Review of “The Heart of What Matters: The Role for Literature in Moral Philosophy”

Douglas Chismar
Chowan College Center for Ethics

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Philosophers have long suspected that in good literature, there is something of value to be found for doing philosophy. Plato, for example, delights in quoting the poets, despite his reservations (at least, in the Republic) about their social influence. As we have, more recently, sought to energize our teaching methods by supplementing lecture and discussion with novels and short stories, as well as film, music, and poetry, we may struggle with lingering suspicions about this expenditure of valuable class time or worries about whether we are making the best use of these supplemental resources. More than tokening assent to the value of literature for philosophy, what is overdue is a careful discussion of exactly what it is that literature brings to philosophical (in this case, moral) inquiry, along with, perhaps, a demonstration of how literature can be most effectively utilized. This is just what is provided by Anthony Cunningham in *The Heart of What Matters*.

Cunningham situates his treatment of literature’s contribution to moral inquiry in the context of a largely adversarial but largely fair dialogue with the Kantian tradition. Because Cunningham believes that literature has much to offer the philosopher, he is suspicious of an over-reliance upon ethical theory and its tendencies to universalize and over-simplify human nature and “what matters” to humans. This leads him to challenge Kant’s excessive reliance upon disinterested reasoning and his critical attitude towards the role of the sentiments or emotions in ethical decision-making.

In a detailed conversation with Kant that stretches through many of the book’s chapters, Cunningham restates quite clearly Kant’s principal concerns about the influence of the emotions. These pertain to the variability of the emotions, their tendency to prejudice decision-makers, and their causal infringements upon the freedom of the will. He also offers a useful summary of the efforts of contemporary Kant scholars, such as Barbara Herman, Marcia Baron, and Thomas Hill Jr., to explain and perhaps rehabilitate Kant’s sometimes extreme statements about feelings. These efforts bring to the fore resources found in lesser-read works of Kant, such as the *Doctrine of Virtue*. For example, he considers Barbara Herman’s proposal that, for Kant, practical reason functions in a guiding or “regulatory” way. Reason provides a kind of “check” on the deliverances of the emotions, filtering them for excesses and forms of unfairness as they enter our “deliberative field.” On this reading, the emotions are not excluded from ethical decision-making, though they are trumped by reason when necessary. Similarly, Cunningham summarizes attempts to locate, in Kant’s notion of “imperfect duties” a substantive place for feelings parallel to the rational consideration of duties.
Despite acknowledging the merits of these interpretations, Cunningham finds these renderings of Kant ultimately unsatisfactory and emotionally unconvincing. He suspects that, even when interpreted in these ameliorating ways, Kant ultimately was not a “man of feeling.” Biographical evidence is unearthed to argue that at key moments in his responses to others in his life, Kant suffered from an emotional hardness or insensitivity. Cunningham is particularly concerned about Kant’s inability to account for “intimate attachments.” He returns repeatedly to the worry that a Kantian approach to moral duty would exclude many of the commitments that impart meaning and energy to human life.

The first two chapters of The Heart of What Matters are thus concerned with defending a wider notion of moral reasoning that permits the influence of strong emotions and attachments. This opens the field for a consideration of the role of literature in helping us to evaluate not only actions, but attitudes, feelings, relationships, and character. The third chapter, “Reading for Life,” offers his most careful discussion of what it is that literature can offer ethical inquiry. The remainder of the book provides illustrations while continuing the banter with Kant. Cunningham offers us chapter long expositions of Kazuo Ishiguro’s Remains of the Day, Toni Morrison’s Beloved, and two novels by Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God and Seraph on the Suwanee.

