

Make-Believe Spelunking: The Influence of Fiction on Ethical Development in *Outline* and *Gilead*

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ABSTRACT

To what extent, and in what ways, is it possible for works of fiction to influence their readers' ethical development? In this essay, I explore different answers to this *descriptive* question in philosophy and literary studies. I dub a view shared by Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum as the attention account: that great works of fiction can influence their reader's ethical development by compelling them to cultivate ethically charged attention. I then evaluate Joshua Landy's criticism of this account and his alternative, which I dub the clarification account: that works of fiction can influence their reader's ethical development by helping them clarify their core ethical commitments. I argue that neither the attention account nor the invitation account describes the one and only way in which works of fiction can influence their readers' ethical development. I then ask a *normative* question: what ways in which works of fiction can influence our ethical development should we embrace? Drawing on Kendall Walton's make-believe model of fictional experience, I develop an account of a third way in which works of fiction can influence their readers' ethical development, which I call the invitation account: works of fiction can influence their readers' ethical development by inviting them to unseat and positively revise their ethical commitments. I make the case for the invitation account by using it to analyze two contemporary novels, Rachel Cusk's *Outline* and Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*. I argue that the process described by the invitation account—that is, the way of invitation—is one we should embrace.

Introduction

To what extent, and in what ways, is it possible for works of fiction to influence their readers' ethical development? In this essay, I explore different answers to this question in philosophy and literary studies. I identify and evaluate three accounts of ways in which works of fiction can influence the ethical development of their readers, which I dub the attention account, the clarification account, and

the invitation account. In (I), I outline the attention account, a view shared by Iris Murdoch and Martha Nussbaum. In (II), I explain Joshua Landy's critique of the attention account and sketch out his opposing view, the clarification account. In (III), I evaluate Landy's critique. I suggest that modest versions of the attention account and the clarification account are plausible and compatible, but that we—that is, human beings who are moral agents and readers of fiction—should not rely on the modes of ethical development

they describe. In (IV), I develop an account of a third way in which works of fiction can influence their readers' ethical development, which I call the invitation account. In (V), I turn to literary analysis of two widely acclaimed contemporary novels—Rachel Cusk's *Outline* and Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*—as proof of concept. I show how these novels embed instructions for reading them that invite their readers to unseat and revise their ethical commitments, a process that my invitation account aptly describes. As these case studies show, I discuss in the conclusion, my account plausibly describes a way in which works of fiction can influence our ethical development that we should embrace.

I

Murdoch argues that reading literature draws the reader's mind out of the self and into the real world. Since we human beings tend to be overwhelmingly selfish and self-deceptive, Murdoch claims, we must continually battle the vicious forces in our psyches by practicing a sort of ethically charged attention to reality. Reading great literature enacts this sort of attention, Murdoch argues, as it compels us to leave behind our egos and see the remarkable details of the world and other human beings with what she calls a 'just and loving gaze.' As Murdoch has it, great works of fiction can thus be marshalled in the battle against our vices, particularly obtuseness, and help us approach the light of 'the Good.'¹ In a similar vein, Nussbaum contends that great works of fiction themselves demonstrate the nuances of human life, capturing in words the minute, intimate, and delicate situational factors that moral agents must perceive and consider. For this reason, Nussbaum argues, reading great literature attunes us to attend to the complex moral dynamics of human life that the world's detail reveals.² Murdoch and Nussbaum share the basic view I now identify as the attention account: that great works of fiction can influence their readers' ethical development by compelling them to take up, practice, and cultivate an attitude of ethically charged attention to the world's particularities.

