



Narrative and Ethical Understanding

Edited by Garry L. Hagberg

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Garry L. Hagberg
Department of Philosophy
Bard College
Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, USA

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Notes on Contributors

Don Adams is a professor of English at Florida Atlantic University and has been a senior Fulbright scholar in Vietnam and India. He has published widely on modern literature, philosophy, and intellectual history.

James A. Baker is an associate professor of English and the Sr. Margaret Patrice Slattery Chair at the University of the Incarnate Word. He was formerly the Writing Programs Director at Texas A&M University. He specializes in rhetorical theory and criticism and has authored numerous literary and rhetorical critiques. The chapter he co-authored with Zenon Culverhouse was the product of research and Philosophy and Literature team-teaching experiment they conducted together in support of a three-year NEH grant to study trauma.

Peter Brian Barry is a professor of Philosophy at Saginaw Valley State University where he is the Finkbeiner Endowed Professor in Ethics. He is the author of *Evil and Moral Psychology* (Routledge 2010) and *The Fiction of Evil* (Routledge 2016), as well as *The Ethics of George Orwell* (Oxford University Press, 2023). He has published widely on ethics, broadly construed, and has contributed to *The Cambridge Companion to Nineteen Eighty-Four* and *The Oxford Handbook of George Orwell*.

Zenon Culverhouse is an associate professor of Philosophy at the University of the Incarnate Word in San Antonio, Texas. He has pub-

lished in ancient Greek philosophy, philosophy of literature, and trauma studies, including a book *Plato's Hippias Minor: The Play of Ambiguity*, Lexington Books, 2021.

Ana Falcato holds a PhD in Philosophy from NOVA/FCSH. Between 2013 and 2015, she was a Humboldt research fellow at the Johannes-Gutenberg University and the University of Oxford. Her academic work appeared in *Studies in the Novel*, *Hypatia: A Journal of Feminist Philosophy*, *Kant-Studien*, *Wittgenstein-Studien*, *Daimon: Revista Internacional de Filosofia*, *Text and Talk*, *Filosofia Unisinos*, *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* and *Cosmos and History*. Ana published *Philosophy in the Condition of Modernism* with Palgrave Macmillan in 2018 and *Phenomenological Approaches to Intersubjectivity and Values* with Cambridge Scholar Publishing in 2019. In 2021 she published with Palgrave Macmillan *The Politics of Emotional Shockwaves*, and in 2024 Routledge published her new edited volume, *The Philosophy and Psychology of Delusions: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*. Ana is an appointed research fellow at IFILNOVA (Lisbon), where she leads a project about the novelistic and critical work of J.M. Coetzee. Over the past six years, she organized several international meetings at NOVA/FCSH, and in all of them systematically presented work on negative moral emotions and their repercussion both in Coetzee's fictional universe and in modern and contemporary philosophy.

Garry L. Hagberg is the James H. Ottaway professor of Philosophy and Aesthetics at Bard College, and has also held a Chair in the School of Philosophy at the University of East Anglia. Author of numerous papers at the intersection of aesthetics and the philosophy of language, his books include *Meaning and Interpretation: Wittgenstein, Henry James, and Literary Knowledge*; *Art as Language: Wittgenstein, Meaning, and Aesthetic Theory*; and *Describing Ourselves: Wittgenstein and Autobiographical Consciousness*. He is the editor of *Art and Ethical Criticism* and *Fictional Characters*, *Real Problems: The Search for Ethical Content in Literature* as well as his seven edited volumes from Palgrave, *Wittgenstein on Aesthetic Understanding*; *Stanley Cavell on Aesthetic Understanding*; *Narrative and Self-Understanding*; *Fictional Worlds and the Moral Imagination*; *Fictional Worlds and Philosophical Reflection*, *Literature and Its Language*:

Philosophical Aspects, and *Fictional Worlds and the Political Imagination*. Co-editor of *A Companion to the Philosophy of Literature* and editor of the journal *Philosophy and Literature*. Hagberg's most recent book is on the contribution literary experience makes to the formation of self and sensibility, *Living in Words: Literature, Autobiographical Language, and the Composition of Selfhood*. He is presently completing three new books: *Consciousness Portrayed: Seven Case Studies in Philosophical Literature*; *Narratives of the Mind: Henry James, Philosophy, and the Writing of Modern Subjectivity*; and *Art and Meaning: On Artworks and Their Implications*.

Carl Humphries holds the position of adjunct lecturer at the Institute of Philosophy of the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow, Poland. He is the author of two books, *Musical Expression and Performance: A Philosophical Study* and *Radical Historicality: Perspectives from the Later Wittgenstein*. He has also co-edited two collections of articles: *Wittgenstein, Philosopher of Cultures* and *Wittgenstein's Denkbewegungen (Diaries 1930–1932/1936–1937): Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. In addition, he has published a range of articles aimed at exploring how notions of temporal perspective intersect with philosophical issues surrounding human culture and value, focusing on both their methodological and their ethico-political implications.

