

## LITERATURE AND ETHICAL THEORY: ALLIES OR ADVERSARIES?

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*Nowadays, explicit discussion of literary authors as diverse as Sophocles and Coetzee, Wordsworth and Dostoyevsky, might easily be found on the program of any mainstream meeting in the area of philosophical ethics. What, however, is the contribution that literature makes to our understanding of ethical matters? On one account, certain works of literature are valuable allies of ethical theorizing, helping us understand issues having to do with moral perception and moral emotion in a way that we could not do well without turning to such texts. By now, however, some philosophers have adopted an anti-theoretical posture in ethics. To such anti-theorists, literature provides an alternative to ethical theory.*

*In this article Martha Nussbaum examines the problematic relationship between literature and ethical theory. Inspired by reaction against the ascendancy of reductive theory, especially normative theory deriving from economics, she shows that literature is more than a handmaid of ethical theory, claiming that novels not simply represent ethical deliberation, but incite it. Nussbaum wishes to offer an account that goes beyond the narrow and excessively rationalistic accounts of what moral philosophy includes in claiming that the fluidity of the moral life is well captured in works of literature. The other way round, she sees literature as in need of a partnership with theory, so that we will read critically. In short, literature is needed as a supplement to the theoretical enterprise of ethics; literature and ethics are allies, not adversaries.*

Maggie Verver watches. She watches her friend Charlotte, whose high quavering voice, as she conducts a tour of the gallery, betrays, like “the shriek of a soul in pain,” the anguish of her abandonment (James 1985: 526). She watches her father, as, “with strange tears in his own eyes,” “the shame, the pity, the better knowledge, the smothered protest, the divined anguish even, so overcame him that, blushing to his eyes, he turned short away” (ibid., 527). Above all, and constantly, Maggie watches her husband Amerigo, as he wanders through the “closed dusky rooms from place to place,” or reclines on unused sofas and stares before him, “liking better than anything in the world just now to be alone with his own thoughts” (ibid., 528). At last, however, Maggie closes her eyes:

She sank to her knees with her arm on the ledge of her window-seat, where she blinded her eyes from the full glare of seeing that his idea could only be to wait, whatever might come, at her side. It was to her buried face that she thus for a long time felt him draw nearest; though after a while, when the strange wail of the gallery began to repeat its inevitable echo, she was conscious of how that brought out his pale hard grimace. (ibid., 529)

What do these dense, elliptical sentences – in which the silence of the unstated is as heavy a presence as their weight of cumbrous statement, straining toward the adequate – have to do with moral philosophy? And if such sentences, and the novels in which they are embedded, do make, as I believe, a distinctive contribution to ethical understanding, is it one that complements and enriches the enterprise of philosophical theorizing about ethics, or one that subverts that enterprise and shows it to be bankrupt?

### A merciful closing of the eyes

In 1980, when I first delivered a paper on Henry James's *The Golden Bowl* at the American Philosophical Association,<sup>1</sup> this seemed to be a somewhat peculiar thing for a young philosopher to do. The reigning approaches to ethics were the Kantian and the Utilitarian. And although both types of ethical theory in fact contain a large space for the study of virtues of conduct, and thus for detailed exploration of patterns of virtue in action, including the inner psychology of these patterns, those parts were not the parts on which philosophers typically focused. Kant's Doctrine of Virtue, Mill's essay on Coleridge, and the rich moral psychology of his The Subjection of Women – these texts were relatively little studied in graduate courses. Even the revival of serious philosophical study of ancient Greek philosophy, which ultimately contributed so much to the revival of the study of virtue and moral psychology,<sup>2</sup> was at that time relatively limited in its ethical scope, focusing more on accounts of the function of moral language than on the tradition's richly detailed substantive inquiries into virtue and love.

It was not as if no leading philosophers in the main stream of the subject had spoken of these topics, or turned to literature for illumination when they did.<sup>3</sup> Iris Murdoch's *The Sovereignty of Good* was already widely read work, although its lessons were not entirely taken to heart.

<sup>1</sup> The paper was 'Flawed Crystals: James's The Golden Bowl and Literature as Moral Philosophy', published in *New Literary History* 1983, and then in my *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Nussbaum 1990).

<sup>2</sup> See my 'Virtue Revived' (Nussbaum 1992).

<sup>3</sup> For much more extensive discussion of all these thinkers and the unfolding of different types of “virtue ethics”, see my ‘Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?’ (Nussbaum 1999a).

Daring and original thinkers such as Stanley Cavell and Richard Wollheim (whom I was fortunate to have as my commentator at the APA session I have mentioned) wrote about literary works and works in the other arts with a rich sense of their possible contribution to the ethical. And neo-Aristotelian thinkers such as David Wiggins and John McDowell were already pressing toward an ethical approach that takes moral perception to be a central category and holds that complex forms of attention in the inner world are among the primary ingredients of good ethical deliberation.<sup>4</sup> But novels, though widely taught in introductory ethics courses as ways of inducing undergraduates to take an interest in the subject, were still not considered central and respectable parts of our discipline at its higher levels. Even the more literary among the recognized moral philosophers were likely to be either neglected utterly (Kierkegaard), or approached with selective attention to the less literary aspects of their oeuvre (Plato, Nietzsche, Sartre).

