognitivism. Recall the crux of her objection: that Cognitivism ascribes a morally educative role to written fictions that is not *distinctive* of written fictions, *qua* written fictions. If fiction is morally educative just in the way that Cognitivists claim, then there is no fundamental difference in how we acquire moral education from novels, and how we acquire it from parental guidance, religious instruction, ethics education in school, or any other informational or pedagogical source with moral content.

Although this worry becomes more complex when addressing Neo-Cognitivism, I believe it can be extended, in some form, to all of the theories described in the previous section. This is because, while I pointed out (§2.3) that Neo-Cognitivist theories have the theoretical *resources* to meet the demand that one’s account attribute a distinctive educative role to written fictions, all the Conceptual and Phronesis described above nevertheless fail to meet this requirement to a greater or lesser extent.

Carroll’s and Elgin’s theories, for example, rely on the claim that written fictions have morally educative functions analogous to, or the same as, thought experiments (Carroll 2002: 9; Elgin 1993: 25). Hence, both their accounts ascribe the same

morally educative roles to written fictions as those already played by features of philosophical and scientific texts, namely, certain kinds of enhancements to conceptual understanding. Consider Carroll's example that Milton's Satan can function as a thought experiment that leads one to re-examine Socrates' denial of *akrasia*. But if that is right, one need not waste time reading *Paradise Lost* to understand that certain beings are capable of weakness of will; a much simpler thought experiment could disclose the same insight. For instance, one could receive the same insight just as easily by being persuaded of the veracity of the following vignette, of the kind that might show up in an undergraduate ethics seminar:

Mary: Mary has a chance to embezzle funds from her company. Knowing that the company may be forced into bankruptcy if she embezzles the funds, and that, hence, embezzlement would be wrong, Mary gives into temptation and takes the money anyway.

On Carroll's account, fiction reading's role in a program of moral education could, in principle, be replaced by that of hearing basic little tales like this one. *Paradise Lost* and our little story about Mary are both just ways of recognising that, contra Socrates' scepticism, weakness of will is a real feature of our moral lives, and that the concept of weakness of will is one worth reflecting upon and taking seriously if we want to live well. Thus, neither Carroll's nor Elgin's account gives us a distinctive account of how this insight, or others like it, stands to be gained specifically through reading fiction.

Gibson's theory, which takes written fictions to play a role in moral education by inducing Cavellian acknowledgement, also seems unable to meet this demand. For, if the cases Gibson adduces to illustrate a *lack* of acknowledgment (the Simpleton and the Sadist), are anything to go by, it would be highly surprising if the *only* or even the richest, source of enhanced acknowledgment, in his and Cavell's sense, turned out to be fiction reading. If every non-reader of fiction were in a position similar to that of the Simpleton or the Sadist, in relation to their ethical understanding, then one would expect the world to be a much more uncaring place than it is already. It seems clear then, that the everyday life experience of striving to meet the ethical demands of situations which call for action and assessment can play the same role in one's moral education that Gibson proposes is played by fiction reading. Consider, for example, a child who has been taught that when others are in pain, one should seek to alleviate it but, who, on seeing their playmate graze their knee, offers no assistance. Their teacher might notice this and say: 'don't you understand that you ought to have helped your friend?'. It is not implausible to suppose that as a

result of raising this question, the teacher might instil in the child a greater acknowledgement of the concepts they use to navigate the moral world. Such cases seem to cast doubt on any claim that Gibson's theory might have to identify a distinctive way in which fiction reading can yield moral insights.

Currie's theory also fails to identify a distinctive role that written fictions play in one's moral education. For, 'simulative imagining' is a category of mental process that was originally developed to account for knowledge of other minds. Proponents of simulation theory thus have good reason to contend that fiction reading is far from the only activity which induces episodes of simulative imagining. For, whether or not any particular theory of simulation is successful, it is clear that its basic hypothesis, that understanding others' inner lives often proceeds by modelling others' mental states, describes a process in which many people engage in their day-to-day lives. So much is well known from everyday attempts to empathise with others. Again, then, Currie's version of the Conceptual view, like Gibson's, simply extends the morally educative potential of a familiar activity to the domain of fiction reading. In doing so, it implies that participation in this activity in the everyday context could deliver the same morally edifying results as reading fiction, and therefore that fiction readers are not the sole recipients of the insights that may be gained from simulative imagining.

Assessing whether or not any of the versions of the Phronesis view outlined in section 3 can account for a distinctive role that written fictions play in moral education delivers a similar judgment. Nussbaum, Murdoch and Robinson all suggest that various mental skills might be trained by reading fiction. However, training in these capacities ('perception', 'attention', 'affective evaluation') is something that everyday experiences are also well-equipped to provide. The capacities for 'perception' and 'attention' which Nussbaum and Murdoch respectively claim can be enhanced by fiction reading, for instance, are claimed by these authors to be practical tools which are also trained in response to everyday situations which call for ethical evaluation. Similarly, the increases in emotional acuity which Robinson claims are delivered to readers of certain novels are also the kinds of benefits which one might suppose could be gleaned from responding to the ethical demands of day-to-day life. One need only to enter a context where one's principles are brought into conflict with one's affective attachments, for instance, by arguing with a family member about an abstruse point of political philosophy, to test one's emotional acuity. These versions of the Phronesis view thus also fail to ascribe a morally educative function to written fictions that could not be played by every-day life experiences. Indeed, they don't even necessarily show us that written fictions are superior to ordinary life experience, in

terms of how they develop the kind of skills involved in moral judgement and decision-making.

Finally, Kieran's view that fictions deliver insights in the form of a greater sensitivity to the particularistic features of morally charged situations likewise seems to identify an educational role for the fictions which could be played by everyday experiences or, indeed, by thought experiments. Recall, for instance, Kieran's thought experiment about the two thieves (one who steals some cigarettes and another who steals a widow's only photo of their dead husband). Kieran uses this experiment to illustrate the ways in which reading fiction can train one to form finer-grained moral judgements. As such, he tacitly admits that engagement with a thought experiment of this kind can deliver the same kind of moral insight as reading a written fiction. Similarly, it is not implausible to suppose that responding to the ethical demands of day-to-day life is something that can teach one about the importance of attending to the particularities of lived experience. One can know that lying is wrong but nonetheless use one's sensitivity to the particulars of a situation to avoid telling the truth when doing so would cause pointless distress to someone convinced of a largely harmless fiction. For instance, one might choose to humour a friend who insists that there 'might be something' to astrology.

This extension of Walsh's critique may appear damning. And, indeed, for the versions of the Conceptual view described above, it is. Any version of the Conceptual view capable of meeting the demand for distinctiveness needs either to identify a special way in which fiction reading can result in conceptual understanding or a special kind of conceptual understanding which fiction reading can give rise to, or both. But it is very difficult to see what these special mechanisms or products might consist of. None of the Conceptual views above successfully identifies either of these things. Nor have any of these accounts plausibly connected them with the ethical contributions of written fictions. Hence, the prospect of any version of the Conceptual view being able to account for a distinctive contribution that written fictions make to ethical understanding appears dim, at least for now. Note, though, that this critique does not amount to a rejection of the claim that fiction reading can lead to an increase in conceptual competence. Rather, it is to say that this is not a way in which written fictions *qua* written fictions may disclose moral insights to their readers. Written fictions can act as specific instantiations of a more generic phenomenon, namely, practices of human communication in which moral concepts are highlighted and reflected upon, in a way that is liable to enhance people's understanding of those concepts, and/or of the ethical demands with which they are associated.

Some versions of the Phronesis view, by contrast, do have the resources to push back against Walsh's charge. For instance, Kieran's claim that written fictions

provide a context for imaginings that are otherwise inaccessible to the average person, in their everyday life, suggests that the experience of fiction reading provides a unique – or perhaps, uniquely accessible – way of training one’s phronetic skills (1996: 342). Similarly, Nussbaum too, is careful to stress that fictions do have a special role to play in moral education insofar as they can extend the scope of experience beyond that which is often readily available, thus providing unique contexts for one’s phronetic understanding to be honed (1990: 47). In other words, proponents of the Phronesis view can claim that the distinctive ethical contribution of written fictions lies in their ability to provide otherwise rare, or difficult to access, opportunities for readers to enhance their Phronetic capacities. A proponent of the Phronesis view might suggest, for instance, that if one is not serving in the military, and has no realistic opportunity to enlist, then reading *All Quiet on the Western Front* can provide an otherwise inaccessible (facsimile) experience, which can teach one about how to respond more sensitively to certain aspects of violence-related trauma.

This suggestion has some merit. However, even if reading fiction is held to provide morally educative experiences which are *rare* in everyday life, this falls short of identifying a unique ethical contribution made by these texts. Suppose, perhaps in some distant future, one were in the fortunate position of having nearly limitless material resources and a lifespan much longer than that typically enjoyed by people living today. Under such circumstances, if one were an Ethical Adventurer – that is, someone committed to the pursuit of ethical understanding, by experimenting with one’s form of existence in all its good and bad aspects – would one have a reason to read fiction? In other words, are there some experiences or moral insights to which one would not be able to gain access in these circumstances without turning to written fictions?

If the morally educative experiences that written fictions can offer are limited to those which are simply hard to come by in the ordinary course of events, then the answer seems to be: ‘no’. For, it seems that being able to draw on whatever resources one needs to in order to bring one’s designs to fruition and having sufficient time to see one’s many plans through, would make it possible for one to gain any ethical insight which might also be supplied by reading fiction on these kinds of accounts. Hence, if fiction reading has a distinctive ethical contribution to make only insofar as it affords readers rare experiences of training their phronetic skills, it seems as though what fiction reading offers is still not completely unique to it *qua* written fiction.

Now, Kieran, for instance, denies this. Going further than Nussbaum, he suggests that the phronetically edifying imaginings prompted by fiction reading extend ethical experience beyond any experiences which can be had in ordinary life. I

think this is correct. But I don't think it is correct for the reasons that Kieran advances.

As I have already pointed out, everyday life can engage the imagination in ways which sensitise one to the particularities of ethically demanding scenarios. Kieran offers no examples of how fiction reading might be thought to 'engage our imaginings about subjects and people to which our imaginings, on their own, would remain inadequate' in the relevant sense (1996: 342). However, there are imaginative, cognitive and emotive experiences one can have with fiction which are not only rare but positively *unknown* in ordinary life. What is more, so I shall argue in the Chapter 4, that it is the cyborg fictions, and Speculate fictions more generally, which are best equipped to provide readers with these distinctive kinds of experiences. And indeed, if this is right, it is probably no accident that one of the key texts that Kieran references in his discussion is a Speculative fiction, namely, H.G. Wells' *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. In other words, it turns out that the only author to mention a Speculative text is the only one to propose that fiction reading can provide experiences beyond those available in daily life. Thus, while I maintain that any *distinctive* ethical contribution made by *Dr. Moreau* is not of the kind that Kieran discusses, I nonetheless think it is noteworthy that someone who makes pains to discuss such a work would alight upon such a view – even if for reasons, which, as I have argued, don't yet support this assertion.

What is it that Kieran's account is missing, then? What other kinds of ethically edifying benefits does a text like *Dr Moreau* have to offer its readers, beyond the training of phronetic skills? In the chapters to follow I shall argue that works like these are especially well equipped to provide a different kind of ethical understanding altogether, a certain kind of *phenomenal* understanding, by engendering a distinctive kind of experience, an experience with a special kind of *content*. The suggestion that fiction reading can enrich one's phenomenal understanding is not a new one (De Beauvoir 1946; Putnam 1976; Walsh 1969). It has its roots in early-to-mid-twentieth century aesthetics, especially the work of John Dewey (1934). What I propose to add to this line of thought is that sometimes one's encounters with fictional worlds can, in a distinctive way, take one to the frontiers of what it is possible to experience in everyday life, and that their doing so can yield a significant form of ethical insight.

It is now possible to summarise the shortcomings of the Neo-Cognitivist views described here, with reference to the conception of the ethical sphere defended in Chapter 1. Recall that the Ethical Adventurer takes experience itself as the central touchstone in their quest to comprehend and embody the best form of life. And, while, of course, all the authors discussed here hold that, at some level, the experience of fiction reading is the source of the ethical insights delivered to fiction readers, they

also, in some rough sense, reduce this experience to that of the reader's and text's participation in a program of 'ethical education' (training in skills, refining one's conceptual competence). Thus, they conceive of the experience of receiving enlightenment from fiction reading in terms of fiction reading playing a role in some distinct and fairly formal educative activity. And this is where ethical adventuring and the process of moral education come apart.

Conceiving of fiction reading as being part of one's experience of 'moral education' does not fit that well with the Ethical Adventurer's conception of the moral sphere. For, the Ethical Adventurer holds that experience *itself* is the great moral teacher and not that there is a distinct category of experience which is in the business of supplying ethical edification. They hold that all experiences, writ large, have strange potentials to induce ethical change in one's life. In keeping with this conception, then, a theory which takes readers' encounters with the fictions themselves as the primary touchstones in judging and affecting the progress of the quest makes better sense of the conception of the moral sphere defended in Chapter 1. And this is exactly the kind of theory which I propose to outline and defend in the following two chapters. For, taking the experience of fiction reading itself to be the source of one of the kinds of ethical insight that these works can engender is to hold that the particular encounters each work facilitates, in themselves, can induce forms of moral enlightenment. If there is a distinctive kind of experience which written fictions can supply, and if the Ethical Adventurer is someone who seeks to consult and enlarge their experience in order to achieve ethical insight, then there is a continuity between what the Ethical Adventurer seeks and what written fictions *qua* written fictions have to offer. Thus, as de Beauvoir says, 'the novel will appear as an authentic adventure of the mind' (1946: 272).

If this is right, then the Ethical Adventurer has every reason to want to want to read fiction. In terms of one's quest to grow in moral understanding and character, reading fiction is not just a proxy for having complex, challenging, and edifying life experiences. The Ethical Adventurer wants to read fiction in particular, because without doing so, they run the risk of missing out on an important part of the quest to grasp and emulate the most choiceworthy form of life through having encounters with things, people and places which would otherwise remain *unknown* in day-to-day life.

In the following two chapters, then, I begin by breaking from the tradition which takes the experience of fiction reading to be, broadly, that of receiving ethical 'instruction'. In Chapter 3, I articulate a new way of describing the experience of fiction reading, one which aims to capture the phenomenal qualities of readers' en-

counters with fictional texts. In Chapter 4 I reflect upon what these descriptions suggest about the ethical insights one might derive from reading fiction, with a special focus on applying this theory to Speculative fictions.

## §2.5 Conclusion

The kind of answer a Cognitivist might give to the question about written fictions' role in moral education is that it can impart ethical truths. While this is correct, it is correct in only a limited sense. For written fictions are not the only sources of ethical truth to which most have access in their day-to-day lives. Cognitivism describes only the 'vulgar, autobiographical sense' in which fictions might teach us how to live better; namely by imparting a grasp of something like data or information about life which is probably better sought out by living itself.

The Neo-Cognitivists answer is more sophisticated. Proponents of both the Conceptual and Phronesis views propose that there is more to fiction reading than cognition, and that the diverse array of mental activities implicated in fiction reading can disclose more subtle kinds of lucidity, acuity or understanding than the apprehension of propositions. These insights form the basis upon which any promising theory of fictions' ethical contributions ought to be founded. Hence, in the next chapter I shall be attempting to flesh out this idea in a new way. For, the particular way in which the Neo-Cognitivists account for the roles of these mental processes, and the understanding they are meant to engender, leaves them vulnerable to Walsh's distinctiveness objection. As such, if one wishes to meet this desideratum, it is best to turn away from the Neo-Cognitivists' model of written fictions supplying an 'ethical education', consisting in the opportunity to examine exemplars and train one's skills. This is the direction in which I shall ultimately aim to develop this core insight of the Neo-Cognitivists' approach.

To this end, I will now begin my attempt to explain the 'crystalline correspondence' which written fictions bear to the experiences of their readers, and in so doing, to account for the distinctive way in which one's experience of fiction reading can relate one back to one's lived experience. To explain *that*, so I shall argue, one needs to turn to the idea that the very characters and events of a text can, in some way, enter one's own experience, or, vice versa, that one's own experience can, in some sense, mirror that of the characters'. By producing an account which can explain how one might see a reflection of a character as oneself one can come to see a distinctive way in which written fictions can communicate moral insights.



### 3. Seeing, Hearing, Touching

#### *Chapter Synopsis*

The aim of this and the next chapter is to describe a distinctive form of phenomenal experience generated by reading fictional texts. To this end, in this chapter I develop and defend the use of a metaphorical nomenclature that aims to extend our descriptions beyond saying that they are simply ‘like’ those one has in ordinary life. I begin by borrowing one of the central insights of the Neo-Cognitivist accounts, namely, that imagination, cognition and affect each have a role to play in the activity of fiction reading when it yields ethical insight. Using this claim as the basis of the view developed and defended here, I propose that the operations of each of these mental capacities in the production of morally enlightening fictional *experiences* can be symbolised as forms of *perception* (imagining = seeing, cognising = hearing, feeling = touching). Doing so can, I argue, illuminate the character of morally enlightening encounters generated by interactions between texts and their readers. My main line of argument identifies various intuitive and linguistic points of harmony, correspondence, fit, or overlap between the various perceptual terms and their psychological correlates. I also suggest counterpart metaphorical descriptors for the role that texts themselves play in the production of fictional experiences (describing = showing, explaining = telling, evoking = tactilifying). Part of the attraction of this approach, I argue, can be found in how it helps us appreciate the *active* role that fictions play in eliciting complex and informative mental responses, and also, about the vitality /

aliveness of texts, as commonly perceived by readers, which is also something that's reflected in some philosophical accounts.

Part of the work of this chapter is to explain why we shouldn't fall back on the methods of empirical psychology. I do this by identifying some of the limitations to an empirical approach. In so doing, I seek to articulate some advantages that come with a more literary (that is, metaphorical) way of describing the functions of these mental faculties in generating fictional experiences. In an empirical inquiry, as a matter of necessity, we homogenise our descriptions of what is imagined, felt, and thought, in a way that can dull our sense of their character and quality. This method has its uses, of course. It enables us to generalise about the experiences people have, and to identify certain patterns in their operations. The limitation, though, is that such abstraction limits our ability to recognise, and relate to, those very descriptions. In other words, it is harder to understand and describe the phenomenal qualities of any experience (including experiences of reading fiction) in a language that distances itself from the phenomenal qualities of the thing we are trying to apprehend. It seems intuitively plausible that in response to fiction, or at least some fiction, one can have thoughts, feelings, and imaginings that generate morally illuminating encounters, but which are also fundamentally *elusive* – in some way unlike the thoughts, feelings, and imaginings that are available in everyday contexts. The point of these metaphors is to supply a (non-reductive) vocabulary for reflecting on and describing these elusive (and seemingly partly ineffable) phenomenal episodes.

I conclude the chapter by reflecting on the distinctiveness problem from Chapter 2 and gesturing towards how it might be that the phenomenal experiences generated by fiction – what they lead us to feel, hear, and see – might be distinct, and unlike the perceptual episodes available in ordinary experience.

### §3.1 Introduction

What one is after when farfetching might be described as the intuitive perception of a moral entirety; and thus it tends to find expression not in rational symbols, but in metaphor.

Ursula K. Le Guin, *The Left hand of Darkness*

Genley Ai is puzzled. Every attempt he has made to persuade the rulers of the planet Gethen to consider joining the union of worlds he represents has been met with tedious obfuscation. Considering his position, he begins to suspect that the problem is that he is ‘missing something’ about the Gethenians themselves, that he has failed to perceive something about their culture, about their ways of being and living. This kind of ‘highflown speculation’ about the nature of his predicament, Genley explains, is something he was taught to do while preparing for his diplomatic mission to Gethen. It is called ‘farfetching’, he says, before characterising it in the quotation above.

In this chapter and the next, I will be doing some farfetching myself. In particular, I shall be attempting to explain what is ‘missing’ from the Neo-Cognitivist accounts explored in the previous chapter by articulating a metaphorical description of a moral entirety apprehended via intellectual ‘perception’.

At the close of the previous chapter, I suggested a return to the view that fiction readers can gain phenomenological understanding from fiction reading. As I pointed out there, others before now have proposed theories that travel along similar lines (De Beauvoir 1946; Putnam 1976; Walsh 1969). Those who have defended versions of this claim have sometimes stressed that, on this view, the experience of fiction reading is more or less inseparable from the understanding one gains from it: one comes to an understanding of ‘what it is like’ to do something, be somewhere, or meet someone, by having an experience of the ‘what it is likeness’ of some such thing through reading a fiction.

Such a theory is fine, as far as it goes. It is *prima facie* plausible and appealing to suppose that there is some kind of important phenomenological continuity between the *experience of*, and the understanding *derived from*, one’s encounter with a written fiction.

However, there are several things that no one defending this kind of phenomenological account seems to have done yet. The first is to develop and defend the use of a nomenclature that says more about the qualities of fictional experience, than

merely that they are ‘like’ those one has in ordinary life. The second is to provide a comprehensive explanation of how fictional texts and one’s interactions with them can give rise to experiences that are best captured using this descriptive schema. A third is to apply such a theory to Speculative fictions.

The task that I will be pursuing in this chapter is that of presenting and defending a metaphorical nomenclature which aims to illuminate the phenomenological qualities of the experience of fiction reading. I will do this, first, by tracing the origins of this approach (§3.2). I will then detail the roles that texts and readers play in the production of these experiences, and discuss some further considerations that I think speak in favour of taking this approach (§3.3). In line with the methods of inquiry of the farfetcher, my strategy will be to suggest that metaphors, and in particular, those of *perception*, are especially well suited to describing the parts that readers and texts play in production of the experiences that fiction readers enjoy. I will then conclude by considering some objections to this approach and signalling the direction the discussion will take in Chapter 4 (§3.4).