II

Landy takes aim at Nussbaum, in particular, and argues against the attention account on two counts. First, he disputes the claim that works of fiction, no matter how great, can *compel* readers to adopt this or that attitude, as it seems perfectly possible for some stone-cold readers to dive into pathos-laden literature and emerge unmoved. Second, he contends that, even if works of fiction were able to compel us to take up an attitude of attention while reading, we have no reason to think we would be bound to maintain this attitude after closing our books. On the contrary, Landy objects, surely people can read great literature and still be complacent elites—if not villains or boors—in their daily lives. Landy does not deny that reading fiction can fine-tune our ethical-attentional capacities; rather, he denies that this process can be involuntary. Instead, he holds that we can achieve such effects in reading works of fiction only insofar as we aim to achieve them. But normally, Landy posits, fiction influences our ethical development by a different route: When we read works of fiction, we react instinctively to the characters and their actions. Our ethical intuitions are exposed by these gut reactions, he contends, and hence we can more clearly see just what those intuitions are. Taken together, Landy's clarification account holds that works of fiction can influence their reader's ethical development by exposing their ethical intuitions and thereby helping them clarify their core ethical commitments.³

III

Landy's critique only refutes an implausibly ambitious version of the attention account: that reading great fiction will *always* involuntarily influence one's actual ethical attitude. But it is not clear that either Murdoch or Nussbaum endorses this ambitious, universal claim. To be charitable to them, and to the general type of view I identify as theirs, we should read the attention account as a more modest claim, one less ambitious and more restricted in scope: that reading great fiction can *sometimes* involuntarily influence one's actual ethical attitude. Landy's critique does

not refute this more plausible version of the attention account. It could be the case that reading a great work of fiction would involuntarily influence the actual ethical attitude of one reader but not another, or would have such an effect on a given reader under some conditions and not others. Landy's converse universal claim—that fiction can *never* involuntarily influence one's actual ethical attitude—is as ambitious as the view he ascribes to Nussbaum, and as implausible. If it were true, then fiction would never play a formative role in children's unconscious ethical development, and no one would ever unexpectedly find their outlook on life altered after engaging with a fictional narrative. On the contrary, it seems plausible that fiction can surprise us or move us in ways that shape or challenge our ethical commitments, even without us intending such effects. Admittedly, this is an empirical claim made from the armchair (instead of the lab or the field). But it is enough to show that Landy's far more ambitious armchair empirical claim—that fiction can never involuntarily influence one's ethical attitude—is *prima facie* implausible.

Now, Landy does little to support the clarification account beyond presenting it as a plausible alternative to the attention account. But, we have no reason to assume at the outset that these two accounts exhaust our options. So, even if one is mistaken, the other is not necessarily correct. Moreover, the more modest version of the attention account is compatible with a relatively modest version of the clarification account: that the way of clarification, as it were (namely, the process of helping readers clarify their core ethical commitments by exposing their ethical intuitions) is not the *only* way in which works of fiction can influence their readers' ethical development, but one way among multiple. This relatively modest version of the clarification account is plausible, to my mind, as fictional experience does seem to expose our ethical intuitions—prompting us to praise or blame certain characters, rejoice or mourn at certain events, and so on—and thereby give us occasion for reflection. But that's neither here nor there: what I want to do now is explore what questions persist even if the plausible, modest,

compatible versions of the views I have identified are all correct. So, let's suppose that works of fiction can influence their readers' ethical development by clarifying their ethical commitments or by cultivating their ethical-attentional capacities, either voluntarily or involuntarily. Now what? Well, then we should see the attention account and clarification account not as master-theories, but as accounts of different possible ways in which works of fiction can influence their readers' ethical development. The way of attention and the way of clarification—the processes described by the accounts described above—are ways we may either embrace or deplore, and ways which may not exhaust the field. As such, I want to turn to a new question: what ways in which works of fiction can influence their readers' ethical development should we embrace?

For starters, should we embrace the way of attention (i.e., the process described by the attention account), or should we deplore it? Here, on this normative question, is where Landy's critique finds greater purchase. His opposition to Nussbaum's view seems motivated by a well-placed concern about a not-so-hypothetical culture of reading that enthusiastically endorses the attention account: a concern that we should not predominantly rely on novels, of all things, to form our ethical commitments and take care of our ethical development.⁴ Indeed, where do we fit, as deliberative agents, into such a picture of moral psychology? If we look to fiction (even the great literature Murdoch and Nussbaum admire), in the main, to tell us what is right and good, then we risk eschewing authentic, careful deliberation about our values. If we look to fiction for a low-effort means of ethical development, then we risk eschewing moral responsibility for our character traits. If novels take the place of moral deliberation and deliberate effort, then human beings will become mere *moral wantons*, as Landy provocatively puts it, people “easily swayed by one-well meaning but unnuanced value judgement to the next,” rather than functioning moral agents.⁵