By now, things have to some extent changed. It would be totally commonplace to find discussions of the literary aspects of historical philosophers on the program of an APA meeting, and even more commonplace to find discussions of love, anger, moral perception, and other themes that reflection about fiction might well enhance. Explicit discussion of literary authors as diverse as Sophocles and Coetzee, Wordsworth and Dostoyevsky, Henry James and Knut Hamsen, might easily be found on the program of any mainstream meeting in the area of philosophical ethics. And at least many of the leading moral philosophers would be willing to state that such works make a valuable contribution to philosophical understanding. It is a sign of the times that we discovered recently, in my own Philosophy Department, that our graduate offerings for next year contained courses on both Kierkegaard and Proust, as well as one on Seneca's letters, but no course devoted to a traditional mainstream topic in ethical theory. (I quickly postponed Proust in favor of Mill.)

What, however, is the contribution that literature makes to our understanding of ethical matters? On one account, the one that I have advanced and still believe, certain works of literature<sup>5</sup> are valuable allies of ethical theorizing, helping us understand issues having to do with moral perception and moral emotion in a way that we could not do well without turning to such texts. The nature of the understanding these literary works convey is non-neutral, inclining us toward some philosophical accounts of these

<sup>4</sup> See especially McDowell (1979); Wiggins (1975-1976).

<sup>5</sup> Here as elsewhere, I try to avoid any global claims about “literature” as such, or even “novels” as such; I speak only of a few works that I love, and others works that may share relevant properties with them.

matters and not others. Thus literature helps us get clearer about debated issues in ethical theory.

This account, which I shall call the “alliance” account, does not portray literature as valuable only to those who have an interest in ethical theory. For it holds that the specified literary works contribute to ethical theory, insofar as they do, by inviting the reader to perform ethically significant acts of perception and attention, acts that are themselves part of a well-lived ethical life. In that sense, such works also make a valuable contribution to the moral life more generally: both philosophers and non-philosophers will expand their moral sensibilities by accepting the invitations of such works to perception and, at times, to a merciful closing of the eyes. Thus one might on this account commend these literary works as morally valuable even when one is not studying or writing ethical theory – as a “cultivation of humanity” valuable for all citizens.<sup>6</sup> The “alliance” account, then, is not reductive: it does not make literature simply a handmaid of ethical theory. But it does preserve a valuable role for ethical theory in the moral life, and it sees theories of the better sort as providing insight that is actually quite helpful to the lover of literature herself, and a valuable aid to the type of moral cultivation she envisages. Thus the approach does not see literature as displacing the theoretical enterprise, and indeed is inclined to think of literature as in need of a partnership with theory, if the richest and best human insight is to be attained.

By now, however, the “alliance” approach has a rival. Some fine philosophers, while continuing in some sense to write as philosophers, have adopted an anti-theoretical posture in ethics, holding that the entire enterprise of doing ethical theory is seriously misguided, and a distraction from the important work we need to do when we try to think better about the moral life. To such anti-theorists, literature provides an alternative to ethical theory: an expansion and cultivation of the moral sensibilities (a) that we cannot derive from ethical theory at all, and (b) that we should prefer to, and substitute for, ethical theory. While (a) might be agreed to by the “alliance” camp, (b) would not be. The “adversarial” camp sees literature as offering us philosophers a challenge and a choice: go on doing things in the old theoretical way, or turn to literature and do things in an (allegedly) more adequate, rich, and humane way. Or perhaps even: end the bad old way, and then don’t do anything at all.

The “adversarial” posture is sometimes connected with a more all-out assault on philosophy as a whole, as it is in the writings of Richard Rorty,

<sup>6</sup> See my *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Nussbaum 1997), chapter 3; and *Poetic Justice: The Literary Imagination and Public Life* (Nussbaum 1996).

or, in a related way, the Wittgensteinian anti-theoretical writings of Cora Diamond. Sometimes, however, the position is advanced merely locally, as it would appear to be by Bernard Williams, who admits the relevance of philosophical theorizing in political thought and even in the law, while doubting its value in the personal ethical domain. Of course it is to some extent an accident that the anti-theorists on whose work this debate about ethical theory has focused are the ones who are currently active in professional philosophy; that very combination makes them, no doubt, anomalous. We should imagine that there are many others who share their anti-theoretical view who, for that very reason, did not go into professional philosophy in the first place, or who left it if they did.<sup>7</sup>