### §3.2 Origins and Inspirations – Both Philosophical and Fictional

The first root of my account is Frank Palmer’s *Literature and Moral Understanding* (1992). In this work Palmer appropriates two concepts from Wayne Booth’s writing on the philosophy of fiction (1961), namely, the concepts of ‘showing’ and ‘telling’. These concepts were originally used by Booth to explain the ways in which different kinds of fictional narration convey information to readers (Ibid: 3-16). Like Booth, Palmer also uses the notions of showing and telling to explain certain ways in which fictional texts communicate with readers. However, Palmer adapts them in order to account for the different ways in which written fictions convey *moral insights* in particular. His strategy is to connect the uses of these terms with certain psychological responses that a texts’ ‘telling’ and ‘showing’ can inspire (Palmer 1992: 188).

While I do not accept the particulars of Palmer’s account, his way of using these concepts suggests a metaphorical connection with perception that I find fruitful – one that, interestingly, proves to be implicit in much of what has been written about fiction and ethical understanding. To present the metaphors in their simplest guise: whatever is ‘shown’ must be ‘seen’ and whatever is ‘told’ must be ‘heard’. In other words, if there is anything to the idea that fictions communicate moral insights in a way that can be described as ‘showing’ or ‘telling’, then what readers are doing in response to these ‘actions’ of a text should be able to be construed as ‘seeing’ or

‘hearing’, in some sense. In short, insofar as fictions are able to show and tell, then readers of fictions should be able to *perceive* what they are being shown and told.

Although this explicit emphasis on specific sensory modalities, as a way of characterising the moral phenomenology of fiction, is not a feature of existing philosophical literature on this topic (that I’m aware of), a close inspection of the that literature contains many intimations of this approach. For instance:

Art then is not a diversion or a side-issue, it is the most educational of all human activities and a place in which the nature of morality can be *seen*. (Murdoch 1970: 85)

Says Iris Murdoch. Next, Noel Carroll claims that:

In *Sense and Sensibility*, [Austen] contrasts these traits through the characters of Elinor and Marianne Dashwood in a way that the reader should come to *see* redounds morally on the former’s virtue. (Carroll 1988: 147 emphasis mine)

Similarly, Hilary Putnam claims that literature can be

a way of getting him or her [the reader] to *see* vividly what the *appeal* of one morality is as opposed to another. (Putnam 1976: 86, latter emphasis mine)

R.W. Beardsmore claims that literature is morally educative because, through it,

Man is brought to *see* a new significance in his life. (Beardsmore 1972: 32, emphasis mine)

However, he also blends the metaphors of vision and audition, when he claims that

the failure to *see* what a writer has to *tell* you, is a failure to grasp the importance which details have in his work, a failure to *see* why only the particular words which he uses will do. (Ibid: 36, emphasis mine)

Auditory perceptual metaphors receive greater prominence than visual metaphors, in some authors’ work. For instance, Simone de Beauvoir says that

what I like in the discoveries of a Barrès, of a Rivière, is their purely individual and, consequently, mysterious appearance, which awakens an *echo* in me. (de Beauvoir 2006: 66, emphasis mine)

In addition, the author whose work on fiction and moral understanding was the starting point for this whole inquiry, Nussbaum, makes ample use of auditory metaphors, in describing the ways readers receive moral insights from written fictions. For instance, she says that in a novel, 'a view of life is *told*' (Nussbaum 1990: 5). She further emphasises the auditory when claiming that literature '*speaks about us*, about our lives and choices and emotions, about our social existence and the totality of our connections' (Ibid: 171). At some points, like Beardsmore, Nussbaum also blends auditory and visual metaphors, for instance when she says she is interested in 'thoughts, feelings, wishes, movements and other processes that are actually there to be *seen* in the text.' (Ibid: 9, emphasis mine). Or, in a similar vein, she says

novels do not function... as pieces of "raw" life: they are a close and careful interpretative description. All living is interpreting; all action requires *seeing* the world *as* something (Ibid: 47).

In sum, the idea that I am developing here – that when the experience of fiction reading yields ethical insight through experience it engenders, this can be described using perceptual metaphors, especially auditory and visual metaphors – is one that's latent in the philosophical literature on this topic. Again, insofar as fictions are able to show and tell us things about morality and life, then readers of fictions should be able to *see* and *hear* what they are being shown and told. The contribution I am making here is to, in a certain sense, take this latent insight more seriously than it is usually taken, and to use it to develop a way of characterising the moral phenomenology of fiction.

Some might object to this on the grounds that the use of these perceptual metaphors in the philosophical literature is not really evidence of a deep connection between perception and the experience (morally enlightening or otherwise) of fiction reading. They might insist that these metaphors are simply common turns of phrase, and that these philosophers' use of these linguistic motifs is evidence of nothing more than its widespread employment as a symbolic stand-in for something like 'apprehension'. For example, it is not unusual for someone, after hearing repeated explanations, to exclaim 'Ah! *Now* I see' or insist 'I hear you, really, I do', and for this to imply nothing but that they have grasped what their interlocutor has been saying to them.

This is possible, of course. But I want to stress that whatever connection is suggested by the uses of these phrases, I accept that it is only *hinted at* in the quotations above. The purpose of this section is not to defend the existence or use of this deeper connection. Rather it is to be candid and transparent about the source of this idea, in my analysis, and to indicate why it is not, as it may seem to some, a totally

fanciful idea. I will have more to say in this chapter about why this allegedly shallow use of perceptual metaphors may be more revealing than such an objection supposes. All I want to suggest, at this preliminary stage, is that this is a promising working hypothesis, namely, that the metaphorical language we see in philosophical work on fiction and moral insight, might be taken to indicate a deeper running connection, between perceptual metaphors, the experience of fiction reading and moral understanding derived from that experience. Discovering whether this is a fruitful lens, through which to view the relevant issues, won't be possible unless we are willing to entertain the possibility that this deeper relationship exists. Therefore, I propose that, at this stage, we simply entertain the possibility that the connection I will aim to detail in this chapter could be a real one.

Having outlined the first, *philosophical* source of my approach, I now wish to explain the second, *fictional* source of my view. Perhaps it is obvious that in the examples above, only two sensory modalities are mentioned: hearing and seeing (corresponding to Palmer's talk of telling and showing). This point might initially appear rather obvious, banal even. That is, one might quite reasonably expect that the two sensory modalities that provide the richest picture of the external environment would tend to predominate in the linguistic symbolism one uses to describe one's responses to the internal, psychological 'environment'. However, as the fictional source of my view suggests, other sensory modalities can be effectively put to the purpose of describing purely cerebral experiences, and especially those that are generated by fictions. For instance, one sometimes hears talk from readers of being 'touched' by a character's act of repentance, of 'tasting' the sweetness of a hero's victory, or of 'smelling' the stink of hypocrisy about the villain. This brings me to the second, literary source of my approach.

This is a series of reflections that was prompted by a novel that brings the connection between *sensory* (and not merely auditory and visual), terminology and mental experience into sharp relief. Appropriately enough, the novel is one of the greatest from the early tradition of Speculative fiction, Olaf Stapledon's *Starmaker*.

In one passage, Stapledon envisages an Other Earth inhabited by Other Men. In their civilization, Stapledon writes,

taste played as important a part in their [the 'Other men's'] imagery and conception as sight in our own. Many ideas which terrestrial man has reached by way of sight, and which even in their most abstract form still bear traces of their visual origin, the Other Men conceived in terms of taste. For example, our "brilliant," as applied to persons or ideas, they would translate by a word whose literal meaning was "tasty." For "lucid" they would use a term which in primitive times was employed by hunters to signify an easily runnable taste-trail. To have

"religious illumination" was to "taste the meadows of heaven." Many of our non-visual concepts also were rendered by means of taste. "Complexity" was "many flavoured", a word applied originally to the confusion of tastes round a drinking pool frequented by many kinds of beasts. "Incompatibility" was derived from a word meaning the disgust which certain human types felt for one another on account of their flavours. (Stapledon 1937: 37-38)

Initially, Stapledon's Other Men seem to confirm the fairly obvious point I just made reference to. Consider any being that has a sophisticated language, which makes use of metaphors, and its metaphors of introspective understanding are likely to have cognates in the terms it uses for the perceptual faculties that provide it with the richest picture of the external world. (If dogs had a sophisticated language, it would probably be fairly similar to the Other Men's in this respect.) However, reflecting at greater length on Stapledon's Other Men suggests that the connection runs deeper than that. Stapledon's Other Men seem to suggest that a perceptual faculty's superior development primarily explains the *preponderance* of a linguistic symbolism associated with it, and not the *existence* of a sensory symbology itself. The existence of such a symbolism in general, is, one might be tempted to conclude, to be explained by a genuine psychological connection between perception and *prima facie* more introspective forms of understanding.

This, then, is the second, fictional, and arguably more radical, source of my approach. It also supplies further grounds for thinking that the connection between the understanding derived from fictions and its metaphorical description in terms of perception is deeper than some might be inclined to suggest. Thus, in what follows, part of what I will be doing is undertaking an exploration of this connection by expanding the basic nomenclature of vision and audition already hinted at by the philosophers to include, also, the use of a *tactile* metaphor.<sup>19</sup> Not only can the roles of text and reader be captured well by describing them in terms of showing/seeing and telling/hearing. They can also be captured in terms of 'tactilifying' and 'touching'.

With this explanation laid out, I am now in a good position to present an outline of the overall positive proposal that I am developing and endorsing, in this thesis.

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<sup>19</sup> Initially, I was tempted to try a treatment of the olfactory senses too but was unable to develop a rich and compelling system of relations for them to bear. The kernel of the idea was to connect these sensory modalities to 'raw affect' (not yet developed into full blown emotion), and, while I think that this idea is not without merit, it probably deserves more independent coverage than it can be given here. Hence, my restriction to including only visual, auditory and tactile sensations in the present schema.



Written fictions can deliver ethical insights in the form of phenomenal understanding, i.e. a grasp of what something is like. They do this by providing an experience of the ‘what-it-is-likeness’ of people, places, and things. In order to move beyond a description of these experiences as being irreducibly qualitative, we can use a family of perceptual metaphors to describe them, and how they’re produced. These metaphors enrich our understanding of these experiences, by offering a more contentful description of likenesses encountered while reading fictions, and of the ethical insights that might be drawn from these encounters. Perceptual metaphors that serve this purpose especially well are those of vision, audition, and touch. Each can be used to explain the roles that text and reader play in producing an experience of what something is like. Fictional texts show, tell, and tactilify, while readers see, hear and touch what the text presents to their (psycho)perceptual faculties. And the outcome of this process is – at least sometimes – a form of moral insight that corresponds with the ideal of Ethical Adventuring I defended in Chapter 1. The ethical adventurer aims to learn how life can be better, and they don’t initially adopt a thick set of assumptions about what the upshot of this learning will be or how it takes place, in general. Their primary assumption is simply that the good life is best understood through experience. In the phenomenal experiences that a person has, while reading written fictions – in the way that written fictions help her to see, hear, and feel things – the ethical adventurer acquires new experiential resources, that can inform their understanding of what a flourishing existence may consist in. Fictions offer moral insight, then, but not only in the ways that Cognitivists and Neo-Cognitivists advert to – not just in the form of conveying moral truth, refining moral abilities, or enriching moral concepts. Rather, fictions generate encounters with things, places and persons that enable individuals to perceive things. Some of these experiences, so I eventually go on to argue (especially in the following chapter), are in an important way, *sui generis*. They are perceptions of something that *cannot* be perceived through any other kind of experience.

### §3.3 Perception and Presentation: What the Metaphors are *For*

In confining myself to a discussion of the origins and inspirations that lie behind my perceptual metaphors, I have thus far said little about the details of this proposal, and even less in defence of it. In this section, then, my task will be to expand upon this proposal by detailing the roles of fiction and text in the production of fictional

experience (§3.3.1 and §3.3.2 respectively). The approach outlined so far raises an important question: if these descriptions are metaphors, what are they metaphors *for*? While addressing this question, I will offer some justifications for using the specific metaphors of vision, audition and touch, in order to explicate the roles of text and reader in producing fictional experiences.

### §3.3.1 *The Reader*

I concluded the previous chapter by claiming that the account outlined here would build on the key insights of the Neo-Cognitivists' approach. As the Neo-Cognitivist view would suggest, imagination, cognition *and* affect are all implicated in the experience of receiving ethical insights from written fictions. These mental processes are, I suggest, what the metaphors of 'seeing', 'hearing' and 'touching' ought, respectively, to symbolise. To say that one has seen something while reading a fictional text, is to say that one has imagined it. To say that one has heard the text, is to say that one has cognised it. To say that one has touched something, felt it, made contact with it, while reading fiction, is to say that one has responded affectively to it. Why, then, *these* connections between one's mental processing of written fictions, and the particular perceptual metaphors that I am assigning to them? Why should 'seeing' symbolise imagination, 'hearing', cognition and 'touch', affect? I will address these questions in that order.

The linguistic connections between sight and the imagination are clear. The phrase the 'inner eye' is often used synonymously with 'imagination', and the word 'imagine' itself almost contains the word 'image', the 'proper object' of ordinary visual perception. This provides a basis for a metaphorical connection between visual perception and imagination. Further to the linguistic connections, though, imagination, and particularly the imaginative processing of written fiction, is, in a large part, constituted by the production of mental *imagery*; and imagery can *only* be seen. When one says that a work engaged their imagination, what they seem to mean is that, in a certain symbolic sense, it brought them to see something. The same is true in reverse. If the same person were to say that a text enabled them to 'see' something, what they would be intending to convey, I suspect, is that they had had an imaginative experience. For, all they have really seen while reading is black marks against a white background. When one reflects on this, it seems clear that the more vivid term for conveying a sense of the *experience* that this reported using either 'imagining' or 'seeing' is that of seeing. Using this term to describe the experience conveys a richer understanding of what it was like to have an imaginative encounter with a fictional world.

The linguistic connection between hearing and cognition is similar. Often, people describe themselves as ‘listening to reason’ or of hearing the recommendations of their ‘inner voice’ when exercising their cognitive skills. Sometimes they even talk about cognition in terms of a ‘conversation’ with themselves where two or more voices make various entreaties to them. (The Faustian angel and devil on the shoulder, is one dramatic representation of this.) Further, if one is prepared to accept, prefatorily, the notion that texts have something to *tell*, a plausible corollary is that this is what the reader hears when reading. Given this, it seems to follow that when listening to the text, one is hearing *words*. For, when one hears something being told, what else *can* be told, but something composed of words? The faculty of the mind that deals with linguistic representations is cognition viz. reasoning, belief, knowledge and the sub-doxastic entertainment of propositionally formed thought. It would thus seem that cognising something in response to the text would be well described in terms of the experience of hearing something the text has to tell. This indicates that describing one’s cognitive processing of fictions in this way can reveal more about what it is like to intellectually grasp something while reading a fiction.

The connection between touch and emotion is perhaps the most obvious. Here, the linguistic connection is perhaps clearer than the other two instances. For emotion and tactile sensation share a common term – ‘feeling’ – which denotes both the sensation of, on the one hand, contact between an object and the skin, and, on the other, affective stimulation. This dual use is further reflected in a myriad of expressions that draw upon the same symbols and terms. One often hears discussion of written fictions being ‘touching’; of scenes or characters’ actions being ‘moving’; of a work ‘bringing one into contact’ with something unexpected, or enabling one to ‘feel the force’ of something previously unencountered. Again, a consultation of language reveals this symbol’s power to illuminate the phenomenology of one’s emotive interactions with fiction. Saying one was moved, touched, made to feel, brought into contact with, something, in the experience of a written fiction, provides a richer description of what that experience was like.

So there are a number of intuitions and linguistic connections that support the particular symbolic connections I am proposing. However, at this juncture, one may ask whether this is the right way to go about accounting for a reader’s psychological processing of a written fiction. Shouldn’t one turn to something more like, for instance, empirical psychology for this?

Some commentators, most prominently Robinson, have done just this. A significant part of Robinson’s major work on the emotional responses elicited by fiction reading, *Deeper than Reason*, is dedicated to supplying an account of the emotions which draws heavily on work done by psychologists (2005). It is only once she has

offered her account of the operations of affect in general that she applies the theory to the feelings elicited by reading Wharton's *The Reef*, and other realist fiction. Isn't *that*, then, the kind of approach that ought to be taken here, too?

Several things can be said here. First, insofar as Robinson takes this approach, she is an outlier in the philosophical literature. This does not imply, of course, that her approach is wrong. But it indicates that within the philosophical context, her approach is somewhat unorthodox. Thus, if the charge pressed against my account is that it is idiosyncratic in its treatment of certain psychological phenomena, one must explain why most other philosophers have not attempted what is assumed, by this kind of objection, to be a more promising or more 'standard' treatment to the topic. In short, while I am proposing a substantively original analysis of the nature of the morally illuminating experiences that written fictions generate, the method that I am using to defend this proposal – namely, reflection on the phenomenal character of first-personal experience, combined with an interpretation of that experience, in everyday terms – is one that has been deployed by other authors addressing similar kinds of questions to the one that I'm trying to answer.

Second, the Ethical Adventurer always looks to the thing which they are exploring when trying to make sense of it (in this case the experience of fiction reading when it yields ethical understanding). Hence, in making sense of this, the Ethical Adventurer need not necessarily make use of the work of psychologists. Again, this is not to say that the consultation of such work is not of any potential value to the Ethical Adventurer. But it is to say that other ways of accounting for the matter in hand are held, within this conceptual framework, to be potentially valuable too. In the next sub-section, where I shall be discussing the role of the text in the production of fictional experience, I shall advance some further reasons to suppose that the texts themselves can be fruitfully explored using the symbolic nomenclature I have been outlining.

Lastly, there are some psychological theories, developed by philosophers of mind and psychologists, that, if correct in certain points, would lend support to the idea that the mental processing of written fictions is closely linked to the production of facsimile perceptual states. For instance, Alvin Goldman has argued that a form of mental processing he calls 'enactment-imagination' is implicated in the production of fictional experiences (2006: 42). As he describes it, this mental process is roughly,

a matter of creating or trying to create in one's own mind a selected mental state, or at least a rough facsimile of such a state... Prime examples of E-imagination include sensory forms of imagining where one creates, through imagination, perception like states (Ibid: 42).

If there is anything to Goldman's psychological thesis, it would lend support to the idea that the mental processing of fiction is, in some sense at least, 'perceptual'. Indeed, it could support the claim that the experience of fiction reading is *more* than just symbolically or metaphorically 'perceptual'. For, according to Goldman's theory, the experience of fiction reading involves creating *copies* of ordinary perceptual states. If there is any credibility to this theory, therefore, it could be used to indicate a psychological basis for the (in fact) weaker, *metaphorical* connection between the mental processing of fiction and perception that I endorse.

Another psychological theory that could lend support to the metaphorical connections I have drawn has already been touched on in Chapter 2. This is the so-called 'simulation' theory. Proponents of this view explain readers' mental processing of written fictions in a similar way to that described by Goldman in his discussion of 'enactment imagining'. They propose that a central part of the experience of fiction reading is the recreation viz. 'simulation' of the mental processes (including perceptual processes) of fictional characters, or alternatively, of a 'hypothetical observer' of the events and persons the text describes (Feagin 1996; Currie 1995; Carroll 2001). Again, this might be taken to provide some justification for positing *at least* a symbolic connection between the psychological processing of fictions and perception.

Naturally, whether the metaphorical relations I have posited can be successfully justified via either of these theories depends upon the viability of the accounts these theorists advance. And I am not going to officially endorse either of these accounts here. As I have said, they go further than I propose to go in their suggestion that the mental processing of fictions is, in a sense, *genuinely* perceptual, rather than just metaphorically perceptual. I have discussed them here principally to answer the worry that what is needed, in order to account for readers' psychological processing of fictions, is an account drawn from the field of psychology. What these examples show is that there are some psychological theories that are in sympathy with the kind of position that I'm endorsing, on which, when one reads a fiction, the experience is, in some sense, that of seeing, hearing, or touching things.

Here it is worth pausing briefly to clarify that my theory is not one which seeks to explain some of one's morally edifying experiences of fiction reading in terms of extra-sensory perception, intuition or 'the sixth sense'. The sensory modal terms, as I use them, denote – and in denoting, aim to illuminate – sensations associated with familiar forms of psychological interaction with fictional texts, when these are implicated in the reception of certain moral insights. There is not supposed to be anything 'spooky' about them. Rather, they are merely intended to explicate the nature and quality of certain intensely private phenomenal interactions with fiction, usually referred to as either 'imaginative', 'cognitive' or 'emotive'.

### §3.3.2 The Fictions

What, then, should we say about the symbology of ‘showing’, ‘telling’ and ‘tactilifying’? What aspects of fictional texts do these terms represent, and why are these terms illuminating?

‘Showing’, I propose, is a metaphor for *describing*. When a fiction contains a description of something, especially people, locations or events, it shows them to the reader. It does this by directing their imaginative attention to the specific things the text refers to. For instance, in the following passage, which is a part of a description of running through city streets as a young boy:

He mixed his music with the shouting from the other side of the fence. He rippled his fingers on the wire and walked and looked through: Children clustered at the sliding board. But their scuffle had turned to shouts.

Beyond that were street sounds. He walked out among them and let his song pick them up. Cars and two women talking about money, and something bang-banging in the big building with the corrugated walls: emerging from that, foot-rhythms. (Men in construction-helmets glanced at him.) That made him sing louder.

He walked up the hill where the houses got bigger, with lots of rock between. Finally (he had been flipping his fingers along the iron bars of the gate) he stopped to really look in (now going Hummmm, and hmmmmm, hmmmm, and hmmmmm) at the grass marked with tile squares, and the house that was very big and mostly glass and brick. A woman sat between two oaks. She saw him, cocked her head curiously and smiled – so he sang for her Ahhhhhhhh – she frowned. He ran down the street, down the hill, singing.

