Moral Learning, Fiction, and the Ability to Engage with the Text: A Suggestion for Improving How Universities Teach Literature

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There has been a recent flurry of activity in the area overlapping aesthetics and ethics. Many aestheticians have argued that various art-forms can make valuable contributions to the questions traditionally dealt with in ethics. More specifically, it has been argued that fiction is an enterprise that can provide moral learning—i.e., how to perform good or right actions. Since fiction occupies a significant place within the modern-day university-level introductory literature course, the prospect of acquiring moral knowledge from fiction must be considered in the context of tertiary education. I intend to argue that on most theories of how we acquire moral knowledge from fiction, the ability to engage with the material is crucial. If we don't engage with the material, then this valuable knowledge is not accessible to us. I will assume that if this kind of learning is available, then we would want university students to be able to attain it. Thus, we will want to prescribe engagement with fiction, so that this learning can occur. But we cannot prescribe engagement if the ability to engage is not developed enough in the student. Therefore, we should reserve a place in the curriculum for attending to the improvement of this ability to engage with fiction. I suspect, however, that this need has not been sufficiently grasped within many universities. My paper is an attempt to make clear why it is vital that we make the ability to engage with fiction part of the curriculum.

I will first present what I take to be the modern perspective on the goals of liberal education. Then I will present three examples of theories of how we can attain moral learning from fiction, showing how each of these relies on the ability of engagement in a significant way. I will conclude with some practical suggestions of how we might put into place some procedures intended to help students improve their ability to engage.

The Goals of Liberal Education

It is often claimed that liberal education is intended to expose individuals to a wide array of different areas of human endeavour. This is often accomplished by requiring university students to take introductory classes in many disciplines, often unrelated to their chosen majors. These introductory classes are not intended to provide the students much depth in any one field. The trade-off, however, of depth for breadth is considered worthwhile within the context of the overall aims. *Some* exposure to fields such as history, philosophy, art, and literature is better than the limited experience presumed to be the norm for most incoming freshmen. Proponents of liberal education justify such decisions to require students to explore fields unrelated to their own chosen majors by citing the individual growth that students will experience as a result. The business student who is required to take a philosophy class will be enriched having read the words of, say, Plato, Augustine, Descartes, Kant, and Nietzsche. But there is another strand of justification that is offered up against more hard-nosed criticisms, which question what kind of value this growth really will have once the student leaves the university and enters the workforce. This second strand claims that skills learned in introductory classes can be transferred to other fields to great advantage. These skills, it is said, are best learned as a result of the student's engaging with areas of study distinct from her own. Thus, the business student reading Kant not only learns something about herself, about the world around her, and about the ways people thought of the world three hundred years ago—she also learns *how* to perform certain activities. She learns skills, as well as information. I take it that these are the two preferred lines of justification for liberal education and they correspond with two goals that I call the goal of growth and the pragmatic goal. The goal of growth, aligned with the first line of justification, is that students learn valuable information about

themselves, their fellow humans, and the world around them. The pragmatic growth, aligned with the second line of justification, is that students learn skills and faculties valuable “where the rubber hits the road”—i.e., within their chosen fields and careers. I think that this bifurcation of aims can best be seen in the current introductory literature courses. The current practice of literature courses, to the best of my knowledge, is to assign readings to students, have the students attempt to read the material at home, and then discuss the material in class. What happens more often than not, I suspect, is that the discussion serves as a corrective for the student’s flawed reading. The class discussion begins as an attempt to provide *understanding* for the student (What exactly is going on in this scene where Humbert is eavesdropping on Lolita?) and then moves on to a critical analysis of the work (Can we infer that Humbert is thinking of Annabel as he listens to Lolita?). This sequencing, of course, is exactly right. One shouldn’t attempt to critically appraise any work that one has not first adequately understood.

But what happens next, after the critical analysis work has been done? Usually, I wager, the discussion moves on to advanced chapters or new works. At this point, we might ask, “Well, what else is there? The relevant text has been explicated for the student, some critical appraisal has been performed. What else could possibly be done with the text?” I suspect that this way of thinking about the introductory literature class is pretty standard, especially given the fact that assignments are usually either explicatory in nature or critical in nature or both, culminating in the longer research paper, which is primarily critical. Further, I believe that this is the common strategy in these classes because of the bifurcation of the aforementioned goals: the goal of growth and the pragmatic goal. The task of providing understanding is supposed to get students nearer to the goal of growth, while the task of critical analysis is supposed to help students reach the pragmatic goal.