The debate between the two camps is bound up, clearly, with the whole debate between theory and anti-theory in philosophical ethics. Elsewhere I have described and in detail criticized the anti-theory approaches that have been most influential; I shall not rehearse those arguments here.<sup>8</sup> Instead I shall simply offer as clear a statement as I can of the claims of the “alliance” camp, try to identify where the “adversarial” camp departs from them in its suspiciousness of ethical theory, and, finally, reply to these criticisms on behalf of the “alliance” camp.<sup>9</sup>

### Theory and anti-theory

What, then, does the “alliance” camp claim about the contribution of certain novels to ethical theory? Sticking to my own claims, I begin with a rough story about what moral philosophy is and pursues, which I take to command broad, though not universal, agreement. At least, although this account is drawn from Aristotle, it commands the agreement not only of many Aristotelians in ethics, but also of some of the most prominent neo-Kantians (John Rawls), and Utilitarians (Henry Sidgwick).<sup>10</sup> This account

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<sup>7</sup> One example of such a person is Richard Posner, who has written extensively about literature, in connection with his dismissive writings about ethical theory: see his *The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory* (Posner 1999). For my own response to Posner on literature, see ‘Exactly and Responsibly: A Defense of Ethical Criticism’ (Nussbaum 1998 [a]) and for my response to his attack on ethical theory, see ‘Still Worthy of Praise: A Response to Richard A. Posner, *The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory*’ (Nussbaum 1998 [b]).

<sup>8</sup> See ‘Why Practice Needs Ethical Theory: Particularism, Perception, and Bad Behavior’ (Nussbaum 2000a); and also in Hooker & Little 2000. The authors I discuss on the anti-theory side include Williams, Baier, and Diamond.

<sup>9</sup> When I say “camp,” whom do I have in mind? Other “alliance” philosophers, I believe, are Richard Wollheim, Patrick Gardiner, and Iris Murdoch; the views of David Wiggins and John McDowell make them natural allies of this position, although they do not write directly about literature.



<sup>10</sup> See my remarks about justification in *Women and Human Development: The Capabilities Approach* (Nussbaum 2000b), chapter 2, discussing John Rawls's account of the procedure of scrutiny leading to reflective equilibrium in *A Theory of Justice* (Rawls 1971) and *Political*

holds that we begin ethical inquiry with our considered convictions and the theories that are known to us from our culture (and, as I would add, other cultures as well). Convictions and theories are, of course, not entirely separate: our convictions are informed (and often deformed) by theories, and theories are themselves built upon certain convictions. We then engage in a Socratic process, testing our considered convictions against the theories we encounter, and testing the theories against the convictions, seeking coherence and fit in our judgments taken as a whole. (But how much coherence and overall harmony we seek is itself an issue up for grabs inside the holistic process of sorting that I envisage.<sup>11</sup>) If we were following this procedure for political purposes, we would need to build in additional constraints about agreement; but I imagine for the present that we are following it in the domain of the personal ethical life. One of the most important things we must do, if we follow this process well, is to explore the major contending theories in their best versions – looking, for example, at Kant’s own complex version of his theory, rather than at some simplified or watered-down version of Kantianism,<sup>12</sup> Utilitarianism in the versions put forward by Mill and Sidgwick, rather than simplified versions on the contemporary scene.

I now argue that there is a distinctive type of ethical theory bequeathed to us by Aristotle, in which the items of ultimate value are held to be plural and non-commensurable by any single quantitative measure; in which the fine-tuned perception of particularity has a special place; in which the whole mode and course of life of the agent, and not merely isolated moments of choice, is the focus of the theory; and in which moral emotions are seen to make an important contribution to ethical understanding. In assessing the merits of this type of theory, given its particular stress on extended patterns of choice, and on vision and emotion as aspects of good choice, we probably cannot see all the merits of the theory by confining ourselves to abstract theoretical writings. We need to turn to works that show us in detail the ethical contribution of the inner life of vision, imagination, and emotion; that explore the lives of characters over time, and show the importance of traits of character that extend and develop over time. I argue that the novels of Henry James are among the texts that help us assess the merits of an Aristotelian theory because of the

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*Liberalism* (Rawls 1993); see also the more detailed discussion of Rawls in ‘Equilibrium: Skepticism and Immersion in Political Deliberation’ (Rawls 1999).

<sup>11</sup> See Richardson (1994) for an eloquent discussion of this issue.

<sup>12</sup> See the eEditors’ account of John Rawls’s own procedure in teaching and writing about the history of ethics in *Reclaiming the History of Ethics: Essays For John Rawls* (Reath, Herman

& Korsgaard 1998), and my review-article, 'Conversing With the Tradition: John Rawls and the History of Ethics' (Nussbaum 1999b).

way in which they display the merits of Aristotle's cryptic dictum that "the discernment rests with perception." Although the arguments in favor of perception that Aristotle, and Aristotelians such as Wiggins, McDowell, and Richardson, give us, point us in the right general direction, a close study of *The Golden Bowl* or *The Ambassadors* shows us far more clearly how difficult it is to do justice to all the complexities of an ethical situation, how indispensable, in such situations, are finely developed faculties of perception and feeling. Maggie Verver has no ethics manual telling her what is salient and what is not, how to "read" the people around her and how not. She must grope and "place"; she must be like an actress who has to improvise her role, or an acrobat on a high wire. This sense of the difficulty and danger of ethical vision is crucial to any ethical account that is going to put our moral lives on a good footing in a world where moral blindness and obtuseness are the reigning conditions of the spirit.