Samuel Kahn is currently an associate professor of Philosophy at Indiana University-Purdue University, Indianapolis. He received dual degrees in Philosophy and Bioengineering in 2005 from the University of Pennsylvania, and he received a PhD in Philosophy in 2012 from Stanford University. He has been the recipient of numerous prizes and scholarships, including a Fulbright in 2008 and a Geballe in 2011. In 2013, Samuel won the *Review of Metaphysics* dissertation essay contest, and in 2015 he was included in the Prindle Institute for Ethics Young Philosophers Lecture Series. His work on Kant has won the prestigious Markus Herz prize (2011), and he is the first person to win the North American Kant Society Wilfrid Sellars prize twice (2019, 2021). He has published over thirty articles and book reviews in journals including *Ethics*, *Kantian Review*, *Kant Studien*, and *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*. His first research monograph, *Kant, Ought Implies Can, the Principle of Alternate Possibilities, and Happiness*, appeared with

an imprint of Rowman & Littlefield in 2018; his second, *Kant's Theory of Conscience*, appeared in the Cambridge University Press Elements series in 2021.

Hayden Kee is an assistant professor in the Department of Philosophy at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He completed his doctoral studies in 2020 at Fordham University in New York. His research interests are primarily in phenomenology with a focus on questions of mind, language, and embodiment. He is the author of numerous journal articles.

David Kleinberg-Levin is professor emeritus in the Department of Philosophy at Northwestern University. Author of numerous books, including *Gestures of Ethical Life: Reading Hölderlin's Question of Measure After Heidegger*, *The Philosopher's Gaze: Modernity in the Shadow of Enlightenment*, *Before the Voice of Reason*; a trilogy on the fate of the "promise of happiness" in the language of literature, consisting of [1] *Redeeming Words and the Promise of Happiness: A Critical Theory Approach to Wallace Stevens and Vladimir Nabokov*; [2] *Redeeming Words: Language and the Promise of Happiness in the Stories of Döblin and Sebald*; and [3] *Beckett's Words: The Promise of Happiness in a Time of Mourning*; *Heidegger's Phenomenology of Perception* (in two volumes), and, forthcoming, *Critical Studies on Heidegger: The Emerging Body of Ontological Understanding*.

Catherine MacMillan is an associate professor at the Department of English Language and Literature, Yeditepe University (Istanbul), and obtained her PhD (in European Studies) from Marmara University in 2008. She is the author of a monograph, *Discourse, Identity and the Question of Turkey's Accession to the EU: Through the Looking Glass*, and the editor of *Contemporary Perspectives on Turkey's EU Accession Process: A Reluctant European?*, as well as a variety of articles and book chapters. Her research interests are interdisciplinary; she is particularly interested in the intersection of politics and literature, including literary tropes and narratives in political discourse, and political philosophical approaches to literary works.

Cathy Mason is an assistant professor in Philosophy at the Central European University in Vienna. Her work focuses on the moral phenom-

ena of everyday life, often drawing on virtue theory. She has published on topics such as friendship, love, mourning, forgiveness, hope, and humility. Her work is often influenced by Iris Murdoch's philosophical writing, and she is currently working on a project to reconstruct Iris Murdoch's metaethics.

Daniele Niedda is a professor of English literature at the University of International Studies in Rome. His research interests cover the fields of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century English literature and thought. Author of three books in Italian (*Joseph Addison and Italy*, *The Theory of Language and Emotions in Edmund Burke*, and *Edmund Burke and the Indian Question*), his work favors an intercultural and transdisciplinary approach, as evidenced in *The Reception of Edmund Burke's Aesthetic Ideas in Italy: Translations as Thresholds of Interpretation* (Bloomsbury) and *Beckford's Vathek in Italy: The Reception by Mario Praz, Alberto Moravia, and Giaime Pintor* (*Comparative Literature Studies*). He is in the editorial board of *Fictions. Studi sulla narratività*, a yearly academic journal with a special focus on narrativity and its forms, of which he edited issue XVIII (2019), dedicated to travel literature. More recently, he is researching Benjamin Disraeli's literary works with a view to writing a book, while completing the Italian edition of Leslie Stephen's essay on the same topic, which is forthcoming.

Stefano Rossi is a PhD candidate at the University of Padova (Italy). He is working on Samuel Beckett's literature and Wilfred R. Bion's trilogy, *A Memoir of the Future*, focusing on the phenomenology and the representations of past, present, and future time in the works of the two authors. His research interests include medical humanities, trauma studies, phenomenology and time-awareness, psychoanalysis, psychopathology and its multifaceted manifestations in British and Irish literature of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Rossi has written on late Victorian erotica and sensation fiction, depictions of psychosis in late Victorian literature, and on the ontological implications of time, time-awareness, and its possible disorders in the frame of European modernist literature. Rossi has recently worked on two articles—soon to be published—on the phenomenology of the ghost in Beckett's literature and on the notion of 'human degeneration' in the works of Beckett and Bion.