Of course, this concern is not a reason to think the attention account is false. Rather, it is a reason to

avoid embracing the process it describes (i.e., the way of attention) to the exclusion of further, active modes of value formation and character development. Now, if we should beware moral wantonness and thus deplore the way of attention, at least if writ large, should we instead embrace the way of clarification? It is not so clear we should. Beware moral wantonness, yes, but beware moral stasis too. If we look to fiction merely to help us figure ourselves out, we lose what remains attractive in Murdoch's transformative ideal, in spite of the way of attention's practical pitfalls: that great literature can change us, unexpectedly, by drawing us away from the ego and toward things beyond ourselves that are authentic, beautiful, and good. What we need to do, I suggest, is identify another way in which fiction can influence our ethical development, one which incorporates the attractive features of both the way of attention and the way of clarification. An account of this third way will not amount to an exclusive master-theory of fiction's role in our ethical lives. Rather, it will be an account of one among various ways in which fiction can influence our ethical development, but one we should embrace rather than fear or deplore.

IV

I propose that works of fiction can furnish their readers with instructions, so to speak, for how to appropriately engage with them: instructions that clue in readers to what ethical commitments they should imagine themselves having while living in a given work of fiction's make-believe world. By impressing alternative outlooks onto their minds, works of fiction can invite their readers to carry these ethical commitments into their actual lives. I borrow the expression "make-believe" from Kendall Walton, who construes experiencing fiction as entertaining two different games of make-believe: the game of the fictional world itself and a game in which we, the reader, participate in that world. Playing both games at once, in Walton's model, we can keep one foot out of the fictional world and one foot in, going about our lives while playing pretend that the fictional world is real and that we play a role

in it.⁶ Now, Walton's make-believe model of fictional experience is ultimately a metaphor which I find helpful in describing a familiar fact: that we respond emotionally and evaluatively to fictional events and characters as if they were real. With that in mind, I use "make-believe" merely to refer to a reader's state of mind when they respond to fiction as if it were real. (If you balk at talk of make-believe, simply swap in your preferred metaphor.) Such a state of mind, I suggest, is one in which we can imagine certain things to be true, right, good, or beautiful that we judge differently in actual fact. Walton does not go this far, claiming we are peculiarly inflexible in adjusting our values even within make-believe games.⁷ But this claim is unsubstantiated, and experience speaks against it: movie-goers make-believely endorse the attitudes and actions of renegade heroes like superheroes or rebellious youth, it seems, even when they would decry them in actual fact. Such cases evince that, while playing make-believe with literature, we can imagine ourselves having some ethical commitments different from our own while not going so far as to adopt them outside of the make-believe realm of fiction.

What I want to suggest is that, if we hold our make-believe commitments in steady tension, we can try on the worldview expressed by a fictional narrative—that is, the narrator's implicit set of beliefs, dispositions, preoccupations, values, and attitudes—but can take it or leave it when we stop playing make-believe. To elaborate on my earlier claim, successful works of fiction provide the reader with instructions for what worldview to take up, indicators of the worldview the narrative expresses. The instructions I have in mind can be anything from references to other texts that inform the narrator's outlook to digressive vignettes or recollections that signal or rehearse the ethical commitments that a given work of fiction expects of its reader. By incorporating clues like these, a work of fiction can point to what ethical commitments we should make-believely adopt in order to emotionally appreciate it as a coherent narrative. If we follow the work of fiction's instructions, taking up its ethical commitments and thereby appreciating its narrative design, we can end up with reason to unseat our

own worldview: reason to question aspects of our worldview in light of the alternative commitments the narrative expresses, and perhaps even reason to adopt some of the latter. If the work of fiction's worldview has ethical commitments which improve upon our own, then it can influence our ethical development by inviting us to adopt improved ethical commitments, first make-believable through its instructions, then—if we so choose—further into our actual lives. Taken together, the story I have developed here is what I label the invitation account: works of fiction can influence their reader's ethical development by inviting them to unseat and (positively) revise their ethical commitments in light of alternatives they entertain while make-believable engaging with a fictional world. Works of fiction present readers with such invitations by offering them instructions for entertaining certain ethical commitments. These instructions are embedded in the text in the form of descriptive details, allusions, vignettes, recollections, and the like that articulate the worldview the narrative expresses.