This way of looking at the ends of the introductory literature class is flawed, however, or so I will argue. By trying to cleanly distinguish between the two goals, we miss an extremely valuable opportunity. There are things we can learn from reading fiction that can assist us in growing up intellectually, culturally, and socially, but they cannot be learned merely from reading and understanding. Learning these things can occur only as a result of *engaging* with the work. Engagement with a work is distinct from merely understanding the work. But being able to engage with a work of fiction is a skill, an ability that doesn’t necessarily come naturally. Thus, the set of skills that should be learned in introductory literature classes cannot exclude this skill of engagement, even if this skill seems to have little pragmatic value. If skill of engagement is overlooked, as I suspect it is often is today, then we miss many opportunities to help students along in their personal growth. In short, we short-change the full-on goal of growth by not taking into account this skill that has essentially no pragmatic value.

What evidence do I have that engagement with fiction is crucial for learning from fiction? In the following section I will briefly describe two prominent theories of how we can achieve *moral learning* from fiction. I will also sketch my own view. On all three views engagement is crucial. Indeed, engagement might also be sufficient for moral learning, but I won’t argue this. I wish merely to point out that it’s plausible that our students are not being adequately taught the skill of engagement, and are therefore missing many opportunities to become better moral agents, which, I take it, is a component—perhaps the central component—of the goal of growth.

Theories of Learning from Fiction and Engagement

As I mention above, the kind of learning that I and other philosophers of fiction claim can result from reading fiction is moral learning. It is fairly widely accepted that *some* moral learning can be gained

from reading fiction. The central question is: what is the most valuable *kind* of moral learning that can occur as a result of reading fiction?

Broadly speaking, two kinds of theories have developed: *informational* theories and *formational* theories. The two theories I will summarize and my own theory are not pure versions of either kind. I doubt that there are any pure versions to speak of, but rather theories that fall more toward one end or the other of the spectrum. I use these terms strictly as guides for discussion.

Currie's Account

One prominent informational theory is that of Gregory Currie. In two papers (1995, 1998) Currie argues that we learn information from our experience in fictional situations, and that we can apply this learning to real situations. By reading certain kinds of fiction we discover what we value, what we should value, and how better to plan our own lives. He utilizes the notion of imagination-as-simulation, as opposed to imagination-as-theory, echoing the distinction found in philosophy of mind between the theory-theory and simulation-theory of prediction of the behaviour of others.[1] When I use imagination-as-simulation, according to Currie, I put myself into the perspective of someone in the imagined situation, and I temporarily adopt their mental states. In this way I experience the internal reactions of the person in the imagined situation—that is, I have the mental states consequent to the initial temporary mental states—but I don't instantiate any external reactions. I don't run out the back door when I imagine a situation in which a lion is chasing the person whose perspective I have entered. This is because my mental states are run "off-line".

According to Currie, we can achieve moral learning by imagining in this way—what he calls "imaginative projection. We can perform certain actions *virtually*, within circumscribed, off-line situations, where the cost of error is low. We have to give up some reliability using this method, Currie concedes, as compared to performing real actions in actual situations, but the stakes are so high in real situations, the trade-off is worthwhile. Imagination can help us to determine whether we are pursuing the right ends and can assist us in planning to achieve those ends. Imagination helps us to illuminate our own values, "giving us an indication of the consequences for ourselves and for others of holding those values and pursuing the things to which those values attach" (1998 163).

Fictions serve as aids to the imagination. They help us to "enter empathetically" into the lives of characters, having the same feelings[2] the characters do when they make decisions and seek goals. Moreover, the reader can "reap the rewards and costs of their actions" (164). We reap the rewards and costs of certain actions run off-line in that we obtain evidence of how the actions will turn out in on-line situations.

One thing that we should note at this point is that Currie relies on a certain similarity relation between the imagined situation, where actions and decisions are run off-line, and the real situation, where the

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1 In brief, the theory-theory holds that individuals predict the behaviour of others by reasoning from premises to a conclusion, such that upon attributing to others particular beliefs and desires, and a normal degree of rationality, one can infer that the likely action that will be performed will be the action that will satisfy the relevant desires. By contrast, the simulation-theory holds that in predicting the behaviour of others, an individual puts himself into the position or situation of the other and reasons how he himself would behave, given the initial conditions. Today the consensus appears to be that some hybrid of the two theories is the most plausible option.