The houses weren’t so big any more.

The ribs of the day cracked on the sky. But he didn’t look up at the planes this time. And there were lots more people.

Windows: and on top of the windows, signs: and on top of the signs, things that turned in the wind: and on top of those, blue where wind you couldn’t see went –

‘Hey, watch it –’

He staggered back from a man with the dirtiest wrists he had ever seen (Delany 1974: 57-58).

Here, the description presents each of the things that the protagonist takes in during his passage through the city in a way that entreats a certain visual-imaginative focus:

the people he passes ('A woman sat between two oaks'; a man with the dirtiest wrists he had ever seen'), the things he focusses on in passing (Windows: and on top of the windows, signs...), the things happening peripherally ('Men in construction-helmets glanced at him.'). The specific words and sentences thus actively bring these *particular* objects, actions and persons into focus for the reader. The reader is directed to see the workmen's construction helmets, but not shown what colour they are, for instance. Descriptions in fiction do not reveal something that is there, passive, and ready to be inspected. Instead, they *show*, they *purposefully direct* imaginative, imagistic attention, towards certain features of a scene, in the mind's eye. The text's role in producing the visual experience is to point out certain features of a scene. Providing they're paying attention, all the things the narrative shows will be seen by the reader. In addition, though, once the narrative has placed the reader within a certain imaginative context, it is partly up to the reader to *see* certain additional features of it that the text *doesn't* explicitly show them. And it is there that certain opportunities for interpretation are opened up. For, a reader may imaginatively envision some things that the narrative does not show (e.g. the colour of those helmets).

Telling, I suggest, is a metaphor for *explaining*. When a fiction relays information to a reader, it tells them about something. Again, it does this actively, by bringing certain points of factual interest to the attention of the reader, while withholding others that may well inhere in the 'world' of the fiction, but which are not explicitly relayed. Often this involves telling the reader something about what the text has shown them. For instance, here is a description of an alien being:

It was grey all over. Pale gray skin, darker gray hair on its head. The hair grew down around its eyes and is and its throat. There was so much hair across the eyes that she wondered how the creature could see. The long, profuse ear hair seemed to grow out of the ears as well as around them. Above, it joined the eye hair, and below and behind, it joined the head hair. The island of throat her seemed to move slightly, and it occurred to her that that might be where the creature breathed - a kind of natural tracheostomy (Butler 1987: 13).

Here the text shows the reader something ('pale gray skin, darker gray hair'), before then telling them about it, through an explanation in a conversation:

Some of the 'hair' writhed independently, a nest of snakes startled, driven in all directions.

Revolted, she turned her face to the wall.

‘They are not separate animals,’ he said. ‘they’re sensory organs. They’re no more dangerous than your nose or eyes. It’s natural for them to move in response to stimuli. We have them on our bodies as well. We need them in the same way you need your ears, nose and eyes’ (Ibid: 13-14).

Here, the text tells the reader some things about the ‘hair’ on the creature’s body, again, not by revealing a complete list of facts about them. Instead, it selectively, purposefully explains certain features of what the reader has been shown. In telling, certain facts are left unexplained. How is it that the creature *can* see? Does it breathe through its throat as the protagonist suspects? These are things that the reader is *not* told, though there are, of course, facts about them in the ‘world’ of the fiction. Thus, the narrative’s explanations direct one’s cognitive attention to certain points, while leaving others for future discovery, or mere speculation. In its *choice* of terms, it therefore *tells* one things, while withholding others, rather than simply revealing a full explanation or account of what is going on. Unlike with showing and seeing, what the reader is told, in a certain sense, always matches what they hear, provided they pay attention. Of course, lapses of attention, differences in the understanding of certain terms and the like can produce different episodes of hearing. However, the reader never hears anything that is not told to them while reading the fiction. Different readers may hear the same portions of text telling them different things, but what they have been told will, in the telling, remain constant.

Rendering tactile – or ‘tactilifying’ – is, I suggest, best understood as being a metaphor for *evocation*. The way in which language can be used to evoke is hard to specify in abstract terms, and so quotation of isolated passages is insufficient to fully exemplify it. This is because what is not shown or told is what is felt. In other words, what is withheld from vision and hearing is the solid, tangible substance of the world of the fiction, the thing that is not shown or heard but which one must try to reach out and *touch* if one is to get any sense of it. One way of achieving this is through techniques that generate what is commonly called ‘dramatic tension’. Certain descriptions and explanations are withheld from the reader, creating a sense of anticipation and a *desire* to uncover what is occluded. Motifs in the description and explanation, in what one is shown and told, serve as clues to what is being *actively* hidden, beyond sight or hearing. Eventually, however, a thematic crescendo is reached and what has been withheld is revealed. At this point, the reader is brought into contact with something that they were, in some sense, aware of as an absence, but which is finally rendered more than simply visible or audible. It is rendered *tangible*. If they have been paying attention, they will not only see certain things, or hear them explained, they will feel the impact of these facts and images, of their significance for the characters, and for their own life beyond the text.



Again, then, tactilifying is not something that is done passively. It is the result of an active misdirection, a diversion of attention away from certain images and truths that eventually, are very hard to ignore. In the text's choice of terms and structure, one is *led* into contact with something, through the development of an absence into a presence. As with telling and hearing, then, what is rendered tactile matches, quite closely, what is felt. Naturally, the exact phenomenal nature of the felt sensations may vary, among different readers. But whatever is tactilified, will, in its being rendered tangible, be the same for each reader, if they have been paying proper attention.

In the final chapter (5), a fuller treatment of these perceptual metaphors will be provided, as I will be providing detailed analyses of three works of fiction, and exploring how each of them engages one of the psycho-perceptual faculties to deliver ethical insights. There I will discuss how Delany's *Dhalgren* – an epic, hallucinatory text, rich in descriptions of the a shattered city and its inhabitants – can supply moral insights by *showing* its readers certain things; how Butler's *Dawn* – a troubling meditation on power and paternalism – can supply moral insights by *telling* its readers certain things, and how Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* – a tragic journey of self-discovery – can supply moral insights by giving the reader a kind of *tactile* experience of certain things. Of course, an assessment of my approach could be made exclusively with reference to its abstract theoretical qualities. But I also hope that these later illustrations will more fully reveal the strengths of employing this metaphorical schema (and especially that of touch), as a way of explicating the phenomenal experience of acquiring certain ethical understanding from written fictions.

But for now, we can focus on the abstract theoretical qualities. What are the advantages of this approach to understanding the moral phenomenology of written fictions, in principle? What reasons do we have to adopt this nomenclature of active perceptual presentation?

I have already indicated one attractive feature of this approach. The language of telling, showing and tactilifying captures the sense in which written fictions *actively* direct the reader's psychological processing of the text, drawing attention to certain features of a character, scene or set of actions. Even when authors aren't using fictions as explicit, didactic parables, they are still, plausibly, making active choices about how to tell their stories, in ways that have the potential to impart moral insight to the reader. The perceptual schema I am proposing gains some plausibility from the fact that it gives us a way of describing this active aspect of the author's work, without either exaggerating or downplaying the author's role as a purveyor of moral insight. The author isn't (usually) playing the part of a moral lecturer. But they are exercising

active, creative control over an object of reflection that can be put to morally enlightening uses.

The second attractive feature of these metaphors, is that they can help to capture and make sense of certain widely-shared intuitions about the phenomenology of fiction reading. A stone cannot show you it is grey, hard or smooth; a clod of earth cannot make itself warm to the touch and a tree-stump cannot tell you its age. By contrast, if part of what a written fiction does when it delivers ethical illumination involves its showing, telling and tactilifying – that is to say, *actively presenting* some of its moral contents – this conforms to the intuitive feeling that written fictions are in some sense organic or *alive* – that they are *subjects*, as much as objects.

It should not take too much imagination to find the connection between our pre-theoretical intuitions, and this way of conceiving of fiction's role in delivering ethical insights. Indeed, one finds an intimation of something like this idea at least as early as Hume, in the way that he portrays relations with texts and author as being something like proxy friendships.

At twenty, Ovid may be the favourite author; Horace at forty; and perhaps Tacitus at fifty... We choose our favourite author as we do our friend, from a conformity of humour and disposition (ESY I.XXIII.30).

More recently, in a similar vein, in *The Company We Keep* (1988), Booth conceives of the interaction between text and reader as being between animate beings that may become friends when it achieves its most intimate expression. But one need not go as far as Hume and Booth. Underlying their comparison between written fictions and friends is the idea that a certain kind of relationship develops between readers and written fictions when the latter engage with the former – some kind of intimate bond which, in its formation and development, yields positive transformative change. Just as in the relationship that exists between two friends, the relationship that emerges from one's interactions with a written fiction can, in that shared experience of development, provide insights into one's life, how it may go better. Written fictions aren't just objects. We experience them as live sources of inspiration and insight. My perceptual metaphors give us one sets of tools for describing that experience of fiction's vitality and activity.

### **§3.4 Why Metaphors At All?**

An obvious, higher-level objection remains. Why turn to metaphors at all? Why should one make use of them in this context? Furthermore, even if there are good

reasons, at this level, for making use of metaphors in this connection, does doing so allow one to meet the requirements of the account being sought? Does this treatment of the text and reader account for a distinctive way in which written fictions can deliver ethical insights?

First, importing a literary technique into a philosophical commentary promises to, in some way, transform the philosophical analysis into something more like a literary/philosophical *synthesis*, which not only *explicates* but also sympathetically incorporates and imitates the linguistic style of fictional texts. This is desirable in so much as it points one's thoughts in the direction of the kinds of linguistic structures and contents that one is trying to account for, fusing together subject and commentary. This is akin to what Nussbaum says about her philosophy of fiction.

We can see that even to begin that dialectical task, where literature is concerned, we need... a type of philosophical commentary that will point out explicitly the contributions of the works to the pursuit of our question about human beings and human life, and their relation to our intuitions and our sense of life. The novels and their style are, we have argued, an ineliminable part of moral philosophy, understood as we have understood it... In order to be the ally of literature, and to direct the reader to that variety and complexity, rather than away from it, this Aristotelian style [of 'philosophical commentary'] itself will have to differ greatly from much philosophical writing that we commonly encounter. (Nussbaum 1990: 49)

Bringing together the linguistic forms of fiction and philosophy in this way promises to allow the philosophical exploration of fictional texts to be more sympathetic to the things it, itself, claims are important to the advancement of ethical understanding. If one thinks that engaging with written fictions' various ways of presenting life and the world is important to the progress of one's Ethical Adventure, a philosophical commentary which eschews all literary technique will be at risk of downplaying or drawing attention away from the contributions of those forms. By contrast, a discussion that integrates the language and style of the fictions, e.g. by using metaphors, promises the reverse, namely, to bring into focus, through its very methods, some of the things which make the fictions and their contributions to ethical understanding so significant.

A second reason can be found by observing a trend in philosophical writing in general. This is that much of the best writing in many philosophical sub-disciplines possesses qualities that reflect the *values or qualities* of the areas of investigation they comment on. For example, a good piece of political philosophy often has a somewhat

legalistic tone. For instance, it might state key principals in a law-like style. The text might number and name them, like this:

There are certain harms which, although they would not occur but for certain acts of expression, nonetheless cannot be taken as part of a justification for legal restrictions on these acts. These harms are: (a) harms to certain individuals which consist in their coming to have false beliefs as a result of those acts of expression; (b) harmful consequences of acts performed as a result of those acts of expression, where the connection between the acts of expression and the subsequent harmful acts consists merely in the fact that the act of expression led the agents to believe (or increased their tendency to believe) these acts to be worth performing. (Scanlon 1972: 213)

In this sense, good political philosophy often reflects *values* such as authority, assertiveness and legal precision, much like the realm of just governmental decrees that it seeks to explicate. Logic provides another good example of what I am talking about, perhaps because logicians normally make extensive use, in philosophical writing, of their own invented languages. Such languages express values such as precision, formality, and detachment. And, as such, these languages reflect the values of the logical terrain they aim to describe: the exacting and indubitable reality of truth and falsity. Again, one tends to find the thing discussed most effectively when the linguistic forms that describe it reflect the values of the domain that they aim to describe; and the dispassionate and abstract symbols of logical languages evoke something of the distant and abstract realities they attempt to describe and explain. There is, again, then, in this case, a certain effective fittingness between the qualities of the mode of representation and the thing being represented.

Aestheticians tend, likewise, to be most insightful when their writing reflects the qualities or values that are emphasised or exalted within their own realm of discourse.

A man does something; he lifts, let us say, a stone. In consequence he undergoes, suffers, something: the weight, strain, texture of the surface of the thing lifted. The properties thus undergone determine further doing. The stone is too heavy or too angular, not solid enough; or else the properties undergone show it is fit for the use for which it is intended. The process continues until mutual adaptation of the self under the object emerges and that particular experience comes to a close. What is true of this simple instance is true, as to form, of every experience. (Dewey 1934: 44)

Warm, imperfect, incomplete, interpretable, narratological, self-referential: these are just some of the hallmark values and qualities of the aesthetic realm, and so the effective exposition of that realm is thus often done better by using methods of inquiry that embody those qualities. For instance, above, Dewey writes beautifully of ‘an’ experience – the key thing which, on his view, art provides – by *evoking* one. The terms used to describe the thing mirror qualities in the very thing described, and all the more effectively captures what it is Dewey aims to describe.

Metaphors embody some of the distinctive and valuable features of written fictions. That is some reason to believe, then – in light of the general methodological points I’m making here – that aesthetic inquiry that uses metaphors, in its way of describing and analysing written fiction, is likely to offer more illuminating and effective discussions of its subject matter.

‘Alright’, one might say here, ‘perhaps there is something to the idea that the linguistic techniques of a philosophical discussion ought to reflect the values and qualities of the domain of inquiry they describe, but why *metaphors* specifically in this case? Why not dialogue? Why not narrative? Why not a personal perspective? All of these are common stylistic elements of written fiction too. Why shouldn’t one’s aesthetic theory employ these techniques instead?’

Why not indeed? Here I, think, the bullet ought to be bitten. In line with what I just suggested, other linguistic techniques that are common to written fictions can expand and enhance the philosophical discussion of those fictions. (The first person to write in a distinctively philosophical way about fictions, in the Western tradition – namely, Plato – wrote about them *in fiction*.) But then why have I not emphasised their use, in the present discussion?

My response to this question is that metaphors are perhaps the most ‘fictional’ of all the linguistic forms found in written fiction. For, metaphors are, themselves, a kind of fiction. They say that something *is* something else when it really is not (‘the past is a foreign country’; ‘Juliet is the sun’). In so doing they also communicate a wholly new understanding of what it is they say that a thing is.

That is exactly what the strategy adopted here aims to achieve. By overtly positioning a metaphor at the centre of a philosophical commentary, I aim to make that commentary fictional – but illuminating – in just the way that metaphors themselves illuminatingly fictionalise the things they describe. If the goals of investigative synthesis and domain reflection are appropriate values, as I have suggested, then, arguably, there is no better technique of achieving such aims than to place a series of micro-fictions at the heart of the account.

But do these micro-fictions about perception describe a distinctive way in which written fictions deliver ethical insights? Not on their own, no. My perceptual

metaphors illuminate the nature of certain experiences afforded to fiction readers. When one reads a description of something, one is shown, and can thus see what something is like; when one reads an explanation of something, one is told and thus can hear about what something is like, when certain passages evoke through withheld description or explanation, something is rendered tactile, and thus one can feel what something is like. All of *these* perceptions are of *what something is like*. All these perceptions are of things that can be encountered in day-to-day life and are thus accessible, admittedly in a slightly different form, in the ordinary course of events. One can (really) see, hear and feel what things are like by going out there, into the world, and living. Why, then, would one need to turn to fiction to (metaphorically) see, hear and feel those things, especially given that these are mere facsimiles of ordinary experience? Wouldn't the real thing be better?

In cases where written fictions only present an image, account or feeling of what something is like, this is correct. Sometimes, as Kieran and Nussbaum point out, what a fiction gives the reader an experience of is something that can be experienced, in ordinary human life, but which the reader is not in a position to experience, or not without great difficulty, except through a fictional encounter. This is all to the good, but as I said earlier, this isn't yet an account of an experience that written fictions are distinctively capable of providing. While the perceptual facsimiles supplied by fictions are inaccessible to those who do not engage with these texts, the *direct* perceptions, of which the fictional perceptions are but beautiful phantoms, *are* accessible, in an important sense, whatever the obstacles to access may be.

This suggests that if a phenomenological account is to have any prospect of fulfilling the criterion for *distinctiveness* – the criterion that the Cognitivist and Neo-Cognitivist accounts that I discussed in Chapter 2 both failed to fulfil – it must supply more than a richer description of the likenesses encountered during fiction reading. In addition, the account must identify a sense in which the experiences afforded to fiction readers are *of* something which is different to – in some sense, beyond – what anything is like in other ordinary parts of human experience.

In the next chapter this shall be my task: to identify a kind of experiential content which can *only* be encountered in written fictions. Naturally, in keeping with the overall theoretical goal of this dissertation, I will argue that this kind of encounter can engender a significant form of ethical enlightenment in those who experience it. I will argue for this by considering a special problem that arises when one tries to explicate the experience of reading Speculative fictions.

### §3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter, the account I have outlined has been expressed through metaphors, rather than a more direct form of description or explanation. According to this account, the experience of reading fiction is of perceiving something being presented. One can see what the text shows, hear what it has to tell and feel what it renders tactile. All this is to say that one can imagine what it describes, comprehend what it explains and react emotionally to what it evokes.

I have given my reasons for taking the metaphorical descriptions to be richer, more illuminating, more explanatory, than the terms for which they are substitutes. If this is persuasive, then I have, thus, articulated my speculations in the form in which the farfetcher seeks to express them: symbolically. The account I have outlined has also explained the way in which the metaphors I have adopted account for a form of ‘intuitive perception’. These perceptions are the experience produced by the interaction between fictional texts and their readers. They are a psychological access to that which a fictional text presents as intuitively, mentally, perceptible. Namely, what certain things are like.

This, in itself, can be ethically enlightening. If one has never been to war, seeing the scenes of devastation in the aftermath of a cataclysmic battle, hearing the justifications of the officers and embracing the survivors in their horror and anguish can reveal something about the nature of these things. One’s fresh understanding of them can be insightful. It may change, in some way, one’s posture towards reality for the better. Seeing the devastation of the battlefield may suggest a more pacific attitude. Hearing the inadequacies in the officer’s justifications may prompt a more sceptical attitude towards authority. Sharing in the soldiers’ anguish may hone one’s capacity for sympathy. All these things can enrich moral understanding in a way that constitutes a form of ethical insight. For each consists in forms of affective reorientation, cognitive apprehension, or imaginative grasping, which transform or elevate one’s modes of interacting with, interpreting, and relating to the world of human thought and action, through an experience of what something is like.

However, none of these experiences or forms of moral enlightenment amount to something that written fictions are *uniquely* equipped to provide. My farfetching, then, remains incomplete, to this point. While I have filled in something of what is missing – namely, the nature of the experience that fiction reading can supply when it results in ethical understanding – something more needs to be said: something about the ‘moral entirety’ to which one’s perceptions grant access. Because, as yet, I have failed to describe every aspect of the ‘moral entirety’ that can be encountered while reading fiction, or, at least, certain kinds of fiction. I have not

explained those aspects of that ethical whole which are beyond that which can be experienced by going out into the world and actually living. At this point, then, one might feel somewhat uneasy. Like the Gethenians who Genley seeks to understand as metaphorically insubstantial, shadow-less, something continues to remain imperceptible, missing or occluded, in spite of the speculations I have set forth here. That feeling may persist as I continue into the next chapter, but for different reasons. For, although I shall be explaining what is missing from this account, what is missing will turn out to be something quite as disturbing as the insubstantial, shadow-less persons Genley seeks to make sense of in his speculations. For, there my themes shall be the nature of experience beyond the everyday, the way in which Speculative fictions are especially equipped to supply it, and the nature of the ethical insights which perceptions of this aspect of the moral whole are especially fitted to engender.



## 4. The Unlike

### *Chapter Synopsis*

Picking up where the last chapter left off, my aim in this chapter is to complete my account of the distinctive form of phenomenal experience generated by reading fictional texts. This is achieved by first raising, and then addressing, a problem associated with the experiences generated by reading Speculative fiction. Speculative fictions seem to, in addition to providing experiences of familiar things, generate encounters with things, persons and places that are, in some important sense, radically different to ‘what things are like’. Given this, what is the *content* of the distinctive ethical experiences that these works can generate, if it cannot be simply reduced to familiar qualia?

Part of this chapter is dedicated to exploring several solutions one might propose to this conundrum. Might it be that this content consists in what things are *not* like? Yes, but the morally edifying potential of encounters with such contents are deeply circumscribed, and thus cannot meet the criteria of the account being sought here. Might it be, then, that the content of these encounters consists in what things *would* be like, given certain conditions? Again, the answer, I suggest, is: ‘yes’. Nonetheless, several problems arise for this view. Chiefly, these concern the counterfactual analysis of the phenomenal content, and the fact that such an account cannot plausibly explain the content of the experiences provided by reading many Speculative fictions. As another possibility: could it be that speculative elements generate encounters with what *oneself* is like? As with the other two theories explored before, the answer I propose is a qualified: ‘yes’. One issue with this approach, though, again, is that it cannot account for many cases. Further, certain aspects of the way in which the concept of ‘transformative experience’ has been fleshed out in

the philosophical literature render it inappropriate for conceptualising certain aspects of the experience of reading Speculative fictions.