While the author’s interactions with the Kantians provide a succinct review of longstanding controversies, including some useful diversions to Stoicism, his articulation in the third chapter of exactly the role to be played by literature is, in this reviewer’s opinion, the primary contribution of the book. Literature surpasses philosophical reflection in acquainting us, on an emotional level, with “the irreducible individual of integrity and personal ideals; the undeniable uniqueness of personal relationships, [and] the unpredictability of concrete clashes of incommensurable ethical loves” (THOWM, p. 83). Echoing Lawrence Blum’s concerns (cf. Moral Perception and Particularity), Cunningham is concerned that the universalizing or scientific tendencies of Kantianism leave out the particular circumstances and uniquely individual characteristics that shape much human deliberation. As an example, he considers someone who does the right thing due to the demands of self-image and personal integrity rather than a universalized sense of societal duty:

…the importance of attending to the details of particular people in particular situations looms far larger than it does when we confine ourselves to judgments about what we can unequivocally demand of just anyone. And other than experiencing things for ourselves, the best way to appreciate the more complex, situated ethical demands is with a detailed story that can paint a big picture of character (THOWM, p. 83).

Literature provides a rich portrait of the interior life of the mind, eliciting in us a powerful replica of the emotions of depicted characters. For example, soldiers’ war stories and the film, Saving Private Ryan open a window onto the horrors of war that argument and statistics cannot.

In at least three ways, then, literature offers ethical inquiry what unaided philosophical reflection does not. First, it provides a more realistic view of individual humans in situ. As such, literature is better able to do justice to the complexities and conflicts of human decision-making. In virtue of this, secondly, literature can stimulate an empathic response even with characters whose actions might fare poorly at the hands of an application of ethical theory. Such empathic ties deliver an emotionally-moving antidote against simplifications. When we empathize with even despicable figures, we recognize that theoretical judgments have left something human out of account. Thirdly,
literature is better able to depict and vivify the complex network of attachments that shape so much of “what matters” to human life. Philosophical theories are about as effective at rendering this network of relationships as drawing a family tree succeeds in capturing the twists and turns of daily family life.

If ethical inquiry is to have value, it must remain true to human life in all its details and complications, even if this forestalls achieving a comprehensive theoretical unification. Cunningham espouses a pluralistic image of human development according to which often-conflicting values shape character and motivate behavior. This view is supported by his treatment of the four novels in the second part of the book. Following excellently-composed reviews of the novels’ basic plot lines, Cunningham draws attention to the most ethically-provocative aspects of each story. In Remains of the Day, he finds a subject who (perhaps a little too conveniently) supports his critique of Kantianism: the butler Stevens. His blind devotion to his professional duties prevent him from expressing feelings or developing relationships. In seeking to understand and evaluate Stevens’ shortcomings, Cunningham draws from Antonio Damasio’s discussion, in Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain, of how damage to the emotion centers of the brain interfere with humans’ abilities to manage time and cognitively assess their actions. A holistic account of brain-functioning suggests that attempts to segregate the emotions from one’s life of duty are doomed to failure.

The exposition of Morrison’s Beloved provides Cunningham with the occasion to argue further for his pluralistic view of obligations and the occasional inescapability of tragic moral dilemmas. Beloved depicts an escaped slave, Sethe, who would kill her children rather than allowing them to be returned to slavery. Cunningham uses this story to explore the phenomenon of psychological disintegration. He conducts a sensitive and multi-faceted analysis of Sethe’s situation, reaching for a parallel to Jonathan Shay’s investigation of Vietnamese veterans’ experience of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and The Undoing of Character.

Readers may find Cunningham’s discussion of Sethe’s actions highly problematic: “I defend Beloved’s fundamental insight: that we are morally fragile creatures whose fragility is integrally connected to what is best and most beautiful about us” (THOWM, p. 180). Sethe is in a classic “no win” situation; allowing her children to be enslaved might have created greater moral evils than does their death at her hands. While Cunningham does not morally excuse Sethe, he argues that the impossibility of her situation explains, and in some ways justifies her psychological disintegration. An ethic that is responsive to human life in all its complexities must acknowledge that humans are sometimes placed in situations where there is no fully right action, or where doing the best thing comes at a tremendous cost to the moral decision-maker. “A fitting emotional investment in our ethical loves will entail tension, fragmentation, and even devastation when we must lose, ignore, or work against our deepest loves” (THOWM, p. 225). Beloved’s compelling narrative shows us this with a power unequaled by theoretical arguments or even the detailed consideration of case studies.

