Satan's virtues: On the moral educational prospects of fictional character

Las virtudes de Satanás: perspectivas de educación moral del personaje de ficción

David Carr, PhD. Emeritus Professor. University of Edinburgh (*david.carr@ed.ac.uk*).

Abstract:

Recent attention to character formation as the key to moral education has also regarded personal and fictional role models as appropriate means to this end. Moreover, while one may have grave reservations about the influence of personal role-models (perhaps upon the young by those they happen to admire), serious fiction has often been considered an inspirational source of moral example. Still, while this paper ultimately mounts a defence of the moral educational potential of literature, it is also concerned to press two significant reservations about any and all attention to fictional character as a means to such education. First, since the ultimate meaning of any fictional character and conduct is largely, if not exclusively, confined to their narrative contexts, we should not suppose them to have any direct role-modelling application to the affairs of human life beyond such contexts. Second, and more significantly, since morality is also ultimately more than and/or not entirely reducible to the contingencies of human character, attention to either fictional or real-life character must anyway fall somewhat short of full moral education.

Keywords: literature, fiction, character, virtue, moral education.

Resumen:

El interés reciente por la formación del carácter como aspecto clave en la educación moral ha llevado a considerar también los modelos de referencia personales y ficcionales como medios apropiados para este fin. Además, aunque uno pueda albergar serias reservas con respecto a la influencia de los modelos de referencia personales (quizá la que ejercen sobre los jóvenes las personas que estos admiran), la ficción seria se ha visto a menudo como una fuente inspiradora de ejemplo moral. Aun así, a pesar de que este artículo defiende el potencial de la literatura como promotor de la educación moral, también expresa dos reservas importantes sobre la atención dedicada a los personajes de ficción como medio para dicha educación. En primer lugar, puesto que el sentido final de cualquier personaje y conducta ficcionales está, en su mayoría (si no en exclusiva), limitado a sus contextos narrativos, no deberíamos asumir que tienen alguna aplicación directa como modelo de referencia en los asuntos de la vida humana fuera de esos contextos. En segundo lugar, y aún más importante, puesto que la moralidad es, en última instancia, algo más que (o no reducible totalmente a) las contingencias del carácter humano, la atención a un personaje de ficción o de la vida real no es suficiente, en cualquier caso, para una educación moral completa.

Palabras clave: literatura, ficción, personaje, carácter, virtud, educación moral.

"Poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature more of universals, whereas those of history are singulars. By a universal statement I mean one as to what such or kind of a man will probably or necessarily say or do, which is the aim of poetry."

(Aristotle, 1941a, p. 1464)

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"We touch here on a central dilemma of literature. If literature is didactic, it tends to injure its own integrity; if it ceases wholly to be didactic, it tends to injure its own seriousness."

(Frye, 1974, p. 169)

1. Theorising moral education

Briefly, the dial of modern academic thought about moral learning and education seems to have swung between two apparently opposite poles of attention to rational thought and principle on the one hand and focus on character and practical conduct on the other. The former emphasis on thought and principle, under the (probably main) influence of sociologist Emile Durkheim (1973) and psychologists Jean Piaget (1932) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1974), was to dominate moral educational theorising for much of the twentieth century. For all these theorists, it was basically an application to educational practice of the deontological ethics of the philosopher Immanuel Kant. On this view, moral development is largely a matter of cultivation of rational respect for universal principles of other-regarding rights and justice. On the other hand, the emphasis on moral education more as the psychological cultivation of character and correct practical conduct, while undoubtedly drawing some inspiration from the learning theory of early twentieth century (Russian and American) behaviourism, seems to have been largely a late twentieth-century reaction to what was perceived as the excessive rationalism and intellectualism and insufficiently practical focus of cognitive developmental theory (see, for example, Ryan & Bohlin, 2003; Lickona, 2004).