Robert Lance Snyder taught at Wake Forest University, Georgia Tech, and Seattle Pacific University before retiring from the University of West Georgia as professor emeritus of English. He has written or edited five books, most recently *John le Carré's Post-Cold War Fiction* (2017) and *Eric Ambler's Novels: Critiquing Modernity* (2020). In retirement he has also published nearly forty journal articles on such other authors as Graham Greene, Adam Hall, Geoffrey Household, Len Deighton, Francis Clifford, Olen Steinhauer, Dashiell Hammett, Charles McCarry, Frederick Forsyth, Jim Thompson, David Goodis, Stella Rimington, Patrick Hamilton, James M. Cain, Dorothy B. Hughes, Ian McEwan, Ross Macdonald, Dan Fesperman, Patricia Highsmith, and Paula Hawkins. He serves as an academic advisor to a forthcoming volume of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* on le Carré.

Zeynep Talay Turner did her PhD in Philosophy at the Polish Academy of Sciences, Warsaw (2013), after she had completed her MA in Philosophy at Warwick University, U.K. (2007). She currently teaches philosophy at Bilgi University, Istanbul. Her research interests lie in the area of Philosophy and Literature, Ethics, nineteenth -and twentieth-century Continental Philosophy, Philosophies of the Self. She is the author of *Philosophy, Literature and the Dissolution of the Subject* (Peter Lang, 2014) and numerous articles on related subjects.



1

Introduction: Layers of Understanding and Long-Arc Narrative

Garry L. Hagberg

In what is known as the *Big Typescript*, Ludwig Wittgenstein makes the point that of a given sentence, he may well understand it in terms of knowing all the words, being able to imagine contexts in which he would use it, and so forth. But he said that if he reads or hears the sentence at the end of a long story, a story in which that sentence is presented within its long-arc narrative place and plays its role in that longer and richer frame of reference, he will understand it differently. We can and do use brief sentences and words to describe ethical actions and circumstances (where we know all the words as used, e.g. no legal Latin phrases with which we are unfamiliar), but that level of description is like Wittgenstein's first case of meaning-recognition, not like the second. The chapters presented in this collection explore that second kind of meaning, that second form of understanding. The exploration proceeds through five parts: first, the value of shifting our focus to ethical vision rather than leaving it unquestioningly on moral action; second, issues of self-narration, the

G. L. Hagberg (✉)

Department of Philosophy, Bard College, Annandale-on-Hudson, NY, USA

e-mail: hagberg@bard.edu

possibility of self-deception, and self-critique; third, the way we can reconsider questions of moral responsibility in layered or non-unitary terms; fourth, a consideration of some unobvious forms of moral progress, forms of progress that a truncated narrative might exclude; and fifth, a consideration of the problems, the moral-descriptive dangers, of oversimplification and how one might, with expanded and particularized narrative frames, resist them.

Opening Part I, Carl Humphries begins with what he identifies as the controversial idea that a proper ethics of human relationships means empathizing not just with the practical situations others face, but also with how they experience and evaluate their lives in terms of a unifying ethical vision, noting that this view is partly prefigured in Wittgenstein's late conception of 'world-pictures.' But Wittgenstein, Humphries observes, discusses this alongside other related forms of commitment, also stressing their intertwinement with temporality and contingency. Given that the implications of this view remain too-little explored, in this second chapter his ambition is to shed light on them through a comparison with the conception of the temporality of human affairs, and notions of ethical value, that are disclosed in Homer's epic poem *The Iliad*.

In Chap. 3, Cathy Mason asks, What's so good about John Ames? The narrator of Marilynne Robinson's *Gilead* has been much admired, but, as Mason shows, it's far from obvious why. His life is quiet and unassuming, and has for the most part been uneventful in the extreme. Drawing on Iris Murdoch's moral philosophy to explain the moral arc of the novel, Mason suggests that the novel in turn can shed light on Murdoch's key ethical ideas. What is so notable about John Ames, Mason suggests, is his commitment to seeing the world justly and lovingly—a commitment which for Murdoch is at the heart of virtuous agency.

Next, Don Adams employs the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard to examine the critically neglected yet ethically significant short fiction of Patricia Highsmith. Highsmith's well-known dystopian thriller novels seem to express and endorse a nihilistic worldview. But when we read her more argumentatively explicit short fiction through the lens of the existentialist Kierkegaardian philosophy that she knew and admired, we see revealed in Highsmith's work an ethical earnestness and vision that may be traced through all of her best fiction. Adams posits a manner of

reading Highsmith's fiction as allegorical ethical parable, which transforms our understanding of her work in general. All three of the chapters in this first part show us something about what the phrase "moral vision" means.