V

Why should we find my invitation account plausible? Because, simply put, it helps us understand literature. Why should we embrace the way of invitation, so to speak, that it articulates? Because this is a way in which literature can influence our ethical development while avoiding the pitfalls of moral wantonness and moral stasis. This much will become clear, I expect, by applying the invitation account to examples of literary fiction. My case studies are two widely acclaimed contemporary novels, Rachel Cusk's *Outline* and Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead*, which serve as compelling but contrasting proofs-of-concept for the invitation account. In what follows, I show how each novel provides the reader with instructions for ethical perspective-taking in the way I have described. *Outline* tracks a series of ten conversations the enigmatic narrator Faye has with people she encounters on a trip to teach a creative writing course in Athens. As Faye questions them, the characters retrace and reinterpret fallouts in their lives and relationships.

Gilead consists of letters Reverend John Ames writes as he approaches the end of his life, letters he intends his young son to read when he comes of age. As the novel progresses, Ames's letters become increasingly preoccupied with the return home of his wayward godson, John Ames "Jack" Boughton, and Ames's quandaries in responding to him. Why these novels are compelling, I suggest, largely comes down to how they invite us to revise our ethical commitments.

Outline, I contend, invites the reader to adopt an outlook of engaged skepticism—skepticism in the sense of a doubting, but not necessarily hostile attitude towards the actions and claims of others. First, the novel employs vignettes to instruct the reader to second-guess the tidy life-narratives of others. Right from the get-go, Faye judges a billionaire's erratic, distracted behaviour as rendering him "a child with too many Christmas presents" rather than "the relaxed, well-heeled man" he presents in his life-story. Faye finds it "difficult to assimilate everything [she] is being told" and thus swiftly casts the billionaire out of her—and the reader's—attention.⁸ Further vignettes and recollections strengthen this effect. In talking to fellow teacher Ryan, for instance, Faye briefly recollects a time she saw a woman appraise attractive girls with her husband but betray her unease with a private "grimace of utter desperation."⁹ This memory undercuts Ryan's defense of his own wandering eye, thereby encouraging the reader to test Faye's interlocutors' claims against their own experiences. A final vignette echoes the first: playwright Anne relates her revealing conversation with a stranger on a plane, in which (in contrast to Faye's own rambling dialogue with her unnamed seat partner on her flight to Athens) the stranger went silent and obstinately "seated himself in his own view of life,"¹⁰ revealing another spurious life outline.

Outline's descriptive details instruct the reader to bolster their skeptical outlook by adopting an attitude of estrangement from others. Faye describes her neighbour on the plane as a portrait, as if his formal English "had been applied to him carefully with a brush, like paint."¹¹ Ryan she describes as be-

ing “put together out of unrelated elements, so that the different parts of him didn’t entirely go together.”¹² Indeed, Ryan himself affirms the “feeling of estrangement from his own body” he had felt in his home country of Ireland,¹³ confirming the enduring accuracy of Faye’s imagery. The plane neighbour turns out shorter and wider than Faye had supposed, and she finds it “difficult... to integrate these dimensions with his character,”¹⁴ signalling that the reader should not pin down people in their mind too quickly or easily. The plane neighbour later transforms into a “prehistoric creature” in Faye’s mind, “his claw-like hands with their white fur fumb[ling] at [her] shoulders”¹⁵ as he deludes himself into making an advance on her, thereby becoming “something about which [Faye] could feel only absolute ambivalence.”¹⁶ All told, *Outline* positions Faye’s interlocutors as alien specimens ripe for the reader’s scrutiny, objects of study compromised by artifice and deception. In doing so, the novel indicts human beings who refuse to acknowledge the fallibility, fragility, and internal disorder of their lives and personalities. It thereby instructs the reader to adopt, and invites them to maintain, a provocative ethical commitment: that we should survey the human world with resolutely dispassionate skepticism.