Nonetheless, each of these suggestions contains important kernels of insight which I use to build a more successful theory. In particular, I emphasise a point of agreement that runs through all of the foregoing theories, that the experiences which Speculative fictions generate contain *dual contents* – both what things are like, *and something beyond that*. This content beyond familiar likenesses I call *the unlike*. This term is meant to capture the content of encounters generated by Speculative fictions when such content is either presently unavailable in daily experience, or completely impossible. In an important sense, then, the unlike is ‘like nothing’. This generates further questions, the most important being: how is it that encounters with the unlike can yield ethical insights? I explain how the experiences that Speculative fictions are especially well-equipped to provide can make distinctive contributions to Ethical Adventuring, by bringing one beyond the boundaries of what it’s possible to experience in ordinary life. Such experiences of the unlike sensitise people to the frontiers of what it is possible to experience, in a way that prompts reflections on important questions about one’s capacity for navigating and responding to the ethical demands of daily life. Such questioning, I suggest, can help readers understand the limits of those capacities, in an ethically illuminating way, rather than representing improvements or enhancements to them.

## §4.1 Introduction

Two lights for guidance. The first, our little glowing atom of community, with all that it signifies. The second, the cold light of the stars, symbol of the hypercosmical reality, with its crystal ecstasy. Strange that in this light, in which the dearest love is frostily assessed, and even the possible defeat of our half-waking world is contemplated without remission of praise, the human crisis does not lose but gains of significance. Strange, that it seems more, not less, urgent to play some part in this struggle, this brief effort of animalcules striving to win for their race some increase of lucidity before the ultimate darkness.

Olaf Stapledon, *Starmaker*

At the opening of *Starmaker*, a man sits upon a moor at nightfall, looking up at the stars. Before long he realises that he is drifting up into space and has left his body behind him. Existing now as a disembodied consciousness, he begins to traverse the universe. At first, he simply drifts aimlessly through the void. Soon enough, however, he comes across new life. First, he encounters forms he finds largely familiar: 'Other Men' living on an 'Other Earth'. Slowly but surely, he joins his mind with one of these 'Other Men' and they continue their journey across the stars together, conjoining their dual consciousness to those of increasingly alien beings. The Nautiloids, the Insectoids, the symbiont Crustaceans and Ichthyoids, the Plant Men and many others combine psychologically and journey onward, as one. Eventually, this super-consciousness becomes aware of the minds of the stars themselves, and of their maker. And in that final act of union with the creator itself, the whole of time and space becomes known to the super-consciousness. From the first random experiments of a juvenile demiurge through to the advanced creations of a seasoned God, each stage of the cosmic story is observed in the blinking of an eye. And then the man returns to the moor. Imagining now the surface of the Earth, 'the whole planet, the whole rock-grain, with its busy swarms', he contemplates its place within the totality he has observed and reaches a surprising conclusion. Having seen the immensity of existence, of all those things that are beyond the boundaries of the familiar world, the human struggle only appears more, and not less urgent.

In this chapter I will be exploring the way in which reading fiction, and in particular, Speculative fiction, can provide one with a special kind of experience. Like the journey of the man-consciousness in *Starmaker*, it is an experience of a special

kind of thing. The kind of thing that exists beyond the normal range of experience, of ‘what it is like’ to do, be, or encounter the various persons and things that populate the everyday world. But something which, despite its radical otherness, nonetheless serves to amplify rather than mute the significance of the familiar goings-on of daily existence. In accordance with the desiderata of the account being sought, this theory will identify a way in which reading fictions, and especially those of the Speculative variety, can make a distinctive contribution to people’s Ethical Adventure, by providing them with moral insights. This will be achieved by considering a special kind of problem that arises when one tries to apply a phenomenological account of fiction reading’s morally enlightening functions to Speculative fictions (§4.2). I will then conclude with some remarks that trace the relationship between the phenomenological proposal I have introduced and defended in this and the previous chapter, and the conception of the ethical sphere and its contents outlined in Chapter 1 (§4.3).

## §4.2 The Phenomenology of Nothing

### §4.2.1 *The Problem*

In the previous chapter I claimed that there is an illuminating metaphorical code which can be used to vivify the descriptions of the parts played by readers and texts in the production of fictional experiences. According to this approach, a symbology of perception can be used to enrich our phenomenal understanding of the ‘what-it-is-likeness’ that we experience in reading written fictions. By itself, this approach doesn’t yet fulfil Walsh’s desideratum of distinctiveness. Even it’s true that written fictions make us see, feel, and hear things, in some phenomenologically interesting and ethically illuminating way, so too do many kinds of ordinary experience. We still haven’t isolated a distinctive process through which reading fiction can aid in Ethical Adventuring – a process that couldn’t be enacted through education, relationships, or facing and overcoming life challenges. But as my discussion of *Starmaker* above suggests, the distinctive ethical payoff of reading fiction might be due to the special, strange, and distinctive things that written fictions make us see, hear, and feel, and which are not available to perception in other experiences. The natural move at this stage, then, is explore the ethical contributions of some actual fictional texts through this lens. By doing so, we may unearth some unique insights that the fictions are equipped to provide, and all the more so when the experience of reading them is

couched in the metaphorical nomenclature I have described. That is what I will be doing shortly.

However, a problem soon emerges when one attempts to use these metaphors to explicate the experience of reading the kinds of texts I committed to exploring in Chapter 1. Recall that in the Chapter 1, I recommended several expansions to the range of texts which have typically been explored by authors working on the philosophy of written fiction, suggesting, especially, the need to accept guidance from more contemporary, non-realist and non-canonical works. In line with this recommendation, I pledged to explore the ethical dimensions of works chronicling the lives of Haraway's cyborgs (1991: 61-64). Trouble emerges, however, when one tries to apply the phenomenological approach defended in Chapter 3 to these fictions, because all these fictions are *Speculative*.

Speculative, high concept fictions contrive situations that, however unusual, always remain somewhat grounded in aspects of the familiar. Without this, all sense of what they describe would be lost. However, one of the marks of this kind of fiction is that the situations and characters they describe deliberately deviate from the recognisable patterns of the everyday. Often, this is because of some fictionalised change in human knowledge, e.g., how to travel through time, visit other planets, or gain extraordinary powers. In this way, such texts invite the reader to encounter a peculiar blend of the ordinary and the extraordinary. And so while, just like realist fictions, they are suited to generating an experience of, and consequently, furnishing one with an understanding of 'what it is like' to live through some actual event (*All Quiet on the Western Front*) or encounter some actual person (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*), Speculative works also open a door to a world that is unlike anything that can currently be experienced and *perceived*, in the most familiar senses of that term.

To the extent that Speculative fictions do *this*, they aren't giving readers an understanding of what it is like to, say, encounter a race of androgynous humans; or visit the third planet of the star of Arcturus; or travel through the cosmos as a disembodied consciousness; or have sex with extra-terrestrials. There is nothing that is 'like' that, at least not in the actuality of the here and now. And so, it cannot be that by reading about these things, one *perceives*, and thereby receives some kind of morally revelatory understanding of, 'what these things are like'. What is it, then, that the reader perceives when they encounter high-concept features in Speculative fictions? And what is the ethical understanding that is imparted by *this* perceptual experience?

#### §4.2.2 Some Solutions

One (rather unpromising) theory naturally suggests itself. It goes like this. If engagement with realistic aspects of a fiction can provide an experience and thus, phenomenal understanding of, what something is like, i.e. of the qualities of some *real* thing or person etc., the experience of speculative features in a text ought to provide an encounter which enriches one's phenomenal understanding of what things are *not* like. For instance, one might read a fiction about an alien invasion of Earth (*Childhood's End*, *War of the Worlds*). On this view, the speculative aspects of the fiction would be taken to afford an experience of, and thus a greater insight into, what living on Earth is not like – that it is not like living on a world being invaded by aliens.

There are several considerations that stand against this view. First, neither the experience of what something is not like, nor the understanding derived from it, counts as a distinctive contribution to one's ethical adventure made by written fictions. This kind of understanding is, epistemically, very 'cheap'. All one needs to do in order to grasp that the Earth is not under attack from outer space is to turn on the news or look out of the window. Pretty hum-drum experiences would thus serve as a much more efficient sources of this kind of 'insight'.

Second, gaining an understanding of what some aspect of the world is not like is not only lacking in distinctiveness, it is also not particularly revelatory; a fact that can also be explained with reference to the epistemic cheapness of this kind of understanding. Again, all one needs to do, in order to know that the office where I write this thesis is not filled with one hundred penguins, is look around the office. So, if one is to take seriously the idea that say, reading *War of the Worlds* can yield a significant kind of ethical understanding, it ought to turn out that one's engagement with this text yields more than an understanding that the real world is not like one where a band of murderous Martians is destroying London.

Finally, it seems as though a fairly good grasp of the fact that the world is not under attack from outer space is more of a *prerequisite for*, rather than a *result of*, a fruitful engagement with a text like *War of the Worlds*. (As the infamous 1938 radio adaptation of this work seem to suggest.) Indeed, without a prior understanding that the work in question will encourage an experience of what some aspect of the actual world is not like, one is apt to engage with the text in a rather confused, even inappropriate, kind of way. Hence, even if one does have an experience, and achieve a better understanding of, what the world is not like by engaging with high concept themes, it seems as though this aspect of the experience and the effect it produces are less important to one's engagement with the text than one's prior apprehension of

these phenomenal qualities. In short, without grasping this *before* reading the text, one might not even be able to comprehend that what one is reading is a fiction at all.

So, while it is not impossible that the experiences provided by Speculative written fictions provide perceptions, and hence, a deeper understanding of, what the world is not like, this theory cannot meet the demands of the account being sought here. The one significant virtue of this kind of account is that it highlights an important kind of dualistic contrast which figures most prominently in the experience of reading Speculative fiction. While works of this kind provide one with encounters with things that *are* like those which actually exist e.g. London, they also provide experiences of things which are not like anything else, things which are so to speak, *beyond* any familiar likenesses e.g. Martians. An account of what one encounters in engaging with high-concept features of a written fiction can acknowledge and build on this point.

A second, more promising, theory, might take one's encounters with speculative elements in written fictions to provide an experience of what certain things *would* be like, under certain possible but non-actual counterfactual conditions. If realistic features account for an experience and understanding of what certain things are like, then speculative features might account for an experience of what something would be like, *if* a certain change were made to reality. For instance, when one reads a story about a post-apocalyptic world – like *The Drowned World*, *A Canticle for Leibowitz*, *Ice*, or *Dreamsnake* – part of what such a work provides is an experience of, and an insight into, what it would be like to live among the survivors of such a disaster.

This theory has some virtues. It appears to make sense of the experiences provided by certain works of Speculative fiction (or at least certain aspects of them), namely, works which have been surprisingly, terrifyingly, accurate in portraying what the world would be like, if certain changes occurred. For instance, John Brunner's *Stand on Zanzibar*, originally published in 1968, describes events in the year 2010. In it, the population of Earth stands at seven billion; multi-national corporations have annual turnovers larger than small African states; random acts of violence have become commonplace; the United States is suffering through a period of moral, economic and social degradation; China has ascended to the position of a world superpower; computer systems of immense complexity dictate the policies of nations; 'Mr. and Mrs. Everywhere - or Mr and Miss, or Miss and Miss or, Mister and Mister' can be viewed in a 'television programme' where the viewers feature as the characters; cigarette smoking is socially reviled while the use of marijuana and psychedelics is commonplace and in many places, legal; African Americans hold positions of power within the corporate structures of American society, a relatively new social phenomenon that is met with racist backlash. In other words, imagining the world of 2010

in the 1960s, Brunner's novel captured, with a startling accuracy, a great deal of what it would be like to live in the early twenty-first century. Further, this theory seems to have a claim to meet Walsh's criterion of distinctiveness. How else would someone in the 1960s gain an experience of what something *would* be like (i.e. living in the twenty-first century) without experiencing some kind of facsimile of it, for example, through reading a work of Speculative fiction? The answer is not obvious. Hence, this theory has some promising features.

However, it also has its issues. First, it doesn't seem to hold well for all cases. Consider, for instance, H.G. Wells's *The First Men in the Moon*. In this work, two Victorian men invent a gravity resistant metal, fashion it into a spheroid spacecraft and use it to travel to the moon. Arriving successfully, they leave the craft without any respiratory assistance, travel through vast jungles and discover a race of communist insectoid creatures living beneath the lunar surface. It does not take much to see that the speculative elements of Wells' tale of space travel hardly provide an experience of what it would be like to travel to the moon. The point is not that a Speculative fiction has to make successful predictions about counterfactual worlds, in order to have any value. The point is that many Speculative fictions make highly dubious predictions (or ones that are proven false), but it doesn't seem plausible, to infer from this, that such fictions offer no phenomenologically rich and ethically illuminating insights to the reader.

Second, some high-concept elements in Speculative fictions seem to provide experiences of things which are *impossible*. In these cases, there isn't even anything that it *would* be like to encounter these things, for they will simply never come to be at all. The counterfactual conditions being described are not just non-actual, but impossible. For example, it is not possible to perform magic, in a sense beyond one where 'magic' is synonymous with 'illusion'. But fantasy fictions – novels like *Tales of Neveryon*, *Earthsea*, or *The Lord of the Rings* – abound with descriptions of mages, sorcerers and wizards, their unnatural powers and these powers' effects. The encounters one has with these characters and their abilities are not, therefore, providing an experience of a possible but non-actual set of counterfactual conditions. There are not, and cannot be wizards, and hence there is nothing that it would be like to encounter them.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> There is another possible concern here, related to the way that this account seeks to explain the nature of one's experience of speculative elements *counterfactually*. Those who would advance a Lewisian modal realist analysis of these conditions might face a serious issue in this case. For, modal realism threatens to destroy the distinction between the experiences of reading Speculative and realistic fictions altogether. If one held that Wells' *First Men* provides an experience of what it would be like to travel to the moon in the closest possible world where this happened in Victorian England, then one holds the view that such works provide an experience of some actual state of affairs in some (fairly distant) possible world. But then, Wells' novel would not be a work of *speculation* in the relevant sense. It would be a work that simply describes some (real) possible world. It would provide an



The counterfactual analysis doesn't account well for the whole of the 'moral entirety' perceived during one's interactions with Speculative fictions. It seems suited to accounting for some experiences of speculative features, or certain aspects of those experiences, but it fails to account for others. It gets closer than the previous account – one experiences what some aspect of the world is not like – but is still unable to explain everything one encounters when engaging with high concept themes. Even cases which appear to be explained well by this theory have intransigent features, e.g. in *Stand on Zanzibar* eugenical policies are widely adopted and accepted in most countries – something that does not generate an experience of what it would be like to live in the early twenty-first century). The seems to be because, in the main,

Science fiction is not predictive, it is descriptive. Predictions are uttered by prophets (free of charge), by clairvoyants (who usually charge a fee, and are therefore more honoured in their day than prophets) and by futurologists (salaried). Prediction is the business of prophets, clairvoyants and futurologists. It is not the business of novelists (Le Guin 1976).

Taking science fiction, or speculative fiction more generally, to provide experiences of thought experimental scenarios (what it would be like if...), need not blind one to the 'moral complexity' of a novel, but it seems as though there is more to these works than their ability to, in Le Guin's terms, 'predict' (Ibid: 1976). On this view, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is much more about 1948 than about 1984. Indeed, on its own, the view under consideration sounds very similar to the kind of thing that Carroll and Elgin propose. Namely, the idea that written fiction offers one immersion into a particularly complex thought experiment (imagine what it would be like if the Allies lost the Second World War; imagine what it would be like if a humanoid robot could do the job of a detective). For reasons already explored, this is not the kind of account being sought.

Despite this, the merits of this account still stand. There are important senses in which *Stand on Zanzibar*, for instance, does provide an experience of what it would be like to live in 2010. The turmoil the novel describes can be seen as a kind of warning: 'if we continue the way we're going, look what the world will be like'. The fact that it relays this experience with such accuracy allows it to serve as a lesson about some of the very real dangers of hyper-globalisation and cyberocracy run amok. (Lessons that have gone, depressingly, unheeded). Equally, this account seems able to

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experience of what it is like to travel to the moon in that world. But that doesn't seem right. Wells' work is not a description of a real possible world, but an imaginative reflection on the *actual* world, altered in certain ways. Thus, one promising analysis of counterfactuals seems to jeopardise the central contrast between the experiences engendered by reading realistic and Speculative fictions.

account for the dualistic contrast identified in the discussion of the first account. On this view, Speculative fictions provide an experience with a dual aspect: what something is like *and* something beyond that – what certain things would be like given certain conditions. Further, such a theory does appear to identify one distinctive way in which fiction reading can deepen people’s phenomenal/ethical understanding. However, this will depend, in large part, on whether any version of the account can avoid treating the fictions as nothing more than thought experiments. But whether any such version of this view can be successfully formulated and defended is not a question that I will address here. This is because there are other reasons to be sceptical about this view (e.g. counterexamples such as *First Men*), and most importantly, because there is another, better way to explain the morally illuminating experience of engaging with speculative elements in written fictions, which avoids these issues.

Before I reach this account, one further way of explaining the experience of engaging with speculative elements deserves some consideration. For it too has some promising features, and points the way towards the preferred account that I ultimately want to endorse.

This third approach is to account for readers’ encounters with speculative features using one of the recently popularised conceptions of ‘transformative experience’ (Schwenkler and Lambert 2020). For instance, according to L.A. Paul (2014), certain kinds of transfiguration not only result in an understanding of what something is like but also additionally, involve a confrontation with, and fundamental change to, one’s own *identity*. Experiences of the former kind include, for example, eating an exotic fruit for the first time, while experiences of the latter kind involve irreversible alterations to one’s very mode(s) of interacting with and interpreting the world, e.g. becoming a vampire.

At first blush the *personally* transformative experiences Paul discusses might sound like a good model for explaining the experience and phenomenological results of engagement with the high-concept features of written fictions. On this model, reading these parts of the work does not only involve an encounter with what something is like, but with who oneself is; with what *oneself is like*. In this way, it supposes that the ‘transformative’ experience of fiction reading does not so much leave an impression *in* one’s understanding, but in some way reconfigures the very self that *does* the understanding.

This seems to be a promising model for explaining the phenomenology of reading Speculative fictions which centre on characters that possess or gain paranormal abilities, e.g. *Chocky*, *Odd John*, *The Invisible Man*, *Flowers for Algernon*, or *Parable of the Sower*. By having a kind of experience of radical instances of what it is like to possess such powers, one might vicariously experience a more subtle reconfiguration

of the capacities through which one encounters the world and negotiates one's position within it. Similarly, these kinds of experience may well be distinctive, if not in kind, then in their particular manifestation and the phenomenal understanding they supply. Although certain transformative experiences can be had by simply living in the world (becoming a parent, getting married etc.), experiences of invisibility or telepathy cannot.

However promising this account may appear, though, it also faces several issues. First, as with the counterfactual account, modelling the experience generated by engagement with speculative elements on Paul's notion does not seem to account for some cases, including those it *prima facie* might be thought to account for best. It is not clear, for instance, that all Speculative fictions, even those that feature characters with paranormal abilities, encourage or provide a personal encounter and transformation like the one which Paul describes. Consider, for instance, Frank Herbert's *Dune*. While this work features multiple characters with unusual powers, the style of this text deliberately discourages identification with any particular character. Instead, the narrative is detached from any one character's perspective, with the internal monologues of all the major characters featuring prominently throughout. In this case one is, for instance, actively denied the possibility of vicarious participation in Paul Atreides' transformation from young prince into the godlike '*Kwisatz Haderach*'. Indeed, when he undergoes his transformation, much of the narrative is delivered from his mother's, rather than his own, perspective. Again, the point is not that Speculative fiction has to invite identification with abnormal characters, and thus encourage transformative experiences in the reader, in order to have any value. The point is that many Speculative fictions that don't have this feature, still seem to offer phenomenologically rich and ethically illuminating insights to the reader.

Second, Paul's notion of personal transformation, as well as those deployed by most other commentators discussing transformative experience, are supposed to make sense of certain experiences that are (currently) possible. For instance, for Paul, these experiences include:

a horrific physical attack, gaining a new sensory ability [this is no longer science fiction], having a traumatic accident, undergoing major surgery, winning an Olympic gold medal, participating in a revolution, having a religious conversion, having a child, experiencing the death of a parent, making a major scientific discovery, or experiencing the death of a child (Ibid: 16).

This calls into question the appropriateness of using this notion to explain the understanding engendered by reading about, for example, a fictional character's use of telekinetic powers.<sup>21</sup>

Another issue pertains to the fact that authors working in this area typically discuss transformative experiences which involve some reasonably concrete alteration to the material conditions of one's existence. Moving in with a partner, having a child, undergoing major surgery etc. all involve some sort of change in not only one-self but, in some sense, one's *circumstances*. Major surgery may make it harder to live in one's home, having a child changes the environment in which one lives, as does moving in with a long-term partner. Some cases, of course, do occupy something of a middle-ground in respect to changes in internal and external relationships. For instance, religious conversion or getting married are, in a large part, internal, personal changes. However, even these cases appear to involve some kind of change to the material conditions in which one lives in a way that reading a written fiction does not obviously seem to. Reading a written fiction does not - except, in some unusual cases, indirectly - result in a radical transformation to the material conditions of the reader's life. The distinctive, morally illuminating experiences that I am trying to describe are primarily phenomenal experiences. Whatever transformative potential they have seems like it is different in kind to the materially instantiated transformative experiences that are the focus of recent philosophical work on this topic.

Nonetheless, the idea that the encounter with speculative features in a written fiction may affect some form of 'transformation' is useful. The thought that, broadly speaking, significant transformations may occur when reading written fictions makes good sense of the experience of engaging with speculative features in a way that it does not what applied to one's engagement with realistic features. Encounters with wizards and aliens, journeys to exo-planets and across fantastical lands are so different to anything that one can experience in everyday life, that there is surely some sense in which they are 'transformative'. To meet these beings, to visit these places, one has to be in the position of someone able to make those connections and undertake those quests. This, in itself, seems to require some kind of change in one's way of experiencing, one's way of navigating and interpreting the world of human thought and action in a way that meeting someone's friend, relative or lover, or travelling to Paris or Bangkok does not.