Investigating the influence of twentieth-century phenomenology on the literature of Samuel Beckett, Stefano Rossi aims in the opening chapter of Part II to analyze from a phenomenological perspective Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) and *Happy Days* (1961), specifically to investigate the inability or partial ability of the protagonists of the two plays, Krapp and Winnie, to position themselves in time and space, the existential coordinates on which the subject's acts of self-narration and self-location in the world depend. As for *Krapp's Last Tape*, Rossi explores Krapp's self-consciousness in relation to his defective memory, whereas, in the case of *Happy Days*, Rossi focuses on Winnie's complex corporeality and on her consciousness of being-in-the-world as a vanishing body.

In Chap. 6, Zeynep Talay Turner notes that there is a voluminous literature on the problem of self-deception in both philosophy and psychology. Is it, Talay Turner asks, actually and fully possible to deceive ourselves, and if so, how precisely do we do so? One answer to the last question might be that: we do so through and in the course of self-narration. An example of such is the narration of events in which we have been involved in the past. Talay Turner investigates the relationship between self-deception and self-narration through Richard Linklater's film *Tape* (2001); in doing so, the philosophical aim is to see how and in what ways the film casts light on questions concerning these issues in the scholarly literature, and vice-versa.

In Chap. 7, Ana Falcato presents a discussion structured in three parts, first tracing a conceptual genealogy of the reaction of shame as a primary psychological phenomenon, and then further analyzing two sublimated renderings of the basic emotion, in Kantian ethics and in J.M. Coetzee's novelistic project. The first part of this chapter explores the so-called genealogical approach to shame, most profoundly shaped by Bernard Williams's *Shame and Necessity*. A conceptual bridge is then drawn between some textual reflections from Kant on the notion of shame and a conception of its experience as an instrumental incentive to the moral law, which includes a reconstructive reading of the third chapter of the

Analytic in Kant's second *Critique*. Finally, and countering Kant's central emphasis on the rationality of action, Falcato's analysis shows how the true ethical disposition for J.M. Coetzee's protagonists (who experience intense moments of shame) corresponds to what is actually an abandonment of the last moral idea of oneself, and, as Falcato explains, a defenseless confrontation with the passivity of bodily experience as the true *locus* of pain.

Opening Part III, in Chap. 8, Peter Brian Barry observes that on a popular interpretation of him, George Orwell was profoundly uninterested in philosophy if not outright hostile to it. Yet, Orwell had surprisingly much to say about philosophy, especially about free will and moral responsibility. Barry argues that Orwell is well understood as endorsing Frankfurt-style compatibilism about moral responsibility: like Frankfurt, Orwell attacks the Principle of Alternative Possibilities, albeit implicitly, insofar as he repeatedly exercises strong reactive attitudes even as he denies, sometimes explicitly, that the characters in question could have done otherwise. Orwell's nuanced thought about moral responsibility, having been brought to the surface here, is a powerful reason to think the popular interpretation of his anti-philosophical stance is fatally flawed, because his work on reflection actually invites philosophers to reconsider the relationship between free will and moral responsibility.

Samuel Kahn begins Chap. 9 with the observation that on the standard reading of Kant's ethics, agents are responsible only for their acts of willing, not the consequences of their willing, much less the acts or consequences of *other* agents' willing (as vicarious responsibility). It is, therefore, somewhat puzzling, Kahn sees, to find Kant in fact discussing vicarious responsibility, and with apparent approbation, in the treatment of a case that has come to typify his ethics: the murderer at the door. Nonetheless, he does so, and in his lesser-known works, Kant even sets out a rudimentary framework for handling such cases. Kahn's goal in this chapter is to draw attention to this neglected aspect of Kant's ethics and to uncover its significance for ethical understanding. Indeed, Kahn argues that Kant accepted vicarious responsibility openly and explicitly, both in his ethical and in his legal theory. In so doing, Kahn's interpretive and revisionist hope to reveal how much the current understanding of Kant's

theory of responsibility, accepted by Kantians and non-Kantians alike, has failed to capture one fundamental part of his ethical thought.

Continuing the investigation of moral responsibility in Part III, Robert Lance Snyder strikingly sees Storm Jameson's *The Hidden River* (1955) as projecting a phenomenological nexus between place and identity. But what happens, Snyder asks, when this Heideggerian concept of "dwelling," in this instructive particular case, is compromised by one family member's wartime betrayal of a kinsman? At issue under such circumstances is an ethics of responsibility that powerfully confronts the narrative's main character, a former Resistance leader and older brother to the malefactor. Snyder shows how Jameson's late modernist novel, set in 1949, raises deeply philosophical questions about what constitutes "justice"—indeed what the word means—shortly after the Nazi Occupation of France. And Snyder also shows how this text dramatizes the fragility of attachment to a particular geographical milieu, in this case the Loire Valley, as a matrix of self-definition. Responsibility can indeed be a layered and complex matter.