My contention is, then, that James is an ally of Aristotle and Aristotelians, helping us see why we may want to opt for an Aristotelian type of ethical theory. Any other type of theory, to hold its claim on us, will have to show that it can accommodate these insights, or show that they are not, after all, important insights. But my more general claim is that whether one is a Kantian, a Utilitarian, or an Aristotelian, provided that one thinks it is important to pursue ethical understanding in the dialectical way I have described (drawing on Rawls and Sidgwick), one has reason to incorporate novels into one's inquiry. Only in that way can one be fair to one of the contending views.

But at the same time, of course, such a claim of alliance does not subordinate James's text to Aristotle's, or see James as the mere working out of fine details in the larger enterprise of Aristotelian theory. For I claim that in reading and responding to a novel of James we are developing and exercising moral faculties of perception and emotion. The text in this way does not simply represent ethical deliberation, it incites it; and the reader's acts are valuable sorts of moral activity. Of course the moral activity is valuable only if moral activity is something like what Aristotle says it is: in this sense the theory always lurks in the background, in the form of moral commitments shared by Aristotle and James. A committed Utilitarian thus has no theory-independent reasons for turning to James's novels for ethical understanding; she will be likely to say, with Mr. Gradgrind, that all we find here is misunderstanding. Nonetheless, people who have no interest in ethical theory one way or another may find here good reasons to turn to the novels of James, reasons that are to some extent independent of their ever coming to have any interest in ethical theory. By at-

tending to, and, for a time, exemplifying, Maggie Verver's struggle to perceive accurately and responsibly – and her related recognition that love

requires us not to see too much – we exemplify virtues of astuteness, and of mercy, that we may then at least aim at in the more difficult (because biased) struggles of our own ethical lives.

If one has such a view of the moral faculties and their exercise, then one may well want to insist, as I have, that novels of the sort I analyze should be a big part of the education of citizens and public servants: for they both represent and cultivate moral activities of high value, activities that are too often simplified or debased by the pressures of a type of formal theorizing in economics or social policy. They preserve a sense of the humane spaciousness of the ethical life, and the plurality of the distinct ends it contains. Such ideas are fragile, in a time when the lure of science and pseudo-science makes ever more of our gifted young citizens turn toward theories that, while elegant, simplify and reduce human life. There is a natural alliance between my proposals for the role of literature and the arts in higher education (Nussbaum 1997: chapter 3) and the plural-valued approach to public policy making represented by the capabilities approach,<sup>13</sup> along with its close relatives, the Human Development Index.<sup>14</sup> It seems fair to say that much of the neo-Aristotelian work in ethics that takes an interest in literature is inspired by reaction against the ascendancy of reductive theory, especially normative theory deriving from economics.<sup>15</sup>

### **In dignity of being we ascend**

The “alliance” approach preserves, then, a sense that we are pursuing the best theory and trying to find one that best satisfies our considered convictions after we have worked through all the theoretical alternatives. The “adversarial” approach questions the value of this whole enterprise. It is at this point difficult to proceed, because each of these anti-theoretical thinkers is complex in his or her own right, and we cannot possibly investigate all the particular arguments. It would be especially difficult to grapple with the thought of Bernard Williams, given the complexity of his attack

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<sup>13</sup> See the discussion of capabilities in *Poetic Justice*, chapter 4 (Nussbaum 1996), and in *Women and Human Development* (Nussbaum 2000b), chapter 1.

<sup>14</sup> See the annual *Human Development Reports*, United Nations Development Programme, New York.

<sup>15</sup> This is a central motif in the work of Wiggins and Richardson; see also Richardson’s fine critique of cost-benefit analysis in the *Journal of Legal Studies* (Richardson 2000); and see

my 'The Costs of Tragedy: Some Moral Limits of Cost-Benefit Analysis', in the same issue  
(Nussbaum 2000c).

on ethical theory, and I shall not attempt this here.<sup>16</sup> Nor shall I engage directly with the views of Richard Rorty, who dismisses philosophical theorizing so globally, and on the basis of such general considerations, that it is difficult to relate what he says to my concerns about ethics and literature. Instead, I shall focus on the type of Wittgensteinian skepticism about ethical theory that I find in the writings of Cora Diamond, a particularly subtle and eloquent thinker about these matters, and one who has engaged in detail with the arguments of the “alliance” camp.<sup>17</sup>