There are virtues to all of the accounts considered here, even if none of them is wholly successful in characterising the phenomenal - and metaphorically perceptual - content in the experiences of, and understanding derived from, engagement

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<sup>21</sup> It is relatively clear, for instance, that Paul discusses the 'wacky' cases like becoming a vampire purely in the interests of priming her reader's intuitions in a direction conducive to her general line of argument.

with high-concept features in written fictions. To summarise, three useful points have emerged. First, there is a dual aspect to the experience generated by one's engagement with Speculative written fictions. When reading these works one encounters both something familiar – a 'what it is likeness' – and also something further, something that is not 'like' anything in the real world. Second, there is a real sense in which these works can, in certain circumstances and in certain ways, enlighten one as to the qualities of counterfactual scenarios. Third, *the* experience generated by engaging with these themes can be, in some interesting sense, transformative of one's way of navigating and responding to the world. In the next subsection, my task will be to set out a theory which accommodates and builds upon these points, while avoiding the issues with the accounts discussed above.

#### §4.2.3 *The Unlike*

So, what is it then, that one encounters, experiences, *perceives*, when engaging with the speculative elements in a high-concept written fiction? For, these unusual situations, characters and events clearly *do* engender experiences with some sort of content.

Let's begin by considering the contrast between realistic and speculative content. If realistic features supply the content for an experience of what something is like, and speculative features supply the content for an experience that is, in some sense, contrasted to this, then it seems as though speculative features ought to supply the content for an experience that is not like anything that *is*. This is the premise underlying the first account considered above. The second account builds on this with the suggestion that the content which is not like anything actual is counterfactual, what something would be like, *if it were* actual. This theory, however, cannot account for enough cases. Instead, then, I propose that, in contrast to the experience generated by engagement with realistic themes, namely, of what something *is like*, the experience created by engagement with speculative themes is of something that is *unlike*.

In response to this suggestion, one might ask: 'unlike what?' But this would be to misunderstand the unlike. I use the phrase 'the unlike' here, in an unconventional way. It is not supposed to be understood in its ordinary usage, as denoting a relation between two things (viz. that they do not share certain qualities). Here it has a special, technical usage. This can be drawn out by reflecting upon the fact that 'the unlike' is the content of certain kind of experience, it is a kind of *thing* that one encounters when engaging with speculative themes in written fictions. This then, prompts the

question ‘what is the unlike like?’. And, to this, the only answer one can give is ‘nothing’. This leaves open two possibilities as to the sense in which the unlike is ‘like nothing’:

(1) There is no thing which x is similar to.

(2) x is similar to something, namely, a certain kind of nullity or absence, (which we use the term ‘nothing’ to denote.)

(1) cannot be the right analysis. If the unlike were in *no way* similar to anything, it would seem as though it could not be spoken of at all. (Here the final proposition of Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*... comes to mind.) Similarly, the content of the experience generated by engagement with speculative themes does seem to have *some* similarities to *something*. An alien being is still a *being*, a fantasy land is still a *land* and a sorcerer is still a *person*, after all. This nudges us towards option (2). What these things are like is an absence. Something that one *can* speak of or name; something one can perceive as *being there*, even while perceiving its nullity, namely, nothing.

This, of course, is apt to provoke a kind of *aperia*. How can one speak of nothingness as a thing? Well, even to talk of nothingness is to do just this, in fact. But it turns out that a conceit which is particularly common in Speculative fiction, on this view, is to go further than simply calling nothingness what it is. High-concept features of written fictions describe, explain and name nothingness. In so doing, they help to generate an experience of it.

How is it that speculative elements in written fictions do this describing and naming? An example can help demonstrate. Below David Lindsay tries to capture something of the experience of perceiving a new primary colour and reveals ways in which the unlike is named and described:

It was an entirely new colour - not a new shade or combination, but a new primary colour, as vivid as blue, red, or yellow, but quite different. When he inquired, she told him that it was known as *ulfire*. Presently he met with a second new colour. This she designated *jale*. The sense impressions caused in Maskull by these two additional primary colours can only be vaguely hinted at by analogy. Just as blue is delicate and mysterious, yellow clear and unsubtle, and red sanguine and passionate, so he felt *ulfire* to be wild and painful, and *jale* dreamlike, feverish and voluptuous (Lindsay 1920:60).

What Lindsay is describing here is an experience of the unlike. This is because there is nothing that is *like jale* or *ulfire*. They are like nothing. In doing so he also provides

an explanation of how the unlike can be described, explained and named. As he suggests, the experience can only be *described* or *explained* by being ‘vaguely hinted at by analogy’ (‘wild and painful’; ‘dreamlike, feverish and voluptuous’). This evokes a certain sense of what this aspect of nothingness is like, a sense which feeds one’s psycho-perceptive faculties with content that is unlike. The process of naming the unlike is clearer. One needs a *neologism* (‘jale’; ‘ulfire’). In the choice invention of a term, one can achieve a similar kind of evocation as analogy (e.g. *ulfire* evokes flames, something ‘wild and painful’). However, naming the unlike can also do more than this. In a sense, it imports a part of the unlike into the real world by directly creating (minimally, though quite significantly) an experience of hearing it (in some fairly ordinary sense) *being named*. Indeed, some authors take this method to extremes. Take, for instance, the opening stanza of *Jabberwocky*:

Twas brillig, and the slithy toves,  
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:  
All mimsy were the borogroves,  
And the mome raths outgrabe. (Carroll 1872:132)

Here, the stanza appears to be composed in the language of another planet or dimension and thus fills the content of one’s experience with almost total nothingness.<sup>22</sup> So, these are the ways in which a text can supply the content for an experience of the unlike, but when one experiences it, analogically or neologically, what is it one is experiencing? For, there is a further ambiguity suggested by my use of this terminology: is the unlike one thing or many?

Just like the experience of what something is like, an experience of the unlike is one thing in kind but many things in particular. As the experience of tasting an exotic fruit for the first time is an experience of what the flavour of the fruit is like, the experience of encountering an alien being is an experience of something unlike. Both experiences are the same in kind to others of the same variety. However, the *particular* qualities encountered when tasting the fruit or perceiving an extra-terrestrial being in response to a written fiction are unique to these individual experiences. If this were not the case then the unlike might turn out to be some kind of transcendent unity, perhaps something a bit like God. While there may be qualities in common between the unlike and the divine (it probably depends upon one’s theological commitments), the unlike is not supposed to be understood as being a simple,

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<sup>22</sup> It differs in this respect from other works that engage in something similar. For instance, *Finnegan’s Wake* is written in a language which is a kind of re-imagining of English, however the terms it uses are still supposed to refer largely to familiar objects, events and persons. Similarly, *A Clockwork Orange* is written in an invented future-speak slang but tends to use different/new words to refer to largely familiar things.

unified transcendent thing, or like Parmenides' 'One'. Rather, it is a catch-all term for the content of a certain variety of experience that is (presently or permanently) beyond the scope of any familiar likenesses.

Having cleared up these ambiguities, I also now want to pause briefly in order to clarify that I am not defending the claim that it is *only* (what are usually identified as) Speculative written fictions that can generate experiences with unlike contents. Rather, I wish to remain neutral with respect to the claim that more obviously 'realistic' texts may induce perceptions of the unlike, for, it is not completely unreasonable to suppose that (at least some of) these texts might also do this. *Moby Dick*, for example, affords one an experience and understanding of what it is like to live aboard a whaling vessel in the nineteenth century and *Wuthering Heights* of what it is like to journey across the Yorkshire Moors in a storm. But both of these novels, one might also suppose, also allow one to perceive something that is, in the sense I am interested in, *beyond* simply 'what these things are like'. Each of these fictions, and maybe some others in the realist tradition probably tend to present intimations of the unlike: the 'vengeful' whale; the 'cruel' weather. Hence, my claim here is that the thematic focus of a typical Speculative fiction simply tends, more readily and strikingly, to generate an experience of the unlike. And, indeed, there is a good deal of variation in the degree to which one is likely to encounter the unlike, depending on which Speculative fiction one picks up. For instance, novels like the aforementioned *Dune* or Asimov's *Foundation* saga are set in entirely invented 'worlds' that are almost completely distinct from the one that can be experienced by walking out of the front door. By contrast, novels such as *Flowers for Algernon* or *Black No More* are set in worlds largely familiar from daily life.

So, the missing aspect of the moral entirety that I promised to describe through metaphorical symbology in Chapter 3 can finally be articulated. The farfetching is complete. Speculative fictions have a particular tendency to engender encounters with not only what certain things are like, but also with the unlike. The unlike is the content of a kind of experience, one whose phenomenal character – the kinds of quasi-perceptual seeings, hearings, and feelings that it evokes – is radically unfamiliar, in ordinary experience, and is liable to be interpreted as a kind of nullity. In fictions that generate an experience of the unlike, the reader has an encounter with something that can only be appreciated by going beyond the scope of the experiences one can have in ordinary day-to-day life. Written fictions supply the content for these experiences by 'hinting' at them via analogy, or by naming them neologistically. When they do this, they provide access to an unlike thing; something that is like nothing. The encounter with aspects of the unlike stands in contrast to the encounter with qualities of familiar likenesses, which are alike to the things one bumps into in



daily life. The encounter with the unlike has a transformative potential, for it exists outside the realm of ordinary experience. Encountering it, understanding it, thus involves the adoption of a posture that cannot be perfectly replicated in quotidian contexts.

But then, it seems as though a final problem remains to be dealt with. Namely, how does an encounter with the unlike contribute to ethical understanding in a sense that counts as gaining an ethical insight if, as I have said, the unlike is ‘like nothing’. How can this kind of experience engender insights into the world one *really* lives in; improve the life one *actually* leads? For, indeed, if the unlike is really ‘like nothing’ it may appear as though this theory is liable to collapse into the largely inadequate view discussed at the beginning of §4.2.1 After all, won’t it simply turn out that the understanding one gains from an encounter with the unlike is that the world is unlike in some respect viz. that in some respect, the experience generated by reading the fiction is of things that are *not like* anything encountered in the actual world?

As I have already conceded, this is partially correct. Encounters with the unlike *can* enliven one to what certain aspects of the world are not like. However, experiencing the unlike can do more than this. When one experiences and thus comes to understand some aspect of the unlike, as I have said, one is brought beyond the boundaries of ordinary experience. Here, as I have also said, one is forced to transform oneself in order to make sense of this; one cannot encounter aliens, visit exoplanets, converse with sorcerers or battle with monsters, ghosts and dragons without being the kind of person or thing that is in a position to do these kinds of things. In this transformation, one is thus made to push the capacities one ordinarily uses to navigate and interpret the world past the limits of their everyday applications.

When this happens, one is consequently forced to contend with the insufficiency, the inadequacy, of one’s abilities in those quotidian contexts. For instance, if one were to perceive the suffering of a being whose nature is utterly unlike to one’s own, one may be tempted to ask: ‘if this thing, totally unlike to anything else, impresses me with a demand for affective recognition, which persons or beings encountered during the ordinary course of events might be wrongly outside the scope of my present attention?’ And it is this kind of realisation, of one’s insufficiency, inadequacy or insignificance, which is imparted by encountering and understanding the unlike. It is a phenomenological realisation of the incompleteness of one’s present modes of comprehending and navigating what things are like, how they are experienced, how they are lived.<sup>23</sup> In this way an experience of the unlike can contribute to ethical understanding as it forces one to re-examine, and consequently alter, one’s

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<sup>23</sup> Of course, the particular kind of inadequacy that is revealed will depend upon the particular feature(s) of the unlike thing one encounters during one’s experience.

modes of interacting with, interpreting, and relating to the world of human thought and action. In this way, encountering the unlike can engender a deeply *humbling* kind of ethical insight.

Now, while a powerfully humbling experience is not something that the experience of fiction reading is uniquely equipped to supply, an encounter with the unlike which gives rise to a realisation of one's limitations is a distinctive, and at least sometimes, *distinctively humbling*, kind of experience. For, it has a distinctive kind of *content*. As the experience of the unlike is of something beyond what can ordinarily be experienced, *a fortiori*, it is kind of experience distinct from any that can be had by simply living in the world. If one really wanted to push oneself to the limit of one's abilities in an everyday context, there might be no way to do this that is not extremely dangerous or irreversibly deleterious to one's mental and/or physical constitution. One might be able to encounter one's limits by sustaining brain damage, starving oneself, or taking hallucinogenic drugs, for instance. But these ways of testing oneself are very risky and are not guaranteed to inspire insight. Indeed, in the first case especially, the experience may be so 'transformative' as to render one a different person altogether, something that would undo any ethical development of the person so transfigured. By contrast, encountering the unlike through reading fiction represents a 'safe' way to push the boundaries of one's experience. It will change who one is and what one does, without threatening to destroy the self.

This account can now be shown to explain something one often hears people say about Speculative fiction: 'I don't like it because it's so depressing.' I think this is right. No one likes to feel small. But according to my account, this is one of the central reasons why one *should* read it. Fictions which place ordinary life at their centre tend to make the people and places of the everyday world much bigger than they really are, thus inflating one's grasp of similar situations in day-to-day life (and there is plausibly some ethical value in their doing so). Speculative fictions, by contrast, generally do the reverse. By placing people into the midst of the extraordinary, they tend to minimise people, and thus deflate or mute one's grasp of ordinary experience in a way that, almost paradoxically, amplifies the significance of those very experiences.

### §4.3 Adventure's End

How, then, can a humbling experience of the unlike improve one's life? I have already stated the answer to this question in a fairly abstract form, by explaining how it is that it can represent a moral insight, as I have defined it. To make the point more

clearly, though, I will here contrast the kind of ethical insight which an encounter with the unlike is apt to inspire with the kinds of ethical insights which are supposed to be delivered to readers of fiction according to the other theories discussed in this thesis. I will then use this discussion to tease out some of the specific ways in which an understanding of the unlike can contribute to one's ethical adventure.

First, it should be clear that coming to a fresh appreciation of the limits of one's capacities through an encounter with the unlike is a distinct form of phenomenological understanding to that of apprehending new qualia. That is, an understanding of some unlike thing is different from an understanding of what something is like (in some sense, it is the opposite). This was a point already made in the opening sections of this chapter, where I drew attention to the contrasting experiences generated by readers' encounters with realistic and speculative features in a text. Further, however, an understanding of the unlike is also distinct from the kind of ethical insight that is supposed to be delivered to readers of fiction on either of the Neo-Cognitivist theories examined in Chapter 2. It consists neither in the training of a moral ability, nor in the enhancement or enrichment of one's conceptual scheme. This can be seen by drawing attention to two central differences between, on the one hand, an understanding of the unlike, and, on the other, conceptual or technical understanding.

The understanding one gains from a honing a skill is mastery of (or a movement towards mastery of) that skill. It depends upon a progressive series of achievements which support one's progress towards some (relatively indistinct) end. The understanding one gains from the examination of examples or experiments is a refinement of one's concepts. Like the experience of technical training, it depends on making progress, and implies some kind of *success-apt* goal or end (however indistinct or inarticulate it might be). However, an understanding of the unlike does not, in the same sense, depend upon *progress*, and it consists in some isolated (and usually fairly distinct) *moment* of insular revelation. In this way, understanding the unlike is not a success, but an acknowledgement of one's limitations. Rather than the experience of reaching out to grasp the next rung on a ladder that leads towards practical or conceptual mastery, experiencing and grasping the unlike is like looking up, beyond the next rung, to see how many more one has to climb, and of looking down, to count how many rungs one has skipped or fumbled on the way up. Understanding the unlike, acknowledging one's limits may, then, reveal how much more training one needs to do, but it does not offer one any training in any particular skill. Similarly, it may consist in an understanding of just how limited one's notions are, how much more they need to be clarified, refined or enriched, but not in clarification, refinement or enrichment of one's concepts. In the same way, it may also consist in an

understanding of how limited one's experiences are, but not in an understanding of any particular experience.

And so, understanding the unlike can improve the lives of beings like us, in a way that is broadly in line with a Neo-Aristotelian conception of flourishing, by engendering an insight of a form that is fundamentally similar in all cases. While reading fictions can lead to refinements of one's concepts of 'personhood', 'freedom', 'charity', etc., or train one to become more generous, compassionate or sensitive etc., as the Neo-Cognitivists suppose, it can also generate perceptions of something unlike anything in the familiar world, and in so doing, provide experiences which are fundamentally (and perhaps ironically) *alike*, though distinctive in each instance. That is to say, it can be a deeply and irreplaceably humbling kind of experience.

This kind of humbling is experienced in a moment of insight or revelation which is not so much an instance of progression, but a sudden, sharp realisation of the progress one has made and the effort that will be required to maintain it. And this is important because human existence is bounded in all sorts of ways. There are limits, in ordinary experience, to what one can do, who one can be. And yet, it seems to be a moral weakness, even a failing, of human beings that we so often lose sight of our limitations, and of other people's. When this happens, a lingering sense of inadequacy can develop. This, in turn, can seriously inhibit the progress of one's life, making it much harder for one to live better and flourish. Often, as a result, one is then led to direct undue frustration, shame, jealousy and bitterness towards oneself and others. So, the inculcation of deep humility is a valuable part of one's ethical adventure. This kind of humility, this understanding of the unlike, is not merely the *absence* of vanity or arrogance. It is a positive state in which one softens one's tendency to judge, covet, or resent. In *that* sense, it represents a moment of 'progressive' insight. Once apprehended, a grasp of the unlike can provide one with a palpable sense of one's limitations in a way that puts them in into perspective, allowing one to reconcile oneself to one's form of living as it is.

Thus, if one encounters enough aspects of the unlike, one may achieve a state which was recommended by many in the ancient ethical tradition from which I drew inspiration in Chapter 1, namely, a state of *ataraxia*, or 'undisturbedness'. I am not claiming that there is nothing else in the range of human experience that can be of any use to we human beings in cultivating that state. I am claiming that the kinds of phenomenal experiences elicited by reading fiction – and Speculative fiction, in particular – have a distinctive and distinctively powerful capacity to guide our ethical adventuring in this welcome direction. They can show, tell, and tactilify things that have a humbling kind of otherness and nullity, beyond the range of ordinary experience.

## §4.4 Conclusion

I have already pronounced my farfetching complete. However, another insight of the novelists which I have made use of remains to be commented on.

I opened Chapter 2 with a quote from Delany's *Dhalgren*. There I promised that the account I was to construct in the following chapters, would, as per Delany's image, capture a sense in which certain works can seem to bear a highly 'crystalline' correspondence to life, just as how a mirror reflects an image of reality. The role of the reader would be to find in this mirror-image, not themselves, but a character of some author's invention looking back at them. Reflecting on this, we can now see the connection between this characterisation of fiction's relationship to life and the account developed in this and the preceding chapter. It describes, in the novelist's way, something like the experience of perceiving the unlike, and of the understanding it can impart.

A text can hold up a mirror to life, and, in showing one what is reflected in it, afford one a perception of many familiar things, of what the things around one are like. However, looking closer will allow one to notice that these things, while crystalline reproductions, are nonetheless *inverted* images of their counterparts. They are, so to speak, both alike and unlike the things of which they are reflections. When a text presents this to one's perception, what one encounters is a blend of things that are both like and unlike what one ordinarily perceives. When one looks harder still, one might notice someone identifiably as oneself apparently inhabiting this inverted world. Rather than showing one what one ordinarily looks like, though, one might instead, as Delany suggests, see oneself transformed into the kind of person or being that is fit to inhabit this mirror-world e.g., a character of the author's own invention. In spotting this, one may be made to notice that one's own self was unfit to enter that inverted world of the mirror, that one can only make sense of one's apparent place inside it by admitting one's inadequacy to interpret the inversion of one's own familiar universe. In finally pulling one's attention away from this surprisingly nightmarish vision, one might still, nonetheless, 'find something by which to relate.' In turning back to the ordinary things around oneself, one may realise the inadequacy of one's attempt to interact with, decode and respond to the people, events and things that populate this more immediately perceptible world.

## 5. Dhalgren, Dawn, Darkness

### *Chapter Synopsis*

This chapter proposes to illustrate the theories laid out in Chapters 3 and 4. It belongs to the longstanding tradition of philosophical writing that's dedicated to exploring written fictions. It seeks to provide concrete demonstrations of the theories I have previously developed and defended in the abstract, by applying these to three fictional texts. Each of these works is used, in turn, to exemplify one way in which written fiction can present a particular object of perception to its readers. I discuss some of the important things that *Dhalgren* has to show; that *Dawn* has to tell; and that *The Left Hand of Darkness* has to tactilify. I also explore what it is that, in response to these offerings, the reader of *Dhalgren* might see, what the reader of *Dawn* might hear, and what the reader of *Darkness* may feel. I discuss the experiences that may be generated for the reader in these perceptions, and how both familiar and unlike contents enter each of them. I then outline what ethical insights that may be gleaned from these encounters. The one provided by *Dhalgren*, I suggest, reveals insights about linguistic representation. The experience provided by *Dawn* imparts an understanding of certain forms of self-knowledge, and the one provided by *Darkness* sensitises one to certain features of human otherness. The result is what the foregoing chapters have promised: a series of exegeses which demonstrate a fictional moral phenomenology of transcendental otherness, and the distinctive role it may have in developing ethical understanding in the direction of ethical insight. I provide an extended discussion of the phenomenology of touch, compared to the other two sensory faculties that received more extensive discussion in Chapter 3. I end the chapter with some concluding remarks which trace the connections between these experiences and those sought by the Ethical Adventurer.

## §5.1 Introduction

It gave her... a new colour. A totally alien, unique, nameless thing, half seen, half felt or... tasted. A blaze of something frightening, yet overwhelming, compelling.

Extinguished.