Initiating Part IV, James A. Baker and Zenon Culverhouse begin by reminding us that Joseph Heller's novel *Catch-22* is well-known for its humorous depiction of the absurdities of war and military bureaucracy. What it is less well known for, they show, is the moral evolution of its protagonist, John Yossarian—which, ironically, was Heller's stated purpose in *Catch-22*. Yossarian's moral progress reveals itself in the evolution of his attitudes and behaviors toward women; yet, this is obfuscated by the novel's tone—Heller's use of absurdist humor—that extends to its sexual interactions, many of which are violent and non-consensual. As Baker and Culverhouse reveal, herein lies the problem: while these interactions may involve absurdity, modern readers will likely not find them humorous. Scholarly attempts at decoding a formula of absurdist humor in the novel ignore these interactions or, worse, assume they are simply amusing. Against this, Baker and Culverhouse identify a pattern of absurdist humor in which the novel's sexual interactions provoke the protagonist's unobvious and incomplete moral development.

In the twelfth chapter's study of *The Mill on the Floss*, Daniele Niedda combines Ramon Fernandez's theory of personality with Walter Benjamin's anti-subjectivist philosophy to propose a different

interpretation of George Eliot's novel, one that engages with the critical strategy of surface reading. While a less tragic light is shed on the novel's ending, Niedda's approach entails the reader's recalibration of both the character of the protagonist and the personality of the narrator. Both, Niedda shows, reveal fractured identities in the course of the story. The uneasy relationship of Maggie Tulliver with her affections is reflected in the ambivalent tale of her moral progress and moral choices as told by an equally multifaceted figure of the narrator.

In Chap. 13, Catherine MacMillan explores Margaret Atwood's novella *The Penelopiad* from the perspective of Lyotard's concept of the differend—a wrong or injustice that arises because the discourse in which the wrong might be expressed does not exist. The twelve hanged maids are arguably victims of a literary differend in the *Odyssey*, where they are not given the chance to tell their own story, let alone obtain justice for their brutal murders. However, in *The Penelopiad*, they are granted a voice, although, despite a posthumous appearance in court, their differend is not transformed into a litigation. Nevertheless, MacMillan shows that Atwood's novella bears witness to this differend, allowing it to be expressed if not resolved.

Opening Part V, in Chap. 14, Hayden Kee first observes that the COVID-19 pandemic inaugurated a strong resurgence of interest in Albert Camus' 1947 novel *The Plague*. Kee notes that recent commentaries on the work have emphasized its themes of human nature, decency, and solidarity. However, hasty readings of the novel often trade in simplifications and misunderstandings that conceal or misconstrue the novel's subtler existential and ethical insights. In this chapter, Kee sets up a plausible prima facie reading of central themes from *The Plague* based on recent commentaries. But he then shows how the novel's message is much more complex than the prima facie reading realizes. *The Plague* offers no simplistic ethical prescriptions. Rather, it challenges us to further existential and ethical reflection—and as Kee uncovers, it inspires courage.

David Kleinberg-Levin opens Chap. 15 by noting that Wallace Stevens claimed that his poetry serves “realism,” but also that, as he well knew, his poetry is not merely the product of a lively and vivid imagination; it at

many points appears fantastically unreal or even surreal, in humor and in more serious matters not bound to common sense realities. In what sense then, Kleinberg-Levin asks, can his poetic works be regarded as “realism”? In this chapter, he argues that Stevens’ poetic works exemplify what he calls “poetic realism”: a realism that uses various rhetorical devices, such as exaggeration, fanciful humor, metaphor, resemblance, and word-play, in order to adumbrate a deeper truth, a deeper reality that is often unacknowledged or even repressed. His “realism” serves a truth that is revealing—not the truth that prevails. It also is a “realism” that recognizes multiple perspectives, multiple truths. Perhaps the snow is not just white; it is also turning black, attuned to the menacing storm in the sky—or it is perhaps purple, surrounding a man with a monarch’s boundless ego. Although we can read and enjoy the poetry purely for its sensuous qualities and aesthetic construction, we can also learn much if we read it as narratives that bear not only on the formal conditions of ethical life, such as the multiplicity of perspectives, the illusory forms of truth, the nonsense in sense, and the ambiguities in meaning, but also on ethical life itself: anguishing existential questions, treacheries of the heart, and the complexities that can be involved in bringing to language feelings of friendship, experiences of freedom, and the need for meaning.

In the opening just above I mentioned that it was in the *Big Typescript* that Ludwig Wittgenstein made the point that of a given sentence, he may well understand it in terms of knowing all the words, being able to imagine contexts in which he would use it, and so forth. But he said that if he reads or hears the sentence at the end of a long story, a story in which that sentence emerges in its long-form narrative place and plays a role there, he will understand it differently. In this final chapter, Garry L. Hagberg suggests that one of the central conceptual or philosophical achievements of the third *Godfather* film is to show in detail how such long-form understanding arises. When Francis Ford Coppola returned to his *Godfather* project to complete the trilogy years after the first and second installments, he developed the film in two parts, not as separated parts but rather as parts interspersed that cut back and forth between the present life of an older Michael Corleone and his early life, family background, cultural inheritance, and formative experience. This, as

Coppola's delayed third installment of this great trilogy shows, is how we come to understand a person—their deeds, their words, their self-concept, and more broadly what one might call their mode, their way, of being in the ethically interactive world. The film implicitly argues that a long-arc narrative context of ethical understanding is not a luxury—it is a necessity.