First of all, Diamond points out that my own account of the enterprise of moral philosophy is disputed, and would not be accepted by all ethical theorists.<sup>18</sup> She gives some instructive examples of narrow and excessively rationalistic accounts of what moral philosophy includes, and she is right to say that such accounts have had a persistent influence on the subject, especially in twentieth century analytic philosophy. Often I feel that Diamond is so exercised at the deficiencies of her immediate generational predecessors, whether it be Frankena, or Ayer, or D. D. Raphael who is her target of the moment, that she neglects the greater breadth that is characteristic of most of the really distinguished thinkers on the subject, from Plato and Aristotle to Dewey and Rawls. I think her work suffers from its focus on inferior targets. I am happy to grant that the account I offer will be disputed by some narrow analytic philosophers; nonetheless, the fact that the account is acceptable to both Rawls and Sidgwick shows that I am making a case for the inclusion of literature that has a real (and distinguished) audience; and this is the audience whom I would hope to persuade.

Second, Diamond rightly points out that the disagreement about what ethical theory includes includes a deep disagreement about what ethics itself includes. “[W]e cannot see the moral interest of literature unless we recognize gestures, manners, habits, turns of speech, turns of thought, styles of face as morally expressive” (375), she writes. And if what may possibly bear ethical significance is itself in dispute, this makes my project of organizing the holistic scrutiny of theories and judgments much more difficult. Quite right; this terrain is disputed, and recognizing that it is disputed makes things more difficult. But not impossible, surely. One of the things that we must continually ask, as we work through the theories and

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<sup>16</sup> See my ‘Why Practice Needs Ethical Theory’ for a detailed engagement; and see also my defense of Aristotle’s theory against Williams’s charges, in ‘Aristotle on Human Nature and the Foundations of Ethics’ (Nussbaum 1995).

<sup>17</sup> See Diamond (1991), especially the essays ‘Anything But Argument?’ (291-308); ‘Missing the Adventure: Reply to Martha Nussbaum’ (309-318); and ‘Having a Rough Story about



What Moral Philosophy Is' (367-382). The last two were both responses to papers of mine, and represent close engagements with my arguments.

<sup>18</sup> See 'Having a Rough Story'.

compare them to our considered judgments, is what the most salient moral elements of our lives are; we must continually recognize that the theories differ about perceptions of salience, as well as about specific recommendations. But surely such distinguished members of my putative audience as Rawls and Sidgwick are perfectly aware of this difficulty, which is obvious enough once one begins to think about it. Aristotle already said as much: we all agree in a way that we are searching for *eudaimonia*, but as to what *eudaimonia* might possibly be and include, we have no agreement at all. Like Aristotle, I don't think this lack of agreement makes our work futile, though of course it makes it slippery.

One particular contention Diamond makes in this area, along with Iris Murdoch, is that many common styles of doing moral philosophy have no place for the type of adventure represented in Maggie Verver's struggle to see clearly: for they do not consider the effort to perceive well and describe truly to be a salient effort in the moral life.<sup>19</sup> They think it is obvious enough what the moral facts are; all we have to worry about is how to choose, given these facts. In a way, Diamond says, such philosophers are like obtuse people in real life, who simply don't understand how hard it is to see clearly (Diamond 1991: 316). But they are worse: for their obtuseness is "obtuseness on principle" (ibid.): they include in their accounts of moral rationality the conditions of such obtuseness, or rather they build into their accounts an impossibility of distinguishing between ordinary obtuseness and ordinary perceptiveness, by excluding from the terrain of moral rationality all the adventure of seeing and describing that Maggie so complexly exemplifies. Thus "philosophical blindness like Frankena's is blindness to such [viz. ordinary] blindness" (ibid., 317).

Once again: right. And there may be some distinguished philosophers who make a related error, though I think it is interesting that Kant almost certainly does not.<sup>20</sup> But we should not allow the fact that some people make this serious error to cause us to suggest, wrongly, that this error infects an entire discipline. It is not clear to what extent Diamond does mean to suggest this; as I say, her focus on inferior thinkers is a persistent difficulty for one who would pose this question to her text.

A further claim made by Diamond in her very interesting essay, "Anything But Argument?" is the claim that even the preference for rational argument as a mode of moral persuasion excludes much that the moral life contains. In particular, it excludes, once again, the role of love and

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<sup>19</sup> This is the argument of 'Missing the Adventure' (Diamond 1991: 309-318); Frankena is its primary target.

<sup>20</sup> See Barbara Herman, 'The Practice of Moral Judgment' (in Herman 1993 [which pages exactly??]).

cultivated attention in that life; and thus it excludes much of what an artist such as Charles Dickens might plausibly be said to contribute to it. The view that, as Wordsworth puts it, “We live by admiration and by love/And even as these are well and wisely fixed,/ In dignity of being we ascend” is a view that philosophers frequently fail to consider. It is, she says, all right for philosophers to dispute such claims. “But what is not all right is for philosophers to lay down exclusive ground rules for the discussion of moral issues in blithe unconsciousness that they are simply taking for granted and building into those rules a totally different view of morality and its relation to human nature” (307). In other words, the enterprise of philosophical reflection, if it is to be worthy of our respect, must include such views, must take them very seriously and explore them.