2 Actually, Currie (1997) says that we simulate the feelings of the characters, having what he calls *I-states*, or imagined mental states.

actions would be on-line. For this reason Currie states that the kinds of fiction he means to be discussing are works exemplifying “realism of character”. That is, the characters must be sufficiently similar to real people. The works must have this property because, if they didn’t, either the reader would be unable to “imaginatively project” into the character or the evidence that the character’s decisions translate to the real situation would be too weak.

The crucial thing to note for the purposes of my main argument is that the imaginative projection Currie supposes that the reader undertakes is not going to occur for just any reader. To enter the point of view of a character requires a degree of empathy that many people have no occasion to exercise, other than in works of fiction. This requires a step further than merely reading and understanding the text. This is what I would call a kind of *engagement*.

Nussbaum’s Account

Martha Nussbaum’s account (1983, 1985), intertwined with an interpretative account of Henry James’s *The Golden Bowl*, is difficult to summarize. Her view is essentially that some works of fiction, like James’s *The Golden Bowl*, are also works of moral philosophy. As the purpose of moral philosophy is to show us how to think about acting in a good or right manner, some works of fiction do this as well, and perhaps better than, non-fictional accounts commonly thought to be the norm in moral philosophy. These fictional works teach us how to discriminate more finely, to perceive more subtle details. Moral knowledge “is not simply intellectual grasp of particular facts,” says Nussbaum. “It is perception” (1985: 521). We learn how to apprehend in a “lucid” way events occurring around us. By showing us fine-grained details within scenes, details we would likely overlook if no one were to point them out for us, the author teaches us how better to perceive in real situations. Thus, Nussbaum’s account is going to be primarily formational in nature.

Nussbaum agrees with James when he says that “our own attention to [James’s] characters will itself, if read well, be a high *case* of moral attention. … We actively care for their particularity and we strain to be people on whom none of their subtleties are lost, in intellect and feeling” (527). Thus, fiction teaches us how to observe individuals in a more refined way, perceive the details in the world that might be relevant to our own decisions. These skills then can be used to make knowing and reasoned decisions about how to act. Non-fictional works of moral philosophy might teach us principles, but they cannot improve our ability to perceive. This is why fiction can teach us how to act in ways that non-fiction cannot, according to Nussbaum. I will quote Nussbaum again, since she can say it better than I can:

> What I now want to suggest is that the adventure of the reader of [*The Golden Bowl*], like the adventure of the intelligent characters inside it, involves valuable aspects of human moral experience that are not tapped by traditional books of moral philosophy; in this way as well it would be necessary for the completion of the enterprise of working through all of our moral intuitions. For this novel calls upon and also develops our ability to confront mystery with the cognitive engagement of both thought and feeling. To work through these sentences and these chapters is to become involved in an activity of exploration and unraveling that uses abilities, especially abilities of emotion and imagination, rarely tapped by philosophical texts. (Nussbaum 1983: 45)

One relevant difference between Nussbaum’s account and Currie’s account is that Nussbaum’s claim is stronger, in at least one sense. While Currie argues that engagement with works of fiction provide us some information which we can then apply to real situations, he doesn’t argue that this is actually the best available way to acquire such information. He would be satisfied, I think, if we agree that such learning is possible, but not necessarily unique. Nussbaum, on the other hand, seems to argue that

(some) literature serves the unique function of improving our abilities as moral agents through the refinement of our capacity to perceive. Through reading fiction, we learn to do what the artist does. Indeed, Nussbaum says, the artist's task itself is moral.

It's clear that the kind of learning that Nussbaum suggests we can acquire from fiction involves a highly developed sense of engagement. In fact, someone might object that the kind of engagement she postulates is really unattainable for the average person with finite energy and time. It's possible that one would have to read *The Golden Bowl* multiple times in order to acquire the learning Nussbaum envisions. Is this, however, reason against trying to attain such a level of engagement? I don't think so. Even if students are not able to *achieve* such a high level of engagement by the time they leave the literature course, this doesn't imply that they shouldn't *aspire* to such levels. Indeed, I think they should.