Part I

**To Focus on Ethical Vision Rather
Than Moral Action**



2

From Wittgenstein to Homer: Ethics, ‘World-Pictures,’ and Iliadic Time

Carl Humphries

I.

Some moral thinkers—notably the philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch—have argued that a proper appreciation of the reality of others requires us to cultivate an empathetic understanding of how they experience their own lives, and reality generally, in morally significant terms that reflect an overall world view—an ethically charged vision of how things are to which they are committed by virtue of being involved in the life they are actually living.¹ This line of thinking invests a similar significance in the concept of a ‘world view’ to that suggested by Wittgenstein

¹I. Murdoch, “Vision and Choice in Morality,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Suppl. Vol.* 30/1 (1956): 32–58. See also I. Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Classics, 1970).

C. Humphries (✉)
Institute of Philosophy of the Jesuit University Ignatianum in Krakow,
Krakow, Poland
e-mail: carl.humphries@ignatianum.edu.pl

when, in some very late remarks, he discusses the idea of a ‘world-picture’ (*Weltbild*).² It seems reasonable to think that further light might be cast on such an approach to ethical matters by seeing how it relates to what Wittgenstein himself had to say about the ways in which, in the context of human affairs, ‘world-pictures’ and other related forms of commitment are intertwined with temporality and contingency. At the same time, one might think that literature could also provide valuable insights and helpful illustrations in this regard. The present article pursues both lines of inquiry. It begins by considering Wittgenstein’s late remarks, and then proceeds to explore their implications further through a comparison with the conception of the temporality of human affairs (and associated notions of ethical value) disclosed in Homer’s epic poem *The Iliad*.

An important aspect of what links this sort of conception of the ethical importance of world views to Wittgenstein’s very late thinking about holistic forms of commitment can be usefully illustrated by focusing briefly on Murdoch’s own distinctive stance. What is worth noting is that she does not treat her view as entailing or presupposing some kind of ultimately constructivistic or subjectivistic perspectivalism (of the sort typically ascribed to Nietzsche, for example). Instead, she embraces, at the metaethical level, a construal that is (at least in her terms) robustly *realist*: human moral reality, inhabited by us, is taken to be an irreducible and self-constituting phenomenon. As a consequence, the ethics of human relationships becomes, for her, a matter of how one can move in the direction of a perfected grasp of this reality as it shows up in relation to others as well as oneself. This then takes one beyond an exclusive focus on the moral choices one is faced with in specific practical or everyday situations.

Murdoch’s idea that such a moral reality needs to be understood as more than just situational, in that it shows up via the all-encompassing world views human beings entertain, is closely bound up with her insistence that it is irreducible to the structures of commitment (such as procedural norms of rational decision making) informing morally evaluative choices made in response to supposedly morally neutral facts. Pursuing the same emphatically realist line, she holds that to properly grasp, in an

²L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1969); hereafter abbreviated as *OC*.

empathetic way, the import of another person's experience of living their life in terms that reflect an underlying world view, one must first recognize that for that individual, that world view will be invested with *some* sort of foundational significance—not unlike that traditionally associated with metaphysical frameworks of commitment. To actually live a life with reference to a world view will therefore be importantly different, experientially, from how it would be if one regarded that world view as just one amongst a multiplicity of equally valid perspectives. It will more closely resemble how we experience things when we take them to be a direct, perspectively unmediated manifestation of deep and structurally constitutive aspects of reality. In Murdoch's own case, her conviction that her stance need not automatically translate into a commitment to radical perspectival pluralism (of the subjectivistic Nietzschean kind) was underpinned by the fact that she was herself a committed metaphysical realist (of a Platonistic sort) where matters of value are concerned. On the other hand, it can be argued that such a position can be sustained independently of such potentially controversial commitments, since there is no reason to rule out (in principle) the possibility of convergence between such world views, once human beings engage with one another empathetically in the way that her own account of the ethics of human relationships affirms.³

It can, of course, be claimed that the issue of metaethical (anti-)realism, and even the notion that there could be any point to discussing metaethical issues at all, is entirely foreign to Wittgenstein's orientation as a philosopher. Yet other aspects of his late approach do seem relevant to this line of thinking. His idea of a 'world-picture' (*Weltbild*), while prefigured by his remarks concerning religious belief dating from the 1930s,⁴ is tied in with the broader, overall line of thinking about scepticism and its limits that we see him pursuing in *On Certainty*. The latter aims to explore a diverse range of instances of non-epistemically constituted forms of certainty manifested at the level of our beliefs, of the kind commonly referred to by commentators as 'bedrock certainties' or—in certain more

³A. Bergqvist, "Moral Perception, Thick Concepts and Perspectivalism," in *Evaluative Perception*, ed. A. Bergqvist and R. Cowan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), especially p. 263.