Absolutely. And it was with this idea in mind that I insisted that Henry James (or the analogue, to use an Aristotelian turn of phrase) was ineliminable from the enterprise of moral theorizing. But how much of the enterprise does this just observation call into question? In this case, Diamond’s choice of philosophical target causes even more difficulty than usual. For her negative example is Onora O’Neill, a gifted and subtle philosopher who surely does not hold an excessively narrow view of ethics, though perhaps she does not include everything that Diamond would wish. And Diamond attacks O’Neill for O’Neill’s critique of a book by Stephen Clark, *The Moral Status of Animals* [bibliografisch], in which O’Neill complains of a deficiency of argument in Clark’s appeals to our kinship with the animals. What makes things tricky here is that it is perfectly obvious that Clark is neither Dickens nor Henry James. The want of argument in Clark is not filled by a wonderful type of moral perception. He is recognizably a moral philosopher, writing academically in a conventional way; but he is just rather quirky and high-handed, and doesn’t particularly care to lay out his arguments. When I read Clark I am, like O’Neill, quite inclined to say, “Where are his arguments?” But this is not because I deny that moral philosophy includes “anything but argument”; it’s because argument is what I expect, and fail to get, from *Clark*. So if there is a deeper issue here – I think there is, and I shall raise it in the following section – it is difficult to extricate from the particularities of the example.

At most, then, Diamond has shown that literature’s special type of moral contribution has not been sufficiently recognized in some dominant approaches to moral theory; perhaps, even, than an excessive or disproportionate emphasis on argument in philosophy leads toward undervaluing this contribution. But again: if we look at the great moral theorists, we do not find such a disproportionate emphasis. In fact, if Kant and Hume and

Aquinas and Mill and Aristotle are great, as they are, it is not because they lay out their arguments with the tedious explicitness of undergraduate

teachers of philosophy (and writers aiming at those undergraduates).<sup>21</sup> Moreover, they include many appeals to the moral sensibilities that are very difficult to capture in any formalizing of their arguments, as anyone who tries to do that quickly discovers.

One argument suggested by Diamond carries us further: but it is not clear that she endorses it. In ‘Having a Rough Story’, Diamond quotes literary theorist Wolfgang Iser, who remarks that the fluidity of the moral life is well captured in works of literature, and that literature’s depiction of that fluidity shows us the inadequacy of all systematic accounts of the moral life (Diamond 1991: 369). Once again, this does not exactly show us that theory is without value: for it might be valuable and yet incomplete. But it does offer a consideration that makes the “alliance” I propose a tricky and unstable one, suggesting, as it does, that all theory may as such be distorting of something that literature accurately conveys. I do not know whether Diamond endorses Iser’s view; it simply is not clear from her text. What I would say about Iser’s contention is that any good moral theory ought to build in just as much difficulty, obscurity, and mystery as a good account of life gives us: that, indeed, is one of the reasons for which I so value James’s contribution. In my view, however, a good account of life does not give us a degree of those properties that makes all system inherently distorting. It is always good to recall that all ways of “putting” things (literary, I’d say, as well as philosophical) involve the imposing of form on experiences that are typically, in life, far less shapely. (To demonstrate this, against standard literary works, is Beckett’s remarkable contribution.) But I see no reason why that should undermine the claim of art, whether literary or philosophical, to illuminate our lives.

### **A deep philosophical engagement with literature**

Diamond gives us, then, some reasons to reject narrow ways of characterizing what ethical theory is all about, and also reasons to reject the narrow pursuits of some contemporary or near-contemporary ethical theorists. But I do not see in her essays any reasons for what seems to be a larger air of skepticism about ethical theory that suffuses her work. So far, it seems possible that the skepticism is really not more than irritation with her immediate predecessors.

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<sup>21</sup> Interestingly, this is true even of philosophers who are especially famous for the formal character of their arguments. The late Roderick Chisholm, for example, frequently passed on to his students, typically, the narrow tedious method of definition and counter-example – and

not his remarkable metaphysical imagination and historical insight. But it was these qualities that made him distinguished, as we can see if we compare him with these epigones.

Suppose, however, we try to press harder on Diamond's behalf, saying that the friend of fine awareness and cultivated perception should have no further need for theory. If we can cultivate our moral faculties, both understanding the importance of and developing certain types of fine attention through our interactions with Henry James and Dickens, why should we need as well works of ethical theory? What more do they contribute, and why aren't they simply poor drab versions of what novels vividly supply? Let us try to revive the "antagonist" view in this form, saying that literary and philosophical works compete to do the same thing, enlarging the moral faculties: only the literary works do it much better. What can the defender of "alliance" say on behalf of the necessity of theory?