In similar fashion, Cunningham’s exposition of the two Hurston stories suggests that the nature of human attachments greatly complicates our attempts to wrap them up in normative terms. Both stories depict romantic love, but in a context of messy accommodations, difficult choices, and personal limitations. “When we listen to Their Eyes and Seraph together with an attentive, loving ear, we get a well-rounded view of romantic love’s possibilities as a force for good, as well as its potential as a destructive, disturbing force in human life and character” (THOWM, p. 281). Only
narrative confronts us with the level of nuance and the depth of feeling to fully appreciate this reality and its implications for attempting to make ethical judgments about love.

Cunningham is a highly proficient expositor of these stories. He is particularly skilled at identifying the ethical struggles resident in the stories’ characters. In tune with his view of the moral life, he avoids ethical simplifications and, for the most part, minimizes inserting personal moral viewpoints (though sprinkled through the book are personal observations and experiences about love, grief, jealousy, anger, parenting, and other emotional phenomena). His continuing return to the dialogue with Kant reveals his awareness of the difficulties involved in critiquing a theory as conceptually-tight and historically-compelling as Kant’s. His arguments, many of them not new though handily presented, will probably not win over the committed Kantian. His selective appeal to biographical evidence, his use of the too-easy example of Stevens, and his ambivalent handling of Sethe’s actions may remain problematic for some. How we are to derive moral guidelines from the highly particularized stories deserves further elucidation. Kantians may also protest that he is unduly pessimistic about our ability (or responsibility) to maintain psychological identity and autonomy in the face of radical injustice and trauma.

On the other hand, the power of his elucidations of the four stories in the latter part of _THOWM_ supports his basic tenets in a manner with which it is difficult to argue. My own experience of these expositions was that they provoked empathy and personal reflection, even in response to the stories I have not read. This book will resonate strongly with readers who share Cunningham’s view that while life presents us with many joys, relationships, and opportunities to make good choices, it also challenges us with a complicated web of often-conflicting obligations, compromises, and threats to our ability to make autonomous decisions. Cunningham has illustrated by practice the value of literature in helping us to sort out such a rich and complicated experience.

Douglas Chismar  
Chowan College Center for Ethics

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“This book gives us something all too rare in contemporary philosophical writing: a passionate, careful, deeply sympathetic and sustained analysis of some important literary narratives in aid of a clearly defined philosophical project. Whether one agrees with Cunningham's conclusions or not, his treatment of the texts is inspiring and illuminating.”—Lawrence C. Becker, author of A New Stoicism.

From the Back Cover.

“This is a wonderful book--beautifully written, deeply moving, and philosophically well argued. Whether one agrees with Cunningham's conclusions or not, his treatment of the texts is inspiring and illuminating.”—Lawrence C. Becker, author of A New Stoicism.

About the Author.

Anthony Cunningham is Professor of Philosophy at St. John's University.

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Moral philosophy is the branch of philosophy that contemplates what is right and wrong. It explores the nature of morality and examines how people should live their lives in relation to others. Moral philosophy has three branches. One branch, meta-ethics, investigates big picture questions such as, “What is morality?” “What is justice?” “Is there truth?” and “How can I justify my beliefs as better than conflicting beliefs held by others?” Another branch of moral philosophy is normative ethics. It answers the question of what we ought to do. Normative ethics focuses on providing a framework for Philosophy and literature involves the literary treatment of philosophers and philosophical themes (the literature of philosophy), and the philosophical treatment of issues raised by literature (the philosophy of literature). Strictly speaking, the philosophy of literature is a branch of aesthetics, the branch of philosophy that deals with the question, “what is art”? Much of aesthetic philosophy has traditionally focused on the plastic arts or music, however, at the expense of the verbal arts. In