A half known mystery beautiful and complex. A deep, impossibly sensuous promise.

Octavia E. Butler, *Dawn*

Above, Lilith encounters the unlike. Her experience is of a ‘totally alien, unique, nameless thing’; something that exists beyond the realm of any everyday experience one might have. Describing her access to this ‘new colour’, she talks, metaphorically, in terms of perception. It is ‘half-seen, half felt’. Indeed, Lilith’s experience here is generated by conjoining her anatomy with the alien being, Nikanj, who, in this moment, shares its feeling of ‘grief’ with Lilith as this ‘deep, impossibly sensuous promise’. This encounter is revelatory: ‘a half known mystery beautiful and complex’. Although she might not be able to articulate the full nature of the experience (‘I don’t even know if there are words in any human language to speak of it’), it is encountered as a ‘blaze’ of something ‘overwhelming’ and ‘compelling’. It is this kind of experience, I have suggested, which Speculative fictions are especially fitted to providing their readers. Here, I shall be explaining how each of the works I promised to discuss in Chapter 1, engender experiences of this kind, beginning with *Dhalgren* (§5.2), then moving onto *Dawn* (§5.3) and finishing with a discussion of *The Left Hand of Darkness* (§5.4). I conclude the chapter with a consideration of the ways in which the insights that I have suggested these texts supply count as forms of ethical enlightenment which the ethical adventurer, especially, has grounds for pursuing (§5.5).

## §5.2 ‘Deja-Vu is a Thing of the Eye’

Reading Delany’s *Dhalgren* can provide an insight into the limits of linguistic representation. This is achieved, in various ways, by one of the experiences it provides, especially when one engages with its final chapter: *The Anathema: a plague journal*.

While reading this chapter, one of the most striking encounters one has is that of trying to make sense of linguistic representations. As part of this encounter, the familiar experience of what it is like to try and understand linguistic representations is blended with an experience of reading a text which is impossible, *unlike*. When one sees a text that has been pushed into realms beyond those that can ordinarily exist, one can have an experience which leads one to question the ordinary rules of sense, and gain an insight into the inadequacies of one's own attempts to understand language.

To understand how reading *Dhalgren* can provide this experience, one needs to understand its unique structure. *Dhalgren* is, in an important way, *two* texts, each of which contains, and does not contain, the other. What does this mean?

In the first chapter the protagonist of *Dhalgren*, Kid(d) (sometimes 'the Kid' or 'the Kidd'), wanders into the ruined city of Bellona, where the remainder of the novel is set. In this bizarre and broken place fires burn constantly, buildings are gutted and abandoned, two moons rise together, a giant disc of burning light obscures the sky and futuristic gangs, clad in holographic 'shields' of light, roam the lawless streets. The survivors wander about the shattered buildings, taking advantage of the freedoms of a city forgotten, or ignored, by the rest of society. It is not long before Kid meets some of them.

In a park Kid discovers a shanty town and meets two young women, Milly and Lanya. While being given a tour of the commune, Lanya makes a discovery. In the dim light of the early morning, the three sit down together to inspect what she has found. It turns out to be a wire-bound exercise book, with half of its pages full of handwriting in 'Palmer Perfect script' and some of its first pages missing ('you can see the torn edges still inside the wire') (Delany 1974: 31-32). Together, they open the cover and find that:

an interrupted sentence took up on the first line:

*to wound the autumnal city.  
So howled out the world to give him a name.*

That made goose bumps on his flanks...

*The in-dark answered with wind.  
All you know, I know: careening astronauts and bank clerks glancing  
at the clock before lunch; actresses cowering at light-ringed mirrors and  
freight elevator operators grinding a thumbful of grease on a steel handle;  
student (Ibid: 31).*



Kid's disturbed reaction to the 'pretty weird stuff' written at the beginning of the notebook is not unexpected. For not only does this strange overture appear at the beginning of the *notebook* it also appears at the beginning of the novel, *Dhalgren*, itself. And so, it would seem that the notebook Kid, Lanya and Millie discover in the park in Chapter 1, contains the novel, *Dhalgren*.

After this many things happen. Shortly after first meeting, Lanya and Kid become lovers and she gifts him the notebook. Kid gains employment from the delusional Richards family, helping them move from one flat to another in the largely abandoned apartment complex where they continue to live as though Bellona is a perfectly normal American city. One day the youngest of the Richards, Bobby, falls down a lift shaft and dies. Kid writes a poem about the event in the notebook, and, by several turns of event, it ends up getting printed in the newspaper. Kid becomes the talk of the town. After completing his job for the Richards, Kid falls in with one of the futuristic gangs, the Scorpions, and before long becomes their leader. During this time, Kid continues to write poetry in the pages of the notebook and also begins journaling the strange events he is living through. Eventually, Kid's poems are collected in *Brass Orchids*, and the publisher and newspaper editor, Roger Caulkins, arranges a party to celebrate the work's publication. On the way back from the party, Kid passes a burning building. A man named George Harrison, another famous personality in the city, appears and tells Kid he thinks there are people in the building. The two of them enter the building to stage a rescue mission. Chapter 6 ends. Chapter 7, *The Anathema...* then begins with the following heading:

*[We do not know who typed this manuscript, nor if every relevant entry was included, nor, indeed, the criteria for relevance. Previous publication of Brass Orchids possibly weighted the decision not to include their various draughts here. (The fate of the second collection we can only surmise.) Generous enough with alternate words, marks of omission and correction, the transcriber still leaves his accuracy in question: Nowhere in the transcript is there a formal key.] (Ibid1974: 651)*

What follows is a transcript of the notebook that Lanya found in the park and which Kid has since been using to compose his poetry and diary entries. The passages that follow appear to mostly be diary entries, or excerpts therefrom, that Kid wrote in the notebook after the events that are described in Chapter 6. (For instance, in one of the opening sections of the transcript, Kid discusses an article in the newspaper about his and Georges' rescue mission into the burning building.) So, as *The Anathema...* begins, it appears as though the novel, *Dhalgren*, contains the notebook that Kid, Lanya and Millie found in Chapter 1.

Thus, the text overall is composed of two texts, the novel and the notebook, both of which appear to contain each other. The notebook Kid finds in the park contains the novel – they share the same beginning and, as the reader finds out later on, several other identical passages, including their endings. Similarly, the novel contains the notebook Kid finds in the park. *The Anathema...* – the final chapter of the novel – is a transcript of the notebook that Kid has been writing in ever since he wrote his poem about the Richards' dead son, Bobby. But this is impossible. If the notebook contains the novel in Chapter 1 and the novel contains the notebook by Chapter 7, then, in Chapter 1, the notebook must already contain the text of *The Anathema...* But how could that be? The events described in *The Anathema...* follow on temporally from those that close Chapter 6. Thus, if both texts contain each other then, *already* in Chapter 1, the notebook would have to contain descriptions of events that haven't happened yet. Similarly, given that the diary entries in Chapter 7 are written by Kid, in Chapter 1, the notebook would have to contain passages written by Kid *before* he ever writes anything in the notebook himself! By the time one begins Chapter 7, therefore, what one is reading is an impossible text – a novel that contains a notebook that contains that novel which contains that notebook that...

What experience, then, is generated by one's engagement with this impossible text? Of course, there are many possible experiences which it can provide. However, one of the most interesting, affords us an insight – an ethically significant insight, I believe – into the limits of our capacity to decipher linguistic forms of communication. This experience has a blended content. On one hand, this encounter with *The Anathema...* is of what it is like to attempt to decipher linguistic forms of representation; an aspect of this experience which is generated by the text's *showing* the reader Kid's diary entries. On the other hand, this experience of *The Anathema...* also contains some content which is unlike. An aspect of this experience is generated by *showing* the reader the impossibility of the notebook text. In presenting an experience with this blended content, *Dhalgren* permits one to see a text that exists beyond the boundaries of sense, something that can lead one to question one's notions of linguistic sense.

To explain this, I will outline how each aspect of the experience is generated, beginning with its familiar qualitative content. The structure, content and presentation of *The Anathema...* is highly unorthodox. The chapter is divided into at least fifty or so distinct portions of text. Sections of writing printed in two different fonts are located next to each other on the page, without narrative or temporal connections between them being indicated, like a poorly executed print of a newspaper. Many of these sections begin or end mid-sentence. In many places, the text is struck through

or corrected. In other places, random spelling errors are included, or suggested ‘corrections’ inserted. In the same way, all these choices act as a kind of *description* of the original notebook text itself. Each of them *shows* the reader Kid’s diary entries preserved in their original form, as they originally appeared in the pages of the notebook. This allows the reader to *see* Kid’s diary entries. And, if one is successful in seeing the text in this way, one is afforded an experience of what it is like to attempt to try and make sense of linguistic forms of representation. For instance, the strike-throughs show the errors and marks of correction in the notebook text. As such, they show the reader Kid’s diary entries as they originally appeared:

Dragon Lady let go all her breath in some way still not a scream. Nightmare danced back across the kitchen twisting his orchid, (jerking a little); ~~as though/I think~~ I think he was trying to under stand what he’d done. Dragon Lady threw herself ~~at him~~, cutting for his face and kicking. (~~I kept thinking~~ Thinking: There’s an art to these weapons I don’t begin to understand.) (Ibid: 651)

These marks thus allow one to see Kid’s diary entries as they originally appeared, ‘errors’ and all. And in seeing this entry one may ask: did Kid *keep* thinking or was he simply *thinking* in that moment described in the parentheses? The experience can be of what it is like to attempt to make sense of a piece of linguistic representation.

The same thing is achieved through the inclusion of incomplete sentences. Given that the reader knows that ‘Carrying the book [the notebook] around, though, I [Kid] must have let some of them [it’s pages] slip out’ (Ibid: 686), the fact that the text contains incomplete sentences shows the reader the incompleteness of the notebook text.<sup>24</sup> Again, as such, they show the reader Kid’s diary entries as they actually appeared in the notebook itself:

was nearly too bizarre for comment:

Stopped into *Teddy’s*. It was so early I wondered why it was open. Maybe five people there, among them – Jack. He sat on the last stool, hands (skin grey, cuticles wedged with black, crowns scimitared with it, half moons shadowed under cracked skin) flat on the counter. (Ibid: 686)

These incomplete portions of the text allow one to see Kid’s diary entries. Seeing them, one may ask, but what was it that was too bizarre for comment? Again, this creates an experience of what it is like to attempt to understand linguistic representations.

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<sup>24</sup> Editorial additions my own.

Given that the reader knows that Kid is neuro-atypical, the fact that *The Anathema...* contains spelling errors again shows the reader the errors and suggested revisions in the notebook text. Again, it shows the reader Kid's diary entries. Take for instance:

This is the last full balnk [blank?] page left. (Ibid: 686)

Again, one is invited to see Kid's diary entries as they were originally composed. One may reflect upon whether 'balnk' really should have been 'blank' as the transcriber supposes, or whether Kid meant something else. Again the experience generated can be of what it is like to try and decipher linguistic forms of communication.

Finally, the reader discovers that:

Not only have I [Kid] filled up all the free pages, but all the half and quarter pages left around the poems or the ends of other entries. A few places where my handwriting is fairly large, I can write between lines. I'll have to do a lot more writing in the margins. Maybe I'll try writing crossways over pages filled up already.<sup>25</sup> (Ibid: 686)

And so, the strange layout of the text on the page also serves to show the reader the layout of the notebook text as it originally appeared. It again serves to show the notebook text in its original form, and allows the reader the opportunity to see Kid's diary entries. Noticing the odd layout, one may ask whether those in the 'ordinary sized typeface' (Ibid: 662) really are those which Kid describes as writing in 'quarter-sized, near illegible scrawl all over the margins' (Ibid: 661), or those that appear in the smaller typeface. Seeing this, can, once more, generate an experience of what it is like to attempt to understand linguistic forms of representation.

But *The Anathema...* does not only show the reader Kid's diary entries. For, this is not all that it contains. It also contains editorial notes which comment upon and explicate features of the notebook text. The effect of including these notes is that of *showing* the reader that the novel contains the notebook. Given that the reader already knows that the notebook contains the novel at this point, when *The Anathema...* shows the reader the converse, the reader is *shown* the impossibility of the notebook text. That is, they are shown the impossibility of Kid's diary entries. This allows the opportunity to *see*, and so have an experience of an impossible text. This can generate an experience of engaging with language which is unlike, something that does not, and cannot, 'really' exist. Consider, for example, the following.

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<sup>25</sup> Editorial addition my own.

[Here the correction marks - except for one entry further on - stop. Did our transcriber tire of amateur scholarship? What he has given is more frustrating than helpful. And the sensitive reader will wish with us that he had annotated the final, rather than the first, few pages; there are close to dozen passages to come where even these attempts at *variora* Might be preferable to the most informed supposition. As to the marks employed: indications of authorial deletions are self-evident; we can assume brackets mean editorial conjecture. The bracketed question mark, however, with or without additional word or suffix, seems totally arbitrary. Of the much debates, we can only suggest that words in *virgules* are probably interlinear additions; but even the quickest perusal reveals this accounts only for most cases. While he plies us with quaint descriptions of paper clips and staples he fails to record date and letterhead material in the Caulkin's letter (perhaps there were none), nor does he mention whether any (or all) over the entries were typed or handwritten. Internal evidence (it is a spiral notebook, not a loose-leaf) suggests the latter. Corrections, however, such as *balnk* [blank?], *That8*[?]'s and *bendh* (bench?) bray out for the former... (Ibid: 662)

Here, it is not only possible to understand, intellectually, that Kid's diary entries from the notebook are contained within the novel. Through the descriptions of the notebook contained in the editorial notes, the reader is *shown* that this is so. As one is shown, and able to see and thus experience the impossibility of Kid's diary entries, they are invited to encounter a text which is, in my terminology, unlike.

Reading *The Anathema*... as a part of *Dhalgren* as a whole, one can thus have an experience with a double content. On the one hand, of what it is like to try and understand linguistic forms of communication. On the other, of the very piece of communication one is trying to comprehend as something impossible. Here, then, the experience generated is of what it is like to attempt to comprehend a text which is unlike. The result, is that passages in *The Anathema*... need not conform to any standard rules of meaning or sense, in order for one to experience them as possessing a kind of internal coherence. One's experience of them is of something that does not, and indeed, *cannot* exist, of something that can only *be* in some realm of the beyond, past meaning, past sense as it is ordinarily understood. What, then, would normally be encountered as so much meaningless babble, were it to be encountered as a part of any ordinary experience of deciphering language, takes on its own other-worldly logic. For instance:

An intercallory jamb between Wednesday and twenty-second, bless. Grain, blabbed on slip-time, told its troubles to the tree (all runny in the oozy gyre's

incarnadine). She won't run Thursdays. The underside of the little hand is tarnished; why is muk-amuk canonised so easily? Truck-tracks crow-foot creators drooling half-and half. She didn't remember how or when, last time. Pavement sausages split; The cabbage remembers. Lions with prehensile eyes pick up their paws, apocopate, and go to town. Get with it, mauve-peanut! Make it, thing-a-ma-boob! He won't catch me slipping my sticktoitiveness under your smorgasboarg. Fondle my module, love my dog. Lilting is all is easy. Knitting needles recede around the vision, bearing his curvature, clearing her underwear. So that's not what it's for. French fried picelilly and deep-dish-apple death won't get you through that wake up in the morning alive. Your rosamond's may mathematiks him, but it won't move me one mechanical apple corer. I have come to wound the autumnal city: the other side of the question is a mixed metaphor if I ever heard one. Timed methods run out: coo, morning bird. I could stop before breathing marble bassonets. Salvage a disjuncture, it's all about you Middle of the ring around the Harley Davidson bush, blooming, blooming, shame, socks, dearth and passion pudding, flowers, or Ms Crystalline Pristine. Her backwards mystification is citified in the face. Pentacle pie and hunger city, oh my oh too much, my meat and mashed potatoes pansy, my in the middle of it biche. (Ibid: 731-32)

Such portions of text outside the of the context of *The Anathema* are likely experienced as daringly nonsensical at best, and outrageously transgressive at worst. But as a part of *The Anathema*, experienced as a text which is unlike, they are encountered differently. Rather than being experienced as a list of fragmentary errors, such lines are encountered as being encoded with an occultic significance. For example, the weird echo of the opening line, 'to wound the autumnal city', here appearing in a complete though 'nonsensical' form, returns the reader at once to the opening of the work, but also to one of the work's recurring motifs: the city Bellona is 'unmiraculous' (Ibid: 96), 'of bone' (Ibid: 308), 'not a useful' (Ibid: 75), 'injured' (Ibid: 84), 'without source' (Ibid), 'rigid' (Ibid: 219), 'ganglial' (Ibid: 219). Further, it looks forward to the ending of the work which, like James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, ends in the middle of a sentence that, when combined with its opening fragment – 'to wound the autumnal city' – forms the complete, though corrupted, first/final line of the text:

Waiting here, away from the terrifying weaponry, out of the halls of vapour and light, beyond holland and into the hills, I have come to [to wound the autumnal city]' (Ibid: 801)

What the 'meaning' or 'sense' of this, or any of the other strange lines from *Dhalgren* is, is not something that can be grasped as part of an ordinary experience of what it

is like to attempt to comprehend language. Its significance can only be glimpsed, or guessed at, as a part of an experience of an unlike text. And it is these intimations of a preternatural system of meaning, beyond the ordinary borders of sense, emergent during one's encounter with *The Anathema*, that can sensitise one to the limits of linguistic representation. An encounter in which something like the babble quoted above appears to possess some alien significance, raises ethically important questions about the limits of one's ability to make sense of language during more ordinary, day-to-day experiences. 'If something like *that* can be encountered as having a meaning or sense,' one may ask, 'then which of my encounters with apparent falsifications, incoherencies or contradictions, might I have overlooked, in the search for meaning and coherence? Where might I have dismissed, as crazy, attempts at communication which in fact made some kind of intellectual or moral claim on my attention?' Such questioning can raise doubts about one's ability to spot the difference between intentional divergence and error, sense and nonsense, corruption and accurate reproduction, or truth and falsity. This can provide one with an insight into the limits of one's present ways of interpreting linguistic forms of representation. One might then return to the ordinary world with a new understanding that what one used to view as mistakes, mis-hearings, errors, talk at cross purposes, redactions, omissions, corruptions and incoherencies, may not be what they appeared to be, *prima facie*. They may be newly understood as portentous signs bearing a kind of significance that points towards deeper, hidden resonances.

### §5.3 'I'm Here to Tell You'

Reading Butler's *Dawn* can provide an insight into the limits of one's self-knowledge. It can do this by engendering an experience that can reveal the limits of one's ability to comprehend ways of managing and overcoming self-destructive traits and impulses. This is one of the most striking experiences one has in reading *Dawn*. As part of this encounter, the familiar experience of learning about a strategy for self-preservation is blended with an experience of learning this from a source which is beyond the scope of ordinary experience – a source that is unlike. When one is told about this strategy by beings from beyond the realms of ordinary existence, one can hear something that can lead one to question one's understanding of how to resist one's most self-destructive tendencies, thus revealing certain limits to one's self-knowledge, in respect of this.

To understand how *Dawn* can provide this kind of experience, one first needs to understand one of its central explanatory motifs, the 'human contradiction'. Lilith

Iyapo 'Awakes' from a chemically induced hibernation to find herself in yet another non-descript room. She runs her hand over the large scar on her abdomen, relic of some undisclosed tampering with her body. She cannot remember how it was made, or who made it, or indeed, how she ended up where she is now. She falls asleep. Suddenly, she wakes to the sound of someone saying her name. The 'usual, quiet androgenous voice' of her interrogator isn't issuing from the speaker in the two-way radio console, as she had been expecting (Butler 1987: 11). Instead, it is coming from a 'shadowy figure of a man, thin and long haired' in a dark corner of the room (Ibid).

Rather than the secret service agent that Lilith has been expecting, the 'man' introduces himself as Jdahya, a being from a race of biotechnological extra-terrestrials called the Oankali. Jdahya informs Lilith that she is one of the last survivors of a nuclear war that all but destroyed life on Earth some 200 years ago. The Oankali have rounded up the human survivors and kept them in suspended animation aboard a vast space station orbiting the Earth, while the Oankali have largely restored the damaged planet. Lilith and Jdahya are aboard the station now.

Naturally, Lilith has some questions to ask about this. One of the first things she asks about is the scar on her stomach. Jdahya explains to her (truthfully) that the Oankali realised, due to their extraordinary ability as genetic engineers, that Lilith had a malignant cancerous growth in her body, which the Oankali have obligingly removed for her. This then prompts Jdahya to draw a striking analogy between cancer and what he and the Oankali collectively understand to be the cause of the apocalyptic war that destroyed Earth, when Lilith asks him to confirm that:

'It *was* malignant, I assume.'

'Of course.'

'Then I suppose it would eventually have killed me.'

'Yes, it would have. And your people were in a similar position. If they had been able to perceive and solve their problem, they might have been able to avoid destruction. Of course, they too would have to remember to re-examine themselves periodically.'

'But what was the problem? You said we had two incompatible characteristics. What were they?'

Jdahya made a rustling noise that could have been a sigh, but that did not seem to come from his mouth or throat. 'You are intelligent,' he said. 'That's the newer of the two characteristics, and the one you might have to put to work to save yourselves. You are potentially one of the most intelligent species we've found, though your focus is different from ours. Still, you had a good start in the life sciences, and even in genetics.'

'What's the second characteristic?'



'You are hierarchical. That's the older and more entrenched characteristic. We saw it in your closest animal relatives and in your most distant ones. It's a terrestrial characteristic. When human intelligence served it instead of guiding it, when human intelligence did not even acknowledge it as a problem, but took pride in it or did not notice it at all...' The rattling sound again. 'That was like ignoring cancer. I think your people did not realise what a dangerous thing they were doing.' (Ibid: 38-39)

Jdahya's words *tell* the reader about humans' impulse towards self-destruction. The tendency to intelligently dissect the world around us, combined with a tendency to structure society hierarchically, and especially when the former 'serves' the latter, leads humanity, the reader may *hear*, towards self-destruction. As Jdahya succinctly puts it slightly later: 'the two [qualities] together are lethal. It was only a matter of time until they destroyed you' (Ibid:38).