First of all, we notice that for Diamond as for me, the propositions regarding moral perception and the moral relevance of the inner world that lead us both to literature are controversial propositions. Diamond says that she has no quarrel with philosophers who dispute them; I insist that a good dialectical process of scrutiny *ought to* dispute them. But to dispute them and sift them fully, we ought to turn to theories that do not build in the same place for them that an Aristotelian theory would. Even if it should be granted that we could grasp the Aristotelian theory sufficiently through reading James – and, as we shall see, I shall not grant this – we would still need to study Kant, and Bentham, and Aquinas, and many others, in order to get clear about where we are. And for these theorists, the novels of James do not figure as allies as they do (so I claim) for Aristotle. Of course when we look at Bentham's theory one of the things we will ask is whether he can account for the insights we have found in James; but Bentham might also cause us to dispute those insights, if we are attached enough to the type of impartialism that his form of utilitarianism brings with it. We don't want to foreclose this possibility prematurely.

Second, we cannot fully understand James's own contribution, I contend, without setting it in such a dialectical context.<sup>22</sup> We might be dimly aware that James is no Utilitarian; but only the explicitness of theorizing will permit us to state with full clarity the extent of his disagreement with forms of Utilitarian thought that currently dominate much of our public life. So we would not get the most out of our reading of James if we did not have explicit theorizing – both Aristotelian and Utilitarian – to argue the issues of incommensurability and the plurality of value. Theory gives us something we can hold onto and go to bat for; simply reading James gives us the general impression that our public life might possibly be lacking something.



<sup>22</sup> See my *Love's Knowledge* (Nussbaum 1990), especially 'Love's Knowledge' and 'Perceptive Equilibrium'.

Third, and closely related, we cannot hope to improve the sadly reduced state of our public and to some extent personal discourse without explicit theory, because theory is there already in our lives, in the form of crude perceptions deriving from economic thought and other less scientific forms of popular thought (astrology, new age religion, patriarchal sexism, and many others). The mistake Wittgensteinians sometimes make is to suppose that ordinary life is theory-free, and then philosophy comes along bearing theory. Take the theory away, the suggestion is, and we are left with fine-tuned everyday judgments. Not at all: ordinary “thinking” is a tissue of half-baked theories, whether they come from convention or from religion or from pseudo-science. We need to make the counter-theory explicit if we are to show up the inadequacy inherent in these crude and reductive theories. This is a strategic point: an elegant reading of *The Golden Bowl* won’t go down well at the World Bank, without some theoretical commentary telling us why we need it. But it is also a point of principle: we don’t have a correct account of the relationship of philosophy to ordinary life until we understand that ordinary life is crudely theoretical through and through, and that fine-tuned perception is an achievement, not a default position. This achievement needs theoretical allies, allies who will state clearly and unambiguously the loss in human value that comes of reducing all values to a single value, and who will try to show connections between this bad mode of valuation and an exploitative attitude to people. All this is in Dickens – in a way. But one could read Dickens for enjoyment and miss it completely. We need the theoretical ally to help the literary imagination prevail over what James called “the constant force that makes for muddlement.”

Fourth, and this is in some ways the most important of all, ordinary experience is often profoundly corrupt. Literature can help us to understand some of these corruptions; but it can also aid and abet them. Literary works can, as Diamond shows, help us see humanity where we had previously not seen it; but other literary works can lead us to deny humanity where we had previously seen it. Because Diamond and I focus on James and Dickens, this point can easily be missed. But the point is that to select among the literary works that compete for our attention we need to have some theoretical principles – even inchoate ones that we shall test against the work as well as testing the work by them – because we must be ready to criticize what we love. Our loves are not enough by themselves, because our loves are infected – by racism and sexism, by a disdain for animals and nature, and so forth. For every person who embraces the men-

tally handicapped because she has read Faulkner or Dickens, there will be dozens who will embrace crude stereotypes of the mentally handicapped

in other works of fiction, and be reinforced in their obtuseness. So we need good ethical theory as a partner to our reading, so that we will read critically and not passively.

A critical ethical theory will do little for us if we are corrupt through and through. (So much is also true of novels.) But even if we have basically good characters, we may easily diverge from our best selves when our own interests are at stake, indulging in a type of special pleading and rationalizing that the call to consistency inherent in good philosophical argument can at least help to unmask. Kant put it this way, defending the importance of ethical theory even when ordinary moral understanding is reasonably good:

Innocence is indeed a glorious thing; but, unfortunately, it does not keep very well and is easily led astray. Consequently, even wisdom – which consists more in doing and not doing than in knowing – needs science, not in order to learn from it, but in order that wisdom’s precepts may gain acceptance and permanence...Thus is ordinary human reason forced to go outside its sphere and take a step into the field of practical philosophy, not by any need for speculation (which never befalls such reason so long as it is content to be mere sound reason) but on practical grounds themselves...Thus when ordinary practical reason cultivates itself, there imperceptibly arises in it a dialectic which compels it to seek help in philosophy. (Groundwork, Akad. p. 405, trans. Ellington)