My Account

My own view resembles Currie's view in some respects, Nussbaum's in others. My theory is somewhere between the informational and formational ends of the spectrum. My view holds that reading a particular kind of fiction can improve our ability to empathize. When I use the term "empathize" I mean this to mean a particular kind of simulation. For the most part I accept what is called the hybrid simulation-theory of prediction of others, which says that we theorize about others to an extent, but the primary means of predicting and explaining the behaviour of others is simulation. Empathy-as-simulation is a narrow subset of responses included within the set of simulating behaviour. Empathy as I use it is going to be simulation motivated by moral concerns. In other words, the kind of simulating we do when we consider how we are to act in relation to others will be empathy.[3]

How can reading fiction improve our capacity to empathize? Before I begin to sketch my theory, I should say that, just as Currie and Nussbaum do, I have specific kinds of fiction in mind. The works on which my theory focuses are going to be those that involve third person narrators and multiple shifts in points of view. This leaves open the possibility for both omniscient and limited narrators. The reason for my focusing on this narrow kind of fiction will be made clear shortly.

There are two components to my view: (1) the claim that we improve the *quality* of our ability to empathize as a result of reading the kind of fiction I describe above; and (2) the claim that we develop a greater *desire* to empathize as a result of reading this kind of fiction. I will take each in turn.

First, the reader improves the quality of empathy through reading fiction. What I mean by the quality of empathy are the thoroughness and ease of putting oneself into the perspective of another. Thus, the

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3 It might be objected that the kind of simulating that I call empathy does not exist. Does this mean that my theory fails even to get going for someone making this objection? I don't think so. A similar argument to mine can be run, dealing only with simulation taken broadly. It would look like this: if the hybrid-simulation-theory is correct, then we predict the behaviour of others primarily through the action of simulating. By being able to predict the behaviour of others, I have some reliable pieces of evidence about which of my actions will harm others and which won't. This, however, is at the heart of ethical thinking. The question—which of my actions will hurt others?—is at least a central question we ask when we consider how to act. Thus, the greater ability to simulate can help us to become better moral agents. Of course, this argument, like the one I make regarding empathy, does rely on the plausibility of hybrid or the non-hybrid versions of the simulation-theory.

reader can more fully put herself into the position of others and do so with less sustained effort.[4] The key to this improvement is the activity of *entering points of view* within the work. Entering points of view is not as simple as it sounds. We don't merely assume the point of view of a character—that is, we don't enter a point of view simply by declaring that we have done so. It involves a crucial set of mental recalibrations. In order to enter a point of view I might have to adjust my attitude, re-configure my background assumptions, consider the world— the fictional world—in a different way from the way I normally do. I have to simulate the character's mental states, just as Currie describes. But simulating the mental states of another takes effort and skill, since, presumably, the character is going to differ from me in several respects. To imaginatively project into the character, I have to do more than merely imagine myself in the imagined situation, more than merely imagine myself possessing the mental states of the character. I have to imagine *being* the character.

This is a difficult skill to master, but some works of fiction crucially depend on the reader's having this skill. Every time I successfully imaginatively project into a character—that is, every instance of my entering a point of view—I get better at it, more proficient at the act of projecting. But once the projection is successful, the skill of empathizing is no longer necessary. The entering of the point of view is the trick—keeping myself in the point of view is little more than imagining myself—as the character—performing the actions of the character. This requires a skill, but it's not the skill of empathy. Thus, the more often we are compelled to enter multiple points of view, the better we get at it, the better we are at empathizing.

But why suppose that reading fiction increases our *desire* to empathize, as I claim above as the second component of my view? Even if reading fiction improves the quality of our skill of empathizing, this needn't cause us to want to use the skill more often. So why do I suppose that we develop a greater desire to empathize? To answer this question we have to consider one of the central elements of literature—conflict. Without conflict, fiction is impotent, useless, banal. It's conflict that gets the story moving and keeps it moving. The astute reader will often observe that the conflict arises within a story as a direct result of misperceptions and misunderstandings. In short, it's barriers to understanding that often motivate the conflicts occurring in a story. If there weren't these barriers—that is, if complete understanding were possible within the fictional situations—then the conflicts would vanish or could be avoided entirely. The kind of complete understanding that would eliminate conflict is often possessed by the reader who has access to multiple points of view. The reader often knows exactly what could resolve the problems being worked out by the characters, because the reader has considerably more knowledge than the characters. Of course, since conflict is the life-blood of fiction, the reader does not wish to see the barriers removed—doing so would be tantamount to nullifying the appeal of the story. But the reader does learn that it is this kind of knowledge—the knowledge of the mental states of others—that *could* resolve the conflict, if she wished to resolve the conflict.