A moment's thought, however, should suffice to show that any extreme swing of the pendulum between moral reason and practical conduct is hardly helpful and that responsible moral agency (as in the case of other human action) cannot be other than appropriate conduct in the light of some form of reason. In this light, it has seemed for many contemporary theorists of moral education that final reconciliation of any and all oppositions between moral educational reason and conduct is to be found in a recently revived ethics of virtue drawing mainly on Aristotle's *Nicomachean ethics* (1941b). On this view, to be sure, the key components of moral life, commonly referred to in Anglophone usage as *virtues* (via the Greek *arete* and the Latin *virtus*) are basically qualities of *good character*. Such qualities are considered good (morally and otherwise) as conducive to the human well-being or flourishing of Aristotle's ethically naturalist conception of *eudaimonia*. Virtues such as self-control, courage, justice and fair dealing shape or condition human conduct in generally positive or beneficial directions, whereas human vices, such as indiscipline, cowardice and deceit, are the source of human ill or harm. However, such virtues are not merely mechanical or conditioned routines or habits. Rather, they are discriminating responses to the needs or requirements of some particular human circumstances under the rational guidance of that *intellectual* virtue of practical wisdom to which Aristotle refers as *phronesis*. It is via the rational exercise of *phronesis* that we can come to appreciate that courage, for example, is not always a matter of mere fearlessness: in short, that as much moral error may lie in store from the insufficient fear or caution of recklessness as from the excessive fear of cowardice.

To be sure, this is something that we may know on the basis of familiar (empirical) human interactive experience: those who are characteristically self-controlled, courageous and respectful of the interests, rights and feelings of others are generally regarded as better and admired more than those who have no self-control, pluck or fellow-feeling. Still, while such considerations about good character appear well and good up to a point, they are far from morally conclusive or unproblematic. To start with, *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, may have its uses for the right psychological balance of rational perception and affect in (say) the proper exercise of courage; thus, for example, absence of fear may be as (morally or otherwise) bad as excessive fear. However, it is less than clear how it might serve well in advising us how to act in those not humanly infrequent circumstances of moral uncertainty wherein it is precisely unclear what we should do. Thus, for example, in the famous soliloquy of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the prince asks (presumably, about which is of more virtuous character): "Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune or to take up arms against a sea of troubles and by opposing end them?". Here, whatever *phronesis* may have to contribute to Hamlet's grasp of courageous action, it would hardly seem to help much towards advising what he should *do*. And, to be sure, Aristotle himself is fairly explicit that practical wisdom, as a form of *deliberation* rather than knowledge (Aristotle, 1941b), must fall short of any such advice in Hamlet's or like circumstances. Indeed, all that *phronesis* seems to offer to would-be virtuous agents is

the advice that there are no *general* rational principles whereby such moral questions might be decided and that what it *might* be right to do depends much upon the agent's particular context or circumstances. But this is not much help to Hamlet either: he could be as clear as day about his circumstances, but yet quite unclear about precisely whether he should or should not rightly slay his uncle and stepfather Claudius.

But it seems a no less serious problem about basing morality on some notion of good or virtuous character that, apart from the fact that agents of bad or vicious character may sometimes perform good actions, agents of virtuous or morally exemplary character can act badly or even wickedly. It is neither logically contradictory nor at odds with common experience that genuinely temperate, courageous (or even mostly other-regarding) agents may often behave in quite morally wrong or unjustifiable ways. To be sure, it may be insisted by some virtue ethicists that there can be no *genuine* courage, temperance or other virtues unless these character traits are directed towards *morally* justified ends (see, for example, Geach, 1977); and it is possible (though by no means certain) that Aristotle himself may have subscribed to some such *unity of virtues* thesis. Still, first, if this position is not just actually question-begging, it would certainly set an impossibly high bar for most if not all common ascription of temperance, courage or even kindness or forgiveness: it makes perfectly good sense to regard a bank robber as truly courageous person or as a genuinely kind father even though he is not good or virtuous in other respects. Secondly, however, it is far from clear how (on a strict virtue ethical perspective) any such *moral* justification might be grounded. For while Aristotle certainly explored the idea of justice as both as character trait and more general moral principle (supposing this to be one likely yardstick of the moral), it therefore seems hard to construe virtuous character as other than largely strict observance of the principle. But such dependency of character on principle would now seem to jeopardise the status of virtue ethics as a strict ethics of character. And it should here be recalled that Elizabeth Anscombe, the founder of modern virtue ethics, commended return to an Aristotelian ethics of character precisely in view of her rejection of any useful search for a more principled measure of moral value (Anscombe, 1958).