In contrast to Faye’s ambivalence, *Gilead*’s John Ames lovingly pores over the world’s particularities. He beckons the reader out of their ego and into an outlook of grace, one of human goodwill reflecting divine goodwill. *Gilead*’s instructions come largely by way of intertextuality, as Ames references the books that have shaped his worldview, particularly Scripture and the works of Feuerbach. Early on, he compares his and his father’s journey through the countryside to “Abraham and Isaac on the way to Mount Moriah,”¹⁷ clueing us into *Gilead*’s parallels with Biblical narratives, particularly those stories (often of fathers and sons) that resist tidy interpretation. By introducing Feuerbach, Ames underwrites his own attitude of joyful appreciation of life, as Feuerbach “is about as good on the joyful aspects of religion as anybody, and he loves the world.”¹⁸ Ames’s “mention of Feuerbach and joy” prompts him to assert that

“[t]his is an interesting planet [that] deserves all the attention you can give it,”¹⁹ a remark through which the novel instructs us to give its world due attention. Indeed, in a later sermon Ames wants to “talk about the gift of physical particularity”²⁰ by discussing two Scriptural passages that highlight God’s grace even as human beings struggle with him: the stories of the Sacrament in Mark 14:22 and of Jacob wrestling with the angel in Genesis 32:23-32. The similarly bleak story of Hagar and Ishmael, Ames suggests, “seems like a specific moment of divine Providence.”²¹ Through allusions like these, *Gilead* signals to the reader that, to appreciatively inhabit Ames’s perspective, they should make-believedly adopt a worldview in which the ethical life involves continually striving to be worthy of the grace human beings have been given in the gift of life itself.

Like *Outline*, *Gilead* is dense with vignettes and recollections that clue in the reader to the key conflicts of its narrative. Within the first few pages, Ames recalls how he once burnt up a letter from his father, an act he sees as an example of how “too much anger, too often or at the wrong time, can destroy more than you would ever imagine.” Ames warns his son—and us—about his failure to “control [his] temper.”²² He swiftly starts into a story of his and his father’s search for the grave of his estranged paternal grandfather, which signals that the ultimate tragedy of this narrative would be for a father figure and a son figure to “never [have] any reconciliation between them in this life.”²³ The moral danger of anger and violence is affirmed by another memory, that of a sermon Ames scrapped during the Spanish influenza in which he had planned to warn against “the Lord’s judgement when we decide to hammer our plowshares into swords.”²⁴ Another old story, that of an abolitionist town whose tunnel collapsed, highlights another key ethical commitment of Ames’s worldview: that we should cultivate a conciliatory appreciation of human folly, as “[e]ven thoughtful people have lapses of judgement from time to time.”²⁵ If the reader takes the novel’s cue here, they will find themselves well-positioned to appreciate Jack’s folly. And, living in Ames’s frame of mind, as *Gilead*’s vignettes and recollections instruct, they will

be disposed to rejoice when Ames overcomes his abiding anger towards Jack, offers him his blessing, and finally “love[s] him as much as [Jack’s father] meant [him] to.”²⁶ *Gilead* invites the reader to eschew anger and embrace compassion in their actual life, as hard as doing so may be.

Conclusion

My readings of these novels identify what holds each one together as a coherent narrative: that it instructs the reader to take up its narrator’s worldview. The reader must join Faye in studying her interlocutors with engaged suspicion in order to see a common thread among the ten disconnected conversations that comprise *Outline*’s plot. Likewise, the reader must see extending grace to Jack as Ames’s moral duty in order to register him finally blessing Jack as a moral triumph and *Gilead*’s denouement. The power of these novels rests on their vignettes, recollections, descriptive details, and intertextual allusions, which figure as instructions to entertain a distinctive outlook while playing make-believe in the novel’s world: an outlook of skepticism in one case and grace in the other. In this way, Cusk’s *Outline* and Robinson’s *Gilead* provide the reader with standing invitations to adopt a novel outlook on their everyday experience as well.