Conflict is as undesirable in real situations as it is desirable in fictional situations. But the reader learns from observing fictional situations that if only some or all of the characters could *read the minds of the other characters*, then the conflict could be resolved fairly quickly. Despite the fact that the reader does not wish the fictional conflict to go away, she is likely to wish real conflicts to be resolved. She cannot fully read the minds of others, but she can make some progress, especially if the simulation-theory is correct, by empathizing with others. By trying to put herself into the points of view of others, she thereby performs actions while being completely aware of the stake others have in her choice of actions. Consequently, she desires to empathize with others as much as possible, as a result of her

4 I realize that I am being vague in this description. The specifics, however, would require an empirical study of the capacity to empathize. I am putting off this task until another day.

learning from her experiences with fiction. If we now take both components of my view and try to determine what value reading fiction has on this view, we can see that reading a particular kind of fiction can help us become more aware and responsible agents. If the ability to empathize is crucial for acting with respect and consideration for others, and if reading fiction can teach us *how* to empathize in a more thorough and effective manner and teach us *that* empathizing can often help eliminate or avoid conflicts, then it's clear that reading fiction can help us become better moral agents. If my view is correct, or points us in an approximately correct direction, then it should be obvious that engagement is going to be necessary to reap the benefits I have described. To enter into points of view is no mean task. It takes a level of imagining that many people have to foster and work at to improve. The baseline level of the skill of imagining is going to be too low, I suggest, for successful empathizing of the kind I describe. But this skill will not be learned or improved simply by understanding the text or by critically appraising it. It's going to require some other exercise for students to learn this skill.

I will not argue for one view or another in this paper, although I suspect my view is headed in the right direction. Moreover, I don't claim that these are the best theories on offer for how we might achieve moral learning from reading fiction. But if any one of these theories is plausible, then we will be missing opportunities for students to learn some very valuable things simply because they will not possess the right ability to take advantage of these opportunities. Even if, however, none of these theories is the right one, we can still see that if moral learning results from reading fiction, it's likely going to require a more robust level of engagement than what is being taught in introductory classes. In fact, there might actually be a vital connection between engaging with the work and the desire to apply anything learned from fiction to real life. It might be the case that until and unless we get students to engage with literature, they will simply look at fictional works as pieces of antique art, hidden away in the back of the museum, under glass, available for viewing simply because they arouse our curiosity. Surely literature is more than this.

Possible Ways to Teach Engagement

What are some ways then to teach students how better to engage with works of fiction? I am sorry to say that when it comes to practical suggestions, I have less developed ideas. One thing that I am confident of is that there needs to be some way to re-visit parts of the text that have already been discussed, and to do so in a less critically-oriented way. If my description of the two phases that I presented earlier—that is, first, class discussion effecting understanding; and then critical analysis—is accurate, then I think we need to provide one last opportunity for the student to wrestle with the text. Thus, the sequencing might look like this:

1. the student comes to class with a less than confident grasp of the assigned reading
2. through discussion the student obtains a firmer grasp of just what's going on in the story
3. the student then adopts a critical approach, thereby effecting further and fuller understanding
4. the student re-visits the material after having acquired a rather robust understanding of the text—i.e., after the student has some *command* of the material

This phase of re-visiting then could be used as an opportunity for encouraging the student to imagine herself as a character in the fictional situation, even enlist the help of others to authenticate the experience. Engagement depends crucially on the ability to imagine and this seems to be the best place to start.

I realize that evaluating the student's improvement of the skill of engagement is going to be more difficult than evaluating critical skills. How are we to test a student's ability to imagine? But perhaps

the level of skill isn't as important as the desire to improve the skill. If this is the case, then response papers in which the student is instructed to treat the text in a less critical manner would be effective. Or discussion groups, where the students can discuss the text after having worked their ways through it might be helpful. This would not require mastery of the skill so much as the grasping of the value of the skill itself.

These surely are just sketches of suggestions. But if we can agree that engagement should be incorporated into the curriculum for introductory literature classes, then I am confident we can come up with effective and enriching ways to teach engagement. After all, teachers of literature often love literature. And what is it they love if it's not the experience of engaging with the work?

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