What Kant is saying is that ordinary judgment can frequently become baffled by the claims of self-regard. For this reason, ordinary judgment reaches beyond itself to seek the help of philosophy, asking to have the good thoughts laid out perspicuously and systematically, so that it will be clear ahead of time exactly what they entail in the different areas of life. This way we steal a march on ourselves, building up bulwarks in thought against our all-too-pressing tendencies to slight the dignity of others. We get something to cling to, to look to when we are tempted. From theories that connect and systematize the good thoughts, ordinary judgment, Kant concludes, derives “information and clear instruction regarding the source of its own principles...so that reason may escape from the perplexity of opposite claims and may avoid the risk of losing all genuine moral principles through the ambiguity into which it easily falls.”

How does theory do this? First, it makes the good thoughts clearer and more explicit, so we can’t delude ourselves into thinking, say, that asking for sexual favors in the workplace is really compatible with equal treatment. Kant thinks, plausibly, that self-deception is frequently in-

volved in bad behavior, and that theory's clarity cuts like a knife through that sort of error. Second, it gives us an account of error itself, showing us

what our habits and conventions are and how they might incorporate bad cultural material, or other types of bad tendencies. It shows us what we have to watch out for in ourselves. Finally, it pursues the good thoughts into areas we might not have thought about much; if we've thought about human dignity but not about foreigners and what they deserve, a good theory will force us to ask this question, connecting one thought with another. In this way too it puts us on our guard against our own selfish tendencies.

This is extremely important to the argument between Diamond and O'Neill. For O'Neill's work, throughout her career, has concerned the needs and dignity of distant human beings, human beings whom we are in the habit of slighting in our ordinary moral decision-making. I think that O'Neill wants to say that we cannot simply rely on our imaginations at this point, because imagination is all too likely to be corrupt; in particular, it is likely to be particularistic, linking us to our own context and distancing us from what we have not seen. For this reason, we need a theory of universal human dignity that will give us an account of the basis of our moral obligations, putting us on our guard against the unevenness of our everyday judgments. When we move from recognition of distant humans to the recognition of moral obligations to other species, we need some further account of what the basis of those obligations is: an account, for example, of our common sentience and our shared capacities for many types of valuable life-activity. She fears that Clark, lacking this, will lack a crucial component in the expansion of the moral sensibilities. To this Diamond replies, reasonably enough, that sometimes a novel can in fact get us to consider the distant with an expanded moral sensibility. On behalf of O'Neill, however, I would now respond that novels too are uneven in their attention; we usually are drawn to characters like ourselves, and we can easily be led to neglect the claims of those who seem unlike ourselves. Moreover, the novel is itself a relatively parochial cultural form; it is not clear that it is ideally suited to nourish an equal regard for all human life. So at the very least novels need theories as allies, telling us the basis of our concern and criticizing an uneven regard.

One device theory uses in pursuit of this project is that of estrangement or defamiliarization. Our judgments frequently feel so natural to us that it is hard for us to doubt them. And of course these intuitions are one part of the data that good theory will take seriously. But by asking us to look at the logical form of our judgments, and by urging us to describe them in an unfamiliar theoretical language, theory offers us a perspective on them that can be very valuable as we ask to what extent we have been

engaging in self-interested rationalization. Just as Brecht famously urged the theatrical spectator to suspend identification with the theatrical charac-

ters and their lives, in order to scrutinize the represented situation from a critical practical perspective, so good philosophy often gets us to do this with ourselves and our own lives. We look at the overall form of our judgments in ways we frequently don't, and we use the unfamiliar language of "the kingdom of ends" or "the categorical imperative" to test reactions we usually don't even scrutinize. Often this can help us overcome our tendency to rationalize by getting us to see relationships that had eluded us in our daily thinking. Thus the very detachment and remoteness in theory that anti-theorists find problematic can serve a valuable practical function. Diamond is surely right to think that this sort of de-familiarization should not be pushed to excess, and that more immersed and intuitive descriptions are also important. One good way of getting those more immersed descriptions while still maintaining a wise distance from our own immediate situation is, in fact, the turn to literature that Diamond recommends. But we should see that even what strikes us as cold and forbidding in Socrates, or Aristotle, or Kant may be of significant practical value.

Finally, we may point out that often our practical deliberations have a political dimension. In the political realm we need explicit theories, so that we can debate them and see where all citizens stand with regard to them. That is part of what it is to respect one's fellow citizens: to be willing to lay out the grounds of one's judgment before them.

All in all, then, though I believe that Diamond and the other anti-theorists have made some excellent arguments on behalf of a deep philosophical engagement with literature, I think that her stronger arguments support the alliance position, not the adversarial position. I see no reason to accept the adversarial position, and a number of very strong reasons why we should not do so. Maggie's vision, and her buried face, should continue to haunt our imaginations; but theory, too, has a valuable role to play in our ethical lives.

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