Fortunately for humanity, the Oankali have a solution to offer humankind. The removal of Lilith's cancer was, in fact, the first payment made in a great 'trade' between humans and the Oankali, where the restored Earth and continuation of the human race are part of the payment in kind the Oankali have to offer in exchange for Lilith's cancer. The trade, as the reader is about to find out, will be the solution to humanity's contradiction.

'There's something I need to understand now,' she said. 'You've taken something of value from us and you're giving back our world. Is that it? Do you have all you want from us?'

'You know it isn't,' he said softly. 'You've guessed that much.'

She waited, staring at him.

'Your people will change. Your young will be more like us and ours more like you. Your hierarchical tendencies will be modified. And if we learn to regenerate limbs and reshape our bodies, we'll share those abilities with you. That's part of the trade. We're overdue it.'

'It is crossbreeding, then, no matter what you call it.'

'It's what I said it was. A trade. The ooloi will make changes in your reproductive cells before conception and they'll control conception.'

'How?'

'The ooloi will explain that when the time comes.' (Ibid: 40-41)

Here, the text tells the reader, in the abstract, the solution to the contradiction ('Your hierarchical tendencies will be modified'). This allows the reader their first opportunity to hear what the solution consists in. Building on what the reader has already heard, they may begin to deduce what the result of the 'crossbreeding' between the

Oankali and humanity will be: a redirection of humanity's intelligent impulses away from the establishment or maintenance of hierarchy.

If the reader succeeds in hearing this, it can generate an experience of learning about a survival strategy. The experience is like being guided to an understanding of the way to survive in the face of those dangerous impulses by someone that has superior knowledge ('It's what I said it was. A trade'), but who chooses to withhold certain details ('The ooloi will explain that when the time comes'). And yet, this experience is also unlike. What the reader may hear, in this moment, are the words of Jdahya, the words of an alien being beyond the scope of ordinary experience. References to the mysterious 'ooloi' who will need to 'make changes in your reproductive cells' and 'control conception' in order to affect the solution, contribute significantly towards this. This term helps to create a blended encounter, one that is like learning about the solution to the contradiction, but which is delivered from a source which is unlike. This is one of the of first encounters with blended contents that the text can generate. It has the potential to begin to raise important questions about the limits of one's ability to resist one's self-destructive tendencies.

A second opportunity for the reader to have a very similar experience happens soon after Lilith first meets one of the 'ooloi'. After Lilith questions Jdahya, he introduces her to his family. Here, she learns to live amongst the Oankali before Awakening the rest of the humans that are held in suspended animation. It is here that she first meets the ooloi, Nikanj and its parent ooloi Kahguyaht. These beings are neither male nor female but a distinct, Oankali sex which the Oankali refer to in the third person with the pronoun 'it'. From the first moment Lilith meets Nikanj she is asked to form a relationship with it. First as its chaperone and English teacher, then as a companion during its metamorphosis, and finally as a joint parent in a new family. At each stage Nikanj alters various aspects of Lilith's biological makeup, something that helps her manage her self-destructive impulses.

For instance, after some time with Jdahya's family, Lilith demands access to writing materials. She wants to learn to speak the Oankali's own language better and believes that writing it down will help her. Her first request is refused without reasons being given. After she repeats her request, Nikanj explains that Lilith's learning of the Oankali language 'will be done our way, not yours' (Ibid: 74). It elaborates:

'I must make small changes – a few small changes. I must help you reach memories as you need them.'

'What do you mean? What is it you want to change?'

'Very small things. In the end there will be a tiny alteration in your brain chemistry.'

She touched her forehead in an unconsciously protective gesture. 'Brain chemistry?' she whispered. (Ibid: 75)

Despite Lilith's clear reluctance to undergo the procedure, ('I don't want to be changed!') (Ibid), Nikanj eventually persuades her. When she awakes it comes to her, and she asks:

'What did you do? I don't feel any different – except a little high.'

'You understand me.'

It dawned on her slowly that Nikanj had come to her speaking Oankali and she had responded in kind – had responded without really thinking. The language seemed natural to her, as easy to understand as English. She remembered all that she had been taught, all that she had picked up on her own. It was even easy for her to spot the gaps in her knowledge – words and expressions she knew in English, but could not translate into Oankali; bits of Oankali grammar that she had not really understood; certain Oankali words that had no English translation, but whose meaning she had grasped. (Ibid: 81)

Here, the text tells the reader that Lilith can now remember everything she has been taught and can speak the Oankali's language without effort. In this way, it tells the reader that Lilith has had her intelligence increased and redirected, and that her tendency to think like a human being, in the service of hierarchy, has been altered. She can now speak and so think like the Oankali who, Jdahya tells the reader were 'never' hierarchical (Ibid: 41). If the reader hears this, they will, again, have an experience of learning a bit more about the Oankali's strategy for human self-preservation in the face of their contradictory impulses. The experience is like that of learning about this strategy from someone on one hand, affecting it ('there will be a tiny alteration in your brain chemistry') and, on the other, pursuing it ('It dawned on her slowly that...').

Once again, however, the content of this experience is blended with a content that is unlike. Nikanj's talk of the 'tiny alteration' is, of course, delivered by an alien being, one who finds nothing shocking in altering another sentient being's brain chemistry. Similarly, however, the explanation of Lilith's new powers also provides an encounter with the unlike. For, now, Lilith is no longer 'truly' human. She has a memory which is much more like the Oankali, than a typical human ('She remembered all that she had been taught'). Subtle and ethically significant questions may begin to form in the reader's mind in response to this blended experience.

Eventually, Lilith leaves Jdahya and his family. She is taken to the Awakening chamber. There Lilith is presented with a book full of the personal details of some of

the people aboard the station who are still held in suspended animation. She is asked to peruse the book and select those she thinks would make the best candidates for the establishment of a new civilisation on the regenerated Earth. In preparation for the task, Nikanj further alters Lilith, giving her 'information, increased physical strength, enhanced memory, and an ability to control the walls and suspended animation plants [aboard the space station]' (Ibid: 120).

Lilith begins to Awaken the survivors in earnest. After some time two factions form among them: those who are loyal to Lilith, and those who distrust her on account of her enhancements which, she correctly speculates, would 'make her seem less human' (Ibid). One day, some of those who distrust Lilith decide to test her authority by trying to sexually assault one of the survivors allied to Lilith, a woman named Allison. Lilith realises just in time and intervenes, using her superior speed and strength - 'the Oankali changed me a little', she explains - to seriously disable Allison's attackers. As Allison's attackers lie prostrate before her, Lilith says:

'There'll be no rape here... Nobody here is property. Nobody here has the right to the use of anyone else's body. There'll be no back-to-the-Stone-Age, caveman bullshit!' She let her voice drop to normal. 'We stay human. We treat each other like people, and we get through this like people. Anyone who wants to be something less will have his chance in the forest. There'll be plenty of room for him to run away and play at being an ape.' (Ibid: 178)

Here, the text tells the reader some of Lilith's principles. In this way, it tells the reader that she (now) thinks and *acts* anti-patriarchally, anti-hierarchically. Again, the reader is told, she does not tend to think and act like a human being. If the reader hears this, they will, again, be provided an experience of learning about the Oankali's strategy for human self-preservation in the face of their contradictory impulses. The experience is like that of learning about this strategy from someone who can (now) implement the solution with violence and/or the threat of it.

Once again, however, the content of this experience is blended with a content that is unlike. Lilith's is, in important ways, even less human than she was before. The text reminds the reader of this during this scene when, looking down on one of the attackers as she disables him, Lilith thinks: 'He was garbage. Human garbage.' (Ibid: 177), telling the reader how she views beings who manifest hierarchical, human tendencies in light of the superior strength and intelligence she has received from the Oankali. Her insistence that 'Nobody here is property...' can thus provide an experience of learning about a strategy for human self-preservation by its being delivered by a being which is unlike. Here, similarly significant questions may begin to form in the reader's mind.

Eventually, Lilith and the survivors leave the Awakening chamber for the ‘training ground’, a facsimile rainforest aboard the space station which mimics the environment they will be living in when they eventually return to Earth. Now in the company of the Oankali themselves, the survivors’ task is to learn the skills necessary for sustaining themselves on their regenerated home world. Slowly, things start to break down. Curt, one of Allison’s attackers, abducts and kills Lilith and Nikanj’s lover, Joseph. Shortly after Curt is apprehended Nikanj takes Lilith aside to deliver her some shocking news:

‘I have made you pregnant with Joseph’s child. I wouldn’t have done it so soon, but I wanted to use his seed, not a print [clone]. I could not make you closely enough related to a child mixed from a print. And there’s a limit to how long I can keep sperm alive.’

She was staring at it, speechless. It was speaking as casually as though discussing the weather. She got up, would have backed away from it, but it caught her by both wrists.

She made a violent effort to break away, realised at once that she could not break its grip. ‘You said–’ She ran out breath and had to start again. ‘You said you wouldn’t do this. You said–’

‘I said not until you were ready.’

‘I’m not ready! I’ll never be ready!’ (Ibid: 246)

Here, the text tells the reader that Lilith has been impregnated with an alien being. It tells the reader, that is, that not only will humans need to have their intelligence redirected, away from the service of hierarchical principles, humans will have to relinquish or transcend their very humanity, at least their forms of intelligence and social arrangement, to survive. It goes on to tell the reader even more, confirming this and fulfilling Jdahya’s promise that the ooloi will explain the solution more fully ‘when the time comes’:

‘The child will be yours and Joseph’s. Ahajas’ and Dichaan’s. And because I’ve mixed it, shaped it, seen to it that it will be beautiful and without deadly conflicts, it will be mine... Our children will be better than either of us... We will moderate your hierarchical problems and you will lessen our physical limitations. Our children won’t destroy themselves in war.’ (Ibid: 147)

If the reader hears this, they will be provided an experience of learning about the final, terrifying step of the Oankali’s solution to humanity’s self-destructive tendencies. The experience is of learning this from a source which combines all the previous phenomenal elements. Nikanj’s words here function as a source of authority, as a

demonstration of what it can affect and pursue (for itself as well as Lilith – they will be its offspring too), and of its ability to back up its implementation with violence: ‘She made a violent effort to break away, realised at once that she could not break its grip’. Once more, though, the content of this familiar experience is blended with a content that is unlike. It is again, the words of an unlike being that delivers them, a being that discusses matters of unconsenting sexual conception as if discussing the weather. This passage can therefore generate an experience of learning about a strategy for human self-preservation by its being delivered by a being which is unlike.

The reader of these passages, then, can have an experience with a double content. On one hand, of what it is like to learn about a way of securing self-preservation in the face of self-destructive impulses, on the other, of learning about that method of survival from a source that is unlike. Here, then, the overall experience generated is of what it is like to slowly attempt to develop an understanding of this survival strategy from a source which is unlike. On each occasion, the reader’s experience of this learning is slightly different (from an authoritative source, from someone affecting it, someone pursuing it, someone who can implement it with force – there may be others but these are some of the most striking the text provides).

The result is that one may be provided with an insight into the some of the limits of one’s self-knowledge. In particular, the limits of one’s understanding of how to resist one’s self-destructive tendencies. In trying to learn about the Oankali’s strategy for human self-preservation from unlike beings, the reader may start to question whether they would ever be able to understand this method of ensuring self-preservation themselves. Nowhere are the human characters able to articulate an explanation of how they might survive in the face of their tendencies towards hierarchical domination and, ultimately, destruction. All the reader ever hears about how humanity may be able to survive in the face of their self-destructive impulses comes from sources which are unlike. Only the Oankali *really* grasp the nature of the solution and its necessity.

In consequence, the reader may begin to question their self-knowledge, their ability to grasp how certain of their tendencies, motivations, and impulses tend them towards self-destructive behaviour. They may ask, for instance, ‘if the rejection or transcendence of my human essence is what is needed for me to truly grasp the nature of mine and others self-destructive tendencies, then how many of the motivations on which I, and others, presently tend to act, are producing self-destructive results?’ Such questioning can raise doubts about one’s current ability to grasp the difference between impulses that are directing one towards harmony and self-preservation, and those which direct one towards narcissism and self-immolation. It induces a radical

questioning of our judgements and intuitions, inviting us towards a form of humility more radical than any that might be instilled in us by ordinary experience.

In the wake of hearing all these things, the reader may return to the ordinary world with a new understanding that many of their motives are, in fact, more ambiguous than they might, on the face of things, appear. These motives may now be newly understood as driving one in directions which are not always clear to oneself and others. Ensuring these motives towards the good, and away from the bad, can be seen as requiring a form of self-scrutiny that lies at the very limits of our imaginative and interpretative powers. This can improve one's life by making one less ready to see oneself as objectively well-motivated, as acting clearly for *the* good, and not just in one's own self-interest, for *one's own* good. Ordinary experience can teach us that our motives aren't as pure as we think they are, and that our well-intended plans may go badly wrong. But ordinary experience is, arguably, somewhat limited in its ability to tell us, as *Dawn* does, about the magnitude of the epistemic barriers that stand in the way of our attempts to see through these self-deceptions. And in our ordinary perceptual experiences, we are limited in our ability to hear that message.

## §5.4 'Like Hands Joined Together'

Reading Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* can provide an insight into the limits of one's ability to gain familiarity or intimacy with human difference. The text does this by generating two tactile experiences of trying to reach intimacy and connection with human otherness. First, one of being held at a distance and, second, one of being granted a limited, though significant, form of closeness. These encounters have some familiar contents. Namely, in the first case, of what it is like to try and largely fail, to gain intimacy with difference through the reception of informational report, and, in the second, of gaining a certain kind of closeness through witnessing, and vicariously participating in, the development of a close personal relationship. But these encounters also bear some content that is unlike. The people and the world one strives to make contact with while reading *Darkness* are so radically different to those encountered in ordinary life, that they are unlike. When this unlikeness is tactilified through both reportage and through interpersonal relationship, one is provided with the opportunity to feel things that can lead one to question one's ability to gain authentic contact with more familiar forms of difference.

A brief outline of the story will assist in making the nature of these encounters more comprehensible. Sometime in the distant, forgotten past, the humans of the planet Hain colonised some eighty or so planets in the Milky Way galaxy, including

Earth (Terra). For a while, the Hainish thrived. But eventually, their civilisation collapsed. Communication between the various Hainish worlds dwindled and, finally, ceased. Knowledge of the former empire was lost on all the previously colonised worlds. After many thousands of years, however, with the rediscovery of NAFAL (nearly as fast as light) travel, the Hainish began re-establishing contact with the previously forgotten colonies. Given the former colonies' long isolation, human evolution took different paths on each of them since the original empire fell. On the ice-bound planet Gethen, a.k.a. 'Winter', humans have become fully androgynous. It is the task of Genly Ai, an envoy from Terra, to persuade the Gethenians to re-establish contact with the former colonies and join the new union of planets they are forming in the wake of the old empire's demise, the Ekumen.

Genly begins by making entreaties to king Argaven, the ruler of one of Gethen's major states, Karhide. But before long Genly is forced to flee when he hears that his lone supporter at the Karhidish court, Estraven, has been exiled from the kingdom. Genly makes his way to the other major state on Gethen, Orgoryne. Pursued by Estraven, who covertly attempts to curry favour with the government of Orgoryne on Genly's behalf, Genly once again becomes embroiled in political machinations which force him to leave. This time he is less successful. The secret police in Orgoryne capture Genly and send him to an internment camp. There he is forced to endure forced labour and horrific living conditions until Estraven stages a successful rescue mission. After realising that Estraven is his saviour, Genly is surprised and ashamed, agreeing, when Estraven tells him, that 'I am the only man in all Gethen that has trusted you entirely and I am the only man in Gethen that you have refused to trust' (Le Guin 1969: 199). Genly is thenceforth forced to place his trust in Estraven, as Estraven explains that their only hope of survival is to return to Karhide across a vast ice sheet, on foot, in winter.

Throughout this narrative, certain structural, thematic, and perspectival techniques serve to tactilify the human otherness of the Gethenians. When the reader attempts to make contact with Gethenian otherness in this way, they are granted only a limited sensation of touch. If the reader is successful in feeling anything in response to these tactile presentations, the experience is like being pushed away, or being held at arm's length from the Gethenian difference, through largely unsuccessful attempts to contact it through the reception of informational report.

The first of these techniques is the work's unusual narrative structure. For instance, the novel opens with the pronouncement that it is:

From the Archives of Hain. Transcript of Ansible Document 01-01101-934-2-  
Gethen: To the Stabile on Ollul: Report from Genly Ai, First Mobile on  
Gethen/Winter, Hainish Cycle 93, Ekumenical Year 1490-97. (Ibid: 1)



Here, the text gives us a *feeling* for Gethenian otherness. Nothing is shown or told to the reader about it; the reader cannot see or hear anything comprehensible about the world or people that the text is discussing. The chapter is framed as an archival report about a place that the reader, as yet, knows nothing about ('Gethen/Winter'), stored in a location ('Hain') that the reader knows just as little of, in a document kind ('An-sible') they have never heard of, written by a character they have not become acquainted with (Genley Ai), at time at which is meaningless without relative explanation (Hainish Cycle 93, Ekumenical Year 1490-97). This serves to tactilify the otherness of the world and people it is introducing. If the reader makes contact with this otherness here, it is likely only a passing, glancing, feeling of touch. The experience generated is like that of trying to connect with those forms of difference through the reception of informational report and being almost totally thwarted.

The rest of the narrative redeploys this technique of unfamiliar framing to consistently reproduce similar sensations. The second chapter announces that it is:

From a sound-tape collection of North Karhidish "hearth-tales" in the archives of the College of Historians in Ehrenrang, narrator unknown, recorded during the reign of Argaven VIII. (Ibid: 21)

Once more, the reader is not clearly shown or told anything here. They may have seen or heard that Karhide is where the action of the first chapter takes place, but they lack any acquaintance with 'hearth tales', for example. The reader again encounters Gethenian difference in a feeling. If they manage to feel this at all, they are likely to feel distanced from what they are encountering – something that reduplicates the experience at the opening of the first chapter, although this time, through the reception of a slightly different informational report.

This pattern continues throughout the novel. The third chapter continues the narrative from Genly's point of view, the fourth announces itself as 'an East Karhidish story', the fifth is again from Genly's point of view, while the sixth is the first delivered from Estraven's perspective. The remainder of the narrative then continues to oscillate between anthropological reports about life on Gethen from the first covert explorers of the planet, Gethenian legends, entries in Estraven's diary and Genly's account of his stay on Gethen from the archives of Hain. Although the reader does gain acquaintance with some of the things mentioned in the frames of the chapters as the narrative progresses, almost every time, there is an aspect of Gethenian otherness omitted from auditory and visual presentation, some aspect that is tactilified. On each occasion, the reader can only make contact with an alienating object of touch, something that repels them, pushes them away. The experience is like that

of trying to connect with forms of difference through the reception of informational report, and being mostly unable to do so.

The second technique that tactilifies Gethenian difference is the conspicuous scarcity of accurate description or explanation of many of the social customs and mores of the Gethenians. When Gethenian difference is left invisible or inaudible in these ways, it is, again, rendered tactile. If the reader manages to feel Gethenian difference on these occasions, again, they will feel distanced, repelled, rejected. Again, the experience is like trying to contact this otherness through informational report and being largely unable to do so.

I will discuss three of the most prominent examples of this technique here: *shifgrethor*, *nusuth* and *kemmer*.<sup>26</sup> ‘Shifgrethor’ is a code of social conduct that underlies all Gethenian social and political institutions (Ibid:13). Genly initially describes it in his report that makes up the first chapter as ‘prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority’. Nonetheless, he admits that this hardly serves to do the idea justice (Ibid). Genly is not even sure, when he offers this first characterisation of the notion in response to something Estraven does, that he has correctly identified its operations in the situation he is relaying, commenting that ‘if it was [an instance of shifgrethor] I would not understand it’ (Ibid).

Estraven is a practitioner of the Handdara, one of Gethen’s two major religions. This belief system favours, Genly says, ‘an introverted life, self sufficient, stagnant, steeped in that singular “ignorance” praised by the Handdarata and obedient to their rule of inactivity or non-interference’ (Ibid: 58). When Genly pays a visit to some of the Handdarata, the following transpires:

The person on the path to Otherhord looked with mild curiosity at my nose and answered, ‘then perhaps you’ll want to speak to the Weaver? He’s down in the glade now, unless he went out with the woodsledge. Or would you rather talk first to one of the Celibates?’

‘I’m not sure. I’m exceedingly ignorant-’

The young man laughed and bowed. ‘I am honoured!’ he said. ‘I’ve lived here three years, but haven’t yet acquired enough ignorance to be worth mentioning.’ He was highly amused, but his manner was gentle, and I managed to recollect enough scraps of Handdara lore to realize that I had been boasting, very much as if I’d come up to him and said ‘I’m very handsome...’

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<sup>26</sup> There are many other such notions including: ‘dothe’ (‘the voluntary, controlled usage of what we [Earth born humans] call ‘hysterical strength’); ‘Foretelling’ (a restricted, but nonetheless accurate, form of futurological prediction); The Orgota ‘Commensality’ (a vaguely communistic form of government that prevails in the state of Orgoryne); A Fastness (a kind of monastery where especially devoted practitioners of the Handdara live); The ‘hearth’ (a kind of – perhaps semi communal – living space). There are more.