As this discussion shows, my invitation account helps us understand literature: it identifies what features may explain the aesthetic success of some works of fiction. This gives us good reason to find my account plausible. Moreover, the process I have sketched (i.e., the way of invitation) is more attractive than those glossed by the attention account and the clarification account. It captures Landy’s concern that we should take the reins of fiction’s influence on our ethical development: we are not condemned to be moral wantons, even if we opt to read great literature, for we can decline a work of fiction’s invitation to revise our ethical commitments. Yet it also captures Murdoch and Nussbaum’s hope that fiction can move us in unexpectedly transformative ways: we need not wind up in moral stasis, for we can find

ourselves experimenting with untested worldviews in fiction’s lab of make-believe. For these reasons, the way of invitation is one we should confidently embrace. Novels like *Outline* and *Gilead* influence the ethical development of their readers by inviting them to unseat and revise their ethical commitments in light of radical alternatives that the narrative has instructed them to entertain. In this way, fiction has the power to unmoor us from our default attitudes and send us out into a sea of uncharted worldviews. This may not be the only way in which fiction can influence our ethical development, but it is an enticing one. Why? Because it offers us opportunities for personal change which, to use a Platonist metaphor Murdoch would have liked, may prove to be ladders out of ignorance’s cave.

Notes

1. Iris Murdoch, "The Sovereignty of Good over Other Concepts," in *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 76-86. Murdoch borrows the idea of the Good as a transcendent master-concept from Plato, her hero. I note a tangential connection for the interest of the reader: Murdoch's Platonist account of the ethical function of fiction has striking parallels with the ancient Chinese philosopher Xunzi's theory of ritual and music. For Xunzi, participating in the classical social customs and performances of the fallen Zhou dynasty helps us overcome the recalcitrant viciousness of our basic human nature and harmonize with the reality of Heaven instead. See Xun Kuang, *Xunzi: The Complete Text*, trans. Eric L. Hutton (Princeton: Princeton University Press), especially Chapters 19 and 20.
2. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible": Literature and the Moral Imagination," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 139-158. Nussbaum also suggests that literature should be considered a branch of moral philosophy inasmuch as it thinks through the question of how we ought to live, and that for this reason literary theory and ethical theory should join forces. This intriguing proposal is conceptually distinct from the attention account, and in fact it aligns well with the invitation account I sketch out here. See Martha C. Nussbaum, "Perceptive Equilibrium: Literary Theory and Ethical Theory," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 159-185.
3. Joshua Landy, "Chaucer: Ambiguity and Ethics," in *How to Do Things with Fictions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 44-52.
4. Landy, "Chaucer: Ambiguity and Ethics," 1, 14-15.
5. Landy, "Chaucer: Ambiguity and Ethics," 1, 14.
6. Kendall Walton, "Fearing Fictions," *The Journal of Philosophy* 75, no. 1 (1978): 11-12.
7. See Kendall L. Walton and Michael Tanner, "Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*. 68 (1994): 35-42, for Walton's denial that we make-believable adopt fiction's value commitments.
8. Rachel Cusk, *Outline* (London: Faber and Faber, 2014), 3-4.
9. Cusk, *Outline*, 45.
10. Cusk, *Outline*, 245.
11. Cusk, *Outline*, 7.
12. Cusk, *Outline*, 35.
13. Cusk, *Outline*, 38.
14. Cusk, *Outline*, 58.
15. Cusk, *Outline*, 176.
16. Cusk, *Outline*, 184.
17. Marilynne Robinson, *Gilead* (London: Virago Press, 2005), 12.
18. Robinson, *Gilead*, 27.
19. Robinson, *Gilead*, 31-32.
20. Robinson, *Gilead*, 79.
21. Robinson, *Gilead*, 136.
22. Robinson, *Gilead*, 7.
23. Robinson, *Gilead*, 11.
24. Robinson, *Gilead*, 48.
25. Robinson, *Gilead*, 66.
26. Robinson, *Gilead*, 279.

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