⁴L. Wittgenstein, *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology and Religious Belief*, ed. Cyril Barrett (Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 1967).

specific contexts of analysis—‘hinge commitments.’ These present themselves as seemingly fact-stating empirical propositions. However, their real function within the context of our involvement in a given form of life is shown to be quite different. It is, roughly speaking, regulative—or, to use a term frequently employed by Wittgenstein, ‘grammatical.’ What this means is that in the context of our lived involvements, we embrace them as *unquestionably valid*, but not in the manner of the elementary beliefs considered fundamental by proponents of atomism as a form of epistemological foundationalism, or of elements within holistic systems of belief held to constitute knowledge for the theoretical reasons associated with epistemological coherentism. Rather, we do so because the constraints on what may be considered a legitimate object of empirico-factual inquiry that they bring with them are themselves a precondition of our being involved in certain ways of going on with our lives—acting and reacting as we do. The importance for us of these ways of going on with our lives is manifested both in the scale and richness (of import) of the structures of meaning and practical and/or evaluative commitment we are able to sustain (when such preconditions are met), but also in the consequent impossibility (or extreme difficulty) of imagining a worthwhile life for ourselves without such regulative commitments being in place. The thought that we embrace certain commitments as unquestionably valid in this kind of way is also key to Murdoch’s idea that to grasp the reality of another person (as separate from oneself and living a life separate from one’s own), we must engage with how *they* see things holistically, given the commitments *they* embrace as unquestionably valid.

It is also worth recalling that Wittgenstein’s concern with non-epistemically constituted forms of certainty can be viewed—at least to some extent—as a further development of the line of thinking elaborated in the *Philosophical Investigations*, involving the notions of ‘language games,’ practice-dependency and ‘forms of life.’ There, he seeks to alert us to the extent to which it is plausible to think of human practices as providing a form of stage-setting essential for our coming to be initiated into the realm of human concepts and concerns. This already points in the direction of notions of ‘bedrock certainty’ and ‘hinge commitment’ inasmuch as it favours a characterization of processes of linguistic initiation that ascribes a radical and constitutive role to forms of *pre-reflective*

training.⁵ This line of exploration is something whose implications Wittgenstein could be said to sum up when he states that “What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—forms of life.”⁶ At the same time, the idea that there may be forms of specifically ethical engagement with other human beings that cannot be made sense of without invoking something along the lines of the kinds of non-epistemically constituted certainty explored in his very late remarks is suggested elsewhere, when he remarks that “My attitude towards him is an attitude towards a soul. I am not of the opinion that he has a soul” (*PI*, II, p. 178).⁷

Wittgenstein's remarks in *On Certainty* indicate that he held a 'world-picture' (*Weltbild*) to be something with a number of distinctive features. It presupposes an inherited background (§ 94), yet functions in its own right as a self-evident foundation (*selbstverständliche Grundlage*) (§ 167). At the same time, it can in certain circumstances be rejected—or, to be precise, exchanged for an alternative one. However, this can only occur in response to a kind of accumulative persuasion, as distinct from strictly reasoned forms of factually based argumentation (§ 262), and it can be likened to undergoing a religious conversion (§ 612). Furthermore, 'world-pictures' have a decidedly social character, and exhibit the possibility of gradual change over time. In addition, a 'world-picture' is not simply the sum of our scientific knowledge at some given time. This negative conclusion follows from the fact that on Wittgenstein's construal it must be inherited and transmitted within a social community collectively, and so cannot depend on specialized knowledge or expertise in the way that science does. Hence, it is different from Thomas Kuhn's idea of 'paradigms' that frame bodies of scientific theorizing, only to 'shift' dramatically when faced with an accumulation of countervailing empirical data.⁸

⁵W. Huemer, “The Transition from Causes to Norms: Wittgenstein on Training,” *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 71/1 (2006): 205–225.

⁶L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1st Edition) (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953), II, p. 226; hereafter abbreviated as *PI*.

⁷For an interesting and deep further exploration of this idea, see D. Cockburn, *Other Human Beings* (London: Macmillan, 1990).

⁸These are the general conclusions presented in J. Schulte, “World-Picture and Mythology,” *Inquiry* 31 (1988): 323–334.

Now, a significant feature of the later Wittgenstein's notion of non-epistemically constituted certainty, or 'bedrock,' is the idea that it is subject to temporal evolution in the light of human circumstances. More specifically, as we shall see, he takes it to be so in ways *distinct from, but also interconnected with*, the processes of epistemic revision to which our ordinary empirically accountable factual commitments are submitted. This is also broadly in line with, and so might be expected to cast additional light on, what he holds to be the case for 'world-pictures.'