'I meant, I don't know anything about the Foretellers--'  
'Enviably!' said the young Indweller. (Ibid: 56)

This unfamiliar notion of aiming at *attaining* ('acquiring') ignorance, Genly explains, is 'expressed in the word *nusuth*', a notion which he says that he doesn't 'pretend to understand' (Ibid: 59)

'Kemmer' is perhaps the most radical of the notions which is left partly invisible and inaudible. As already mentioned, the Gethenians are androgynous.<sup>27</sup> However, they cyclically alternate between periods of infertility (*somer*) and fertility, where they will temporarily take on male or female sex characteristics. This fertile period of their reproductive cycle is referred to as 'kemmer'. In contrast to concepts like *nusuth* and *shifgrethor*, the reader is told quite a lot about kemmer. However, much of what omitted, again serves to tactilify Gethenian difference. For instance, in a chapter framed as the 'field notes of Ong Tot Oppong, Investigator, of the first Ekuminikal landing party on Gethen/Winter', it is explained to the reader that:

The sexual cycle averages 26 to 28 days (they tend to speak of it as 26 days, approximating it to the lunar cycle). For 21 to 22 days the individual is *somer*, sexually inactive, latent. On about the 18<sup>th</sup> day hormonal changes are initiated by the pituitary control and on the 22<sup>nd</sup> or 23<sup>rd</sup> day the individual enters *kemmer*, estrus. In this first phase of kemmer (*Khar*, *secher*) he remains completely androgynous. Gender, and potency, are not attained in isolation. A Gethenian in first-phase kemmer, if kept alone or with others not in kemmer, remains incapable of coitus. Yet the sexual impulse is tremendously strong in this phase, controlling the entire personality, subjecting all other drives to its imperative. (Ibid: 90)

This allows the reader to hear some things about kemmer. However, there is a hesitancy, an inability to explain or describe the institution perfectly at many points in Oppong's report. The quote above continues, for instance:

When the individual finds a partner in kemmer, hormonal secretion is further stimulated (most importantly by touch – secretion? scent?) until in one partner either male or female hormonal dominance is established. (Ibid)

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<sup>27</sup> The text does not always succeed in sympathetically or effectively conveying this, with masculine pronouns almost always used to describe the inhabitants of Gethen in the third person – even when the narrative is delivered from Estraven's point of view. This is something that Le Guin later expressed regret about after criticisms were leveled at her by, for example, Joanna Russ (2007). My choice to retain the use of masculine pronouns in my commentary reflects a commitment to remain faithful to the text and to prevent confusion.

Other such instances where explanation and description run out are frequent in this chapter. A few more examples of this include the following.

The genitals engorge will shrink accordingly, foreplay intensifies, and the partner, triggered by the change, takes on the other sexual role (? Without exception? If there are exceptions, resulting in kemmer-partners of the same sex, they are so rare as to be ignored). (Ibid)

*Social observations:* very superficial as yet. (Ibid: 91)

Incest between generations is strictly forbidden (in Karhide/Orgoreyn; but is said to be permitted among the tribesmen of Perunter, the Antarctic Continent. This may be slander) (Ibid: 92)

Again, much is withheld from the reader's vision or audition. Is hormonal secretion by touch or scent or something else? Are there homosexual interactions between Gethenians? What social observations might Oppong have managed, had they had a greater opportunity for observation? Is inter-generational incest permitted between the tribesmen of Perunter? The reader never finds out.

These withholdings of auditory and visual data, again, serve to tactilify Gethenian otherness. If the reader is able to make contact with it at all through the concepts of *shifgrethor*, *nusuth* or *kemmer*, again, the contact is likely only glancing, cursory. The experience, like that engendered by the fragmentation of the narrative frame, is that of trying to gain access to a form of human difference, through informational reports, and largely failing to do so.

A final technique that tactilifies the otherness of the Gethenians is the perspective of Genly's framing in the chapters that are delivered from his point of view. Genly, as a non-androgynous, Terran human is, throughout most of the narrative, unable to explain or describe the Gethenians accurately. First, he says that:

Though I had been nearly two years on Winter [Gethen], I was still far from being able to see the people of the planet through their own eyes. I tried to, but my efforts took the form of self-consciously seeing a Gethenian as a man, then as a woman, forcing them into categories so irrelevant to their nature and so essential to my own. (Ibid: 11-12)

This is reflected in Genly's repeated references to Gethenians in the third person using a masculine pronoun, or using markers of status that denote a male role (e.g. king). Genly also explicitly describes many of the Gethenians in terms of their lacking solidity, dimension, or being. For example, after Genly has arrived in the other major

state on the planet, Ogoreyn, and been welcomed by the government officials there, he spends some time speculating about the people he has met so far in this new country.

I had been missing something. But what? I felt insulated. I had not felt the cold, lately. They kept rooms decently warm, here. I had not eaten with pleasure, lately. Orgota cooking is insipid; no harm in that. But why did the people I met, whether well or ill disposed towards me, also seem insipid? There were vivid personalities among them – Obsle, Slose, the handsome and detestable Gaum – and yet each of them lacked some quality, some dimension of being; and they failed to convince. They were not quite solid. It was, I thought, as if they did not cast shadows. (Ibid: 146).

Here Genly refers to the idea of being ‘insulated’ against them, of the people of Ogoreyn lacking ‘some dimension of being’ of being ‘not quite solid’ (Ibid). They are, from Genly’s own perspective, intangible, something that he cannot touch. Another such description Genly offers is that the Gethenians are:

Neither man nor woman, neither and both, cyclic, lunar, metamorphosing under the hand’s touch, changelings in the human cradle, they were no flesh of mine, no friends; no love between us. (Ibid: 214)

And that they are:

around the edges and corners, a little vague, a little, just a little bit unreal. (Ibid: 145)

Similarly, Genly once says of Estraven that

the man was like an electric shock – nothing to hold on to and you don’t know what hit you. (Ibid: 131)

These passages serve, again, to tactilify Gethenian difference. What is emphasised through them is the fact that, from Genly’s perspective, description and explanation have run up against some kind of wall. The reader cannot see or hear exactly what the Gethenians themselves are really like. Instead, they must try to feel their otherness. But it is very difficult to do this, from Genly’s (Earthly) perspective. If one manages any contact with their form of otherness here, again, it is likely to be a brief, passing touch. Again, the experience is like trying to contact Gethenian difference through informational report but being largely unable to do so.

In contrast to this experience of distance from Gethenian otherness, there is also another tactile experience of Gethenian difference that the text can generate. This is engendered in a different way. As well as tactilifying Gethenian difference writ large, the text also tactilifies Estraven's character specifically, and in a different way. If the reader feels this, they are granted a significant, though importantly limited contact with Gethenian difference. The resulting experience is of what it is like to try and gain contact with this otherness through witnessing and vicariously participating in the development of a close personal relationship. The text does this by leaving Genly blind and deaf to two crucial aspects of Estraven's character, until he can no longer ignore them. The eventual revelation of these aspects of Estraven's character serve to solidify what, before, was absent, what before, could barely be felt or contacted through Genly's reportage. This second tactile sensation is like that of being granted a special form of intimacy with Gethenian difference.

The first aspect of Estraven's character that is obscured until it can be felt with some true intimacy is his trustworthiness, honesty and loyalty. When Genly offers his first characterisation of Estraven, he says, flatly that 'I don't trust Estraven, whose motives are forever obscure; I don't like him' (Ibid: 7). And, indeed, Genly's initial impression of him seems, in many ways, at least initially, to be right. Shortly after Genly provides this initial assessment, the two dine together at Estraven's house where it transpires that:

Now, having got me up on that dangerous eminence, he suddenly and coolly announced he was withdrawing his support.

'You've led me to rely on you—'

'It was ill done.'

'Do you mean that, having arranged this audience, you haven't spoken in favour of my mission to the king? As you—' I had the sense to stop short of 'promised.'

'I can't.'

I was very angry, but I met neither anger nor apology in him.

'Will you tell me why?'

After a while he said 'Yes,' and then paused again...

'Did you hear what the king said to me at the ceremony today?' (Ibid: 13)

Estraven does not go on to elaborate cogent reasons for his withdrawing explicit support for Genly, seemingly confirming Genly's impression of him. However, Genly is wrong. As it turns out, Estraven is loyal and highly trustworthy, something the reader is soon to discover. Nonetheless, this is something that it is hinted at a few times even

during the first chapter where he is introduced, through Genly's distorting perspective, mostly as little more than 'the alien alone with me' (Ibid: 17-18).

For instance, after saying that he dislikes Estraven, Genly goes on to say that, in spite of that 'I feel and respond to his authority as surely as I do the warmth of the sun' (Ibid: 7). Further, when Genly tries to reassure Estraven that his mission to Gethen is purely diplomatic – in response to Estraven saying that the king of Karhide is worried about the prospect of invasion by the Ekumen – Estraven says simply 'I believe you,' seemingly placing trust in Genly (Ibid: 16). Similarly, Estraven candidly reveals to Genly that 'I'm not sure I've ever served the king... Or ever intended to', revealing a depth of self-understanding that is noticeably lacking in Genly, who has just made the 'gaffe' of suggesting he cancel his scheduled audience with the king the next day (Ibid: 18-19). Finally, Genly also relates that

All these months in Ehrenrang it had been he who listened to me, who answered my questions, sent physicians and engineers to verify the alienness of my physique and my ship, introduced me to people I needed to know and gradually elevated me from my first year's status as a highly imaginative monster to my present recognition as the mysterious Envoy. (Ibid: 13)

The concealment of Estraven's true and honest motives, even while they are subtly hinted at, tactilifies him in a different way to the Gethenians as a whole. The reader is not exactly told or shown that Estraven is honest and that his motives align with Genly's. Rather, what they are told and shown, if they are to accept Genly's report of the matter, is that he is not. And yet, the things that the reader is told and shown about his character, even by Genly in this opening chapter, give us a subtle feeling for his honesty and trustworthiness. There is, then, something hidden, and yet present, here. Something that cannot be perceived except by being felt.

This object of feeling is then made more solid when, a few chapters later, the narrative is delivered from Estraven's point of view. At the opening of this chapter, Estraven learns of his exile from the Karhide and makes ready to depart for Orgoryne:

There was nothing to keep me long. I took what I could take. As for properties and banked monies, I could not raise them without endangering the men I dealt with, and the better friends they were to me the worse their danger. I wrote to my old kemmering Ashe how he might get the profit of certain valuable things to keep for our sons' use, but told him not to try to send me money, for Tibe would have the border watched. I could not sign the letter. To call anyone by telephone would be to send them to jail, and I hurried to be gone before some friend should come in innocence to see me, and lose his money and his freedom as a reward for his friendship. (Ibid: 71-72)

Here, something of Estraven's loyalty, honesty and trustworthiness is revealed to the reader as they are shown him making certain arrangements for leaving, and told why he is doing so. The lingering sense that there is something more to him than the conniving politician one meets through Genly's perspective in the opening chapter is made more tangible. The fact that Estraven's first thoughts are to protect those closest to him renders his character more tactile than before. If the reader manages to feel this, they will be drawn closer to Estraven and his form of difference, even while they are not yet completely ushered into a state of intimacy with him.

After both Estraven and Genly leave Karhide, they meet again, briefly, in Orgoryne. Just before, Genly comments that:

I was glad to get the confrontation over with at once. It was plain that no tolerable relationship could exist between Estraven and myself. Even though his disgrace and exile were at least nominally on my account, I could take no responsibility for them, feel no rational guilt; he had made neither his acts nor his motivations clear... I could not trust the fellow. (Ibid: 129)

Again, this obscures what the reader already begins to suspect are some of Estraven's greatest virtues, namely, his honesty, truthfulness and loyalty. Indeed, in the brief interchange that follows, Estraven seemingly proves this, given the events that are about to transpire. For, it is at this meeting that Estraven delivers a stark and providential warning to Genly, one Genly fails to heed, to his very great cost:

You are in Mishnory, [the capital of Orgoryne] what you were not, in Erhenrang [the capital of Karhide]. You are the tool of a faction. I advise you to be careful how you let them use you. I advise you to find out what the enemy faction is, and who they are, and never let them use you, for they will not use you well. (Ibid: 131)

Even after this, Genly again reflects that, still, on Gethen, he is 'without a soul I could trust' (Ibid: 132), completely missing the 'harsh, elaborate courtesy' (Ibid: 132) of Estraven's tone when he delivers his warning. Estraven's warning turns out to be well judged, even if it passes by Genly, unheeded. For, not long after, Genly is taken to the internment camp.

Again, Genly's perspective distorts or occludes Estraven's truthfulness and loyalty. Hints in the text partially reveal it to the reader. And yet, it is still hidden, just beyond sight or hearing, here. Once more, Estraven is tactilified. If the reader makes contact with him here, it is with an increased intimacy. They have begun to



sense what still, Genly does not. The experience is of making some contact with Estraven through witnessing the development of his and Genly's relationship.

It is not until Genly himself comes into full contact with Estraven, however, that the reader achieves a true moment of closeness with Estraven. After Estraven saves Genly from the internment camp, Genly is initially surprised to discover that his rescuer is Estraven given that, from Genly's perspective, Estraven had always seemed to do nothing but lay obstacles in his path. Estraven then explains to Genly that he feels guilty for Genly's present position, that it was his fault that Genly should have been sent to the forced labour camp at which Genly responds:

I see, I believe you – what can I do but believe you. Here I am, here you are...but I don't understand. I don't understand what you did all this for. (Ibid: 197)

Finally, Genly trusts Estraven, and, in doing so, reveals what has been hidden, solidifying Estraven through this acceptance of his trustworthiness. More is to come:

'But for what purpose – all this intriguing, this hiding and power-seeking and plotting – what was it for Estraven? What were you after?'

'I was after what you were after: the alliance of my world with your worlds. What did you think?'

We were staring at each other across the glowing stove like a pair of wooden dolls. (Ibid: 198)

And so Genly comes to trust Estraven's motives, too. Finally, Genly says:

'I don't mean to be unjust, Estraven–'

'Yet you are. It is strange. I am the only man in all Gethen that has trusted you entirely and I am the only man in Gethen that you have refused to trust.'

He put his head in his hands. He said at last, 'I'm sorry Estraven.' It was both apology and admission.

'The fact is' I said, 'that you're unable, or unwilling, to believe the fact that I believe in you.' (Ibid: 199)

Here, Estraven's trustworthiness, honesty and loyalty are laid bare. After having been partially hidden through the distorting veil of Genly's perspective, now these aspects of his character can hardly be ignored. The result is a powerful solidification of Estraven. He is now presented, more fully than ever, as he is. He is tactilified more fully than on any previous occasion. If the reader makes contact with him here, they are likely to feel drawn in, close, to this person, as if ushered into their presence. The

experience is more completely one of gaining intimacy with Estraven through witnessing the development of his and Genly's relationship.

The second feature of Estraven's character that is revealed after being occluded by Genly's perspective is his androgyny, the aspect of him that marks him out as most different to Genly himself. While Genly continually insists on obscuring this aspect of Estraven's character by 'forcing them [the Gethenians, including Estraven] into categories so irrelevant to their nature and so essential to my own,' eventually, during their journey back to Karhide, Estraven's true nature is revealed.

One night during their journey, Genly recalls, Estraven falls unexpectedly falls silent and seems perturbed. When Genly again thinks he has made some error in shifgrethor, Estraven corrects him and explains that that is not the reason for his retreat. The true reason is that he has entered kemmer.

His face in the reddish light was as soft, as vulnerable, as remote as the face of a woman who looks at you out of her thoughts and does not speak.

And I saw then again, and for good, what I had always been afraid to see, and had pretended not see in him: that he was a woman as well as a man. Any need to explain the sources of that fear vanished with the fear; what I was left with was, at last, acceptance of him as he was. Until then I had rejected him, refused him his own reality. He had been quite right to say that he, the only person on Gethen who trusted me, was the only Gethenian I distrusted. (Ibid: 248)

Estraven is revealed more fully, here, than at any point before or after. What has been hidden before – his loyalty, honesty, trustworthiness, his very biology – is tactilified for the reader. In this moment, if they manage to make contact with him, they will feel as close to him as they possibly can, which is just as close as Genly himself comes. Genly's account continues:

'I must not touch you,' he said, with extreme constraint; saying that he looked away.

I said, 'I understand. I agree completely.'

For it seemed to me, and I think to him, that it was from that sexual tension between us, admitted now and understood, but not assuaged, that the great and sudden assurance of friendship between us rose: a friendship so much needed by us both in our exile, and already so well proved in the days and nights of our bitter journey, that it might as well be called, now as later, love. But it was from the difference between us not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that that love came: and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us. For us to meet sexually would be for us to meet once more as aliens. We had touched, in the only way we could touch. (Ibid: 249)

Finally, then, Estraven himself is rendered tangible to the reader. Revealed now, as he is and in his relationship to Genly, they touch in the only way they could, now, truly, as friends, with a mutual bond of truthfulness, honesty and loyalty between them. If the reader manages to do the same, they will have reached the closest point of intimacy with Estraven that they will manage. The experience is of achieving a limited, though significant form of intimacy with Gethenian difference, through witnessing, and to an extent, participating in, the development of a close personal relationship.

These aspects of *Darkness* provide two familiar tactile experiences. In both, what is tactilified is, in a sense, the Gethenians themselves, though, in different ways. And so, they are contacted in different ways. In the first instance, what is withheld is never fully revealed, namely, Gethenian difference writ large, in general; something that engenders an experience of being held at a distance through reportage. In the second, with the revelations about Estraven's particular character, something is revealed and so one is granted a still limited, though significant, form of closeness through witnessing and participating in the development of his and Genly's relationship.

And yet these familiar things are blended with some unlike entities, namely, the very persons, in their otherness, that one seeks, in these encounters, to feel, to touch and be touched by. There are no completely androgynous humans, in the sense in which the Gethenians are. They are beyond the scope of any familiar experience – they are unlike. Hence, any contact one manages to make with them, any feeling one has towards them, are towards something unlike. The experiences the texts can provide, then, are not only of what it is like to gain a cursory form of contact with otherness through reports, and of what it is like to gain some intimacy with human difference through encountering a personal relationship. It also of achieving these forms of contact with something unlike.

As a result of these experiences with blended content, one may gain some insights into the limits of one's ability to gain familiarity or intimacy with human difference. For, in trying to make contact with beings who are unlike in the way the Gethenians are, through informational reports, the reader may start to question whether they would ever be able to achieve any significant form of intimacy with more everyday forms of human difference in this way. The reader may begin to question the limited reach of the emotive capacities, and their ability, in more ordinary contexts, to respond meaningfully and connect with persons different to themselves, using only informational reports. They might ask, for example: 'If the reception of dispassionate reportage concerning the totally unlike difference of the Gethenians can bring one only into a transitory and distanced connection with *them*, then to

what extent are one's attempts to comprehend and navigate real human differences in the living world of the everyday equally so constricted? In asking this kind of question, one may be made to realise the limits of such impassive methods of comprehending, accepting and assimilating human difference.

Similarly, in trying to make contact with the unlike being of Estraven, in his difference, through participating and witnessing the relationship that grows between he and Genly, the reader may also begin to question whether any present attempts to feel and respond appropriately to more familiar forms of difference could be improved. They might ask themselves, perhaps: 'if one can get this close to a being who is totally unlike through vicarious participation in an interpersonal relationship, might it be that my current attempts at interpersonal contact with people different to myself could be stretched much further, made to encompass so much more, be made so much better?' Again, in raising this question to themselves, the reader may be made to realise some of the limits of their abilities to make authentic interpersonal connections with people who are very different to themselves.

In each of these instances, such questioning can raise doubts about one's current ways of contacting more familiar forms of human difference or otherness. One might return to the ordinary world imbued with a new understanding that many of one's attempts at this are more shallow, less successful than one used to suppose. These attempts, if one makes them at all, may now be newly understood as less adequate, even inadequate. This can improve one's life by making one less prone to see oneself as insightful or perceptive, with respect to the way others live, and their particular forms of living.

## §5.5 Conclusion

The encounters described here seek to highlight concrete instances of what was 'missing' from my farfetching at the end of Chapter 3. Speculative fictions have a particularly notable capacity for engendering quasi-perceptual experiences with a content that is beyond that which can be encountered in daily life. These encounters, like the experience described by Delany at the opening of Chapter 2, can place one, transformed, into a mirror world, where things are both alike to familiar qualia, and yet, inverted, *unlike*. This supplies a basis for the claim that written fictions which generate these uncanny encounters can make distinctive contributions to ethical understanding. Like the conclusion of the man/super-consciousness in *Starmaker*, at the opening of Chapter 4, these experiences can, in a paradoxical way, serve to elevate the importance of the human struggle. They do so, not by improving one's skills or

refining one's conceptual stock in its connections and applications. Rather, in a unique way, they sensitise one to the limits of these things, and to other modes through which we interrogate, negotiate and navigate the moral complexities of life. They are, as Butler puts it at the opening of this chapter: 'A blaze... A half known mystery beautiful and complex'. For, these experiences cannot be *substituted* for any other that one might have by going out into the world and living. Seeing an impossible text, hearing about a way to temper one's self-destructive impulses from an alien being, touching, and being touched by, the otherness of person utterly different to oneself; these are things that are positively *unknown* in ordinary life. There is, then, something in the nature of these experiences that is distinct from anything one might encounter by walking out of the front door. For while life does, of course, supply the occasion for strange, eerie experiences, such experiences are largely perceptual in the ordinary sense. They are not *metaphorically* perceptual. Similarly, what one experiences in these moments is not something *unlike*, it is something *unusual*; that is, something that is, in the important sense, 'like' other things that exist in the world around us. There is, then, a reason for the Ethical Adventurer to want to seek out the perceptions of the unlike which are most readily available in the experiences generated by reading Speculative fiction. Without doing so, the Adventurer might miss out on a special kind of encounter. Such encounters, I have argued, can improve our lives by revealing, in a way in which no other experience can, the limits of our human modes of existence; humbling us deeply as individuals, and as part of the broader community.



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