Wittgenstein is explicit about the possibility of our concept-using practices being subverted by contingencies emerging in the surrounding world when he writes that "Certain events would put me into a position in which I could not go on with the old language-game any further. In which I was torn away from the *sureness* of the game. Indeed, doesn't it seem obvious that the possibility of a language-game is conditioned by certain facts?" (*OC*, §617). At the same time, he seems inclined to endorse a particular sort of top-down conception of how our commitments reflect holistic concerns, observing that "I have arrived at the rock bottom of my convictions. And one might almost say that these foundation-walls are carried by the whole house" (*OC*, § 248).

Taking these points together, he seems to have held that there are structures of commitment generated by our involvements in practices (or in aiming to live a certain sort of life) that are such that any potentially revisable factual claims form only one element (alongside grammatically regulative 'bedrock certainties' or 'hinge commitments'), but also that changes to such factual commitments may, in *certain* circumstances, translate into changes to the very concept-sustaining practices or forms or ways of living we are prepared to adhere to. In the latter case, this will then entail surrendering or adjusting any 'grammatical' commitments presupposed by those same holistically constituted structures of commitment. Certain elements that performed a regulative role will be returned to the realm of empirico-factual inquiry, and this may even eventually culminate in the exchanging of one particular overall 'world-picture' for another.

Philosophical discussions of this dimension of *On Certainty* tend to focus on Wittgenstein's well-known and vivid 'riverbed analogy,' in which he suggests that what does or does not change in the way that is

associated with our empirically revisable propositional commitments *itself* changes, and does so in a manner consistent with there being a continuously graded rather than sharp distinction between the two (*OC*, §§ 96–99). Yet there is another feature of Wittgenstein's approach that is arguably just as relevant in the present context. This concerns two elements, of which the first is his running together of ostensibly different sorts of belief in his account of how factual and grammatical elements coexist in the context of such holistic structures of commitment:

“I believe that I have forebears, and that every human being has them. I believe that there are various cities, and, quite generally, in the main facts of geography and history. I believe that the earth is a body on whose surface we move and that it no more suddenly disappears or the like than any other solid body: this table, this house, this tree, etc. If I wanted to doubt the existence of the earth long before my birth, I should have to doubt all sorts of things that stand fast for me” (*OC*: § 234).

Here, Wittgenstein offers a list of examples of the sort of propositional commitments that, as he puts it, “stand fast” for him. His suggestion seems to be that while these are in some sense propositions whose intrinsic significance would otherwise make them individually open in principle to doubt and revision, the fact of their belonging to a larger structure of commitment obtaining en bloc at the level of his lived (and practice-constituted) engagement with the world suffices to accord them a collectively non-revisable status as being immune to doubt. If they are each individually presupposed by that larger structure of commitment, then questioning one or other of them will involve stepping outside of the latter, leaving the others potentially exposed to questioning as well. This, if done, would engender an artificially inflated form of scepticism at odds with the practice-constituted and/or practical reality of human life.

This seems like an illustrative example of the kind of holism we have been talking about. Yet Wittgenstein's choice of examples has invited the accusation that he is conflating distinct kinds of propositions, whose *inherent* relations to the issue of epistemic revisability stand in sharp contrast to one another in a way at odds with what the riverbed analogy purports to describe. It has been objected that while some of these by

their very nature express genuinely empirico-factual commitments, in that it *just is* a contingent matter whether we *know* them to be true or not at a given time, others function intrinsically in a way that Wittgenstein himself characterizes as regulative (i.e. ‘grammatical’), their purpose being *invariably* to help sustain a certain internally coherent body of empirico-factual beliefs—i.e. independently of contexts tied to specific practices, forms of life, approaches to living and so on.⁹ Whether one agrees with this criticism or not, it can prevent one from noticing a more clear-cut sense in which two different sorts of commitment are indeed being placed on the same level here. This pertains to how such commitments stand in relation to contingency in respect of their status as true or false, *independently of epistemologically framed concerns*. The point here is that some of these statements pertain to matters that, in the *particular* form in which we actually hold them to be the case (and quite apart from whether we do so for the sake of their factual or their regulative significance, or something in between), have come to obtain over time in the wake of events that need not have occurred but did (e.g. “the main facts of geography and history”). Others, meanwhile, do not (e.g. “that I have forebears, and that every human being has them”).

The second element I wish to draw attention to in this regard is brought into view by Wittgenstein’s exploration of an alternative-reality scenario, where we imagine having come to have different commitments from the ones that we actually do have, and where this development is not a product of some epistemic evolution in my beliefs about the world, but instead marks a response to the coming-to-obtain of some radically novel facts: “What if something *really unheard-of* happened?—If I, say, saw houses gradually turning into steam without any obvious cause, if the cattle in the fields stood on their heads and laughed and spoke comprehensible words; if trees gradually changed into men and men into trees. Now, was I right when I said before all these things happened “I know that that’s a house” etc., or simply “that’s a house” etc.?” (*OC*: § 513).

As the above remark’s final sentence makes explicit, this prompts one to wonder whether we would then *still* recognize our currently

⁹A. Grayling, *Scepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge* (London: Continuum, 2008), especially pp. 130–131.