Moreover, if we are to agree with Aristotle that the human virtues (bearing in mind that ancient Greek virtue and virtues could be other than human) of his *Nicomachean ethics* are not innate, but acquired, this last point brings into quite sharp relief the problem of how such qualities of character might be developed through experience or education. To be sure, Aristotle affirms that regular practice of the virtues is a key mechanism of virtuous character formation, but this obviously cannot be in and of itself sufficient. Besides, primary focus on habit formation risks some relapse into cruder behavioural conceptions of character education and losing sight of the contextualised guidance of Aristotelian *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. Nonetheless, the same Aristotelian repudiation in the name of *phronesis* of any appeal to *general* principles of moral conduct, reinforced by Anscombe's later dismissal of the principled ethics of duty (deontology) and utility (utilitarianism or consequentialism) of her day, would also seem to leave the nature of virtue acquisition no less uncertain. In short, if virtuous character needs to avoid the devil of habituation to fairly routine patterns of behaviour on the one hand and the no less undiscriminating deep blue sea of appeal to general moral principles on the other, how are aspiring virtuous agents to learn or acquire the more context-sensitive patterns of practical deliberation and judgement that serve to define genuine virtuous agency? Indeed, bearing in mind here that the virtues of good character are far from synonymous with *moral* conduct, by what measure might such judgements count as moral rather than (say) merely prudential or instrumentally opportune?

2. The prospects of moral learning from character

In the event, those drawn to the contemporary virtue ethical focus on qualities of so-called good character as the heart and soul of human moral life are inclined to regard something like close (empirical) encounter with or observation of the motives and conduct of others as the key means to moral learning. In short, on this view, effective moral learning crucially requires exposure to the moral example of others via the process that is usually referred to as role-modelling. Indeed, it might here be noticed that the function of role-modelling in moral learning has been strongly reinforced in latter day virtue ethics by a theory of so-called "exemplarism" (Zabzebski, 2010, 2013; for insightful criticism, see Szutta, 2019) that takes *admiration* of others to be the key mechanism of moral learning. To be sure, this perspective may appear compelling insofar as it seems undeniable that much moral learning does evidently follow from the influence of others, especially

those to whom the young are exposed in the persons of such early custodians as parents and teachers. This, in turn, speaks strongly in favour of some social and professional case for ensuring, as far as possible, that such early carers are persons of decent and responsible character and conduct (see, for example, Carr, 2007). Still, this line of argument may seem to be little more than question-begging and to put the empirical cart of admirable or imitable character before the horse of moral or normative appreciation. For how is the potential moral learner to recognise that those to whom they are exposed as appropriate role models come up to reputable moral scratch? Indeed, the very social and professional case for trying to ensure that early carers are morally respectable agents itself rests upon the commonly accepted fact that the influence of other people can be as often for moral ill as good: it is all too clear, from the slightest acquaintance with past human history and contemporary global politics, that very large numbers of people have been and continue to be all too easily influenced by persons of the worst possible human character and conduct in the course of close or more remote encounter, and thereby prompted towards the perpetration of unspeakable human injustices and atrocities. (For recent criticism of role-modelling approaches to moral education, see Carr, 2023a.)

That said, virtue ethicists and other would-be character educators have been drawn to another rather less immediately personal but clearly time-honoured route to good or virtuous character formation via the exposure of young or old to the rich heritage of literary narrative. A literary narrative which, from the earliest days of oral and written storytelling, has invariably been directly concerned with often detailed exploration of the consequences for (moral or other) good or ill of human psychology and agency. Thus, while moral and educational advocates of more normatively principled deontological, or consequentialist, ethics (of precisely the sort condemned by Anscombe) have been largely indifferent to past literature as a potential means to moral education, philosophers interested in character as a key engine of moral agency have been increasingly attentive to this possibility or prospect. One notable example is the distinguished twentieth century philosopher and popular novelist Iris Murdoch. While more influenced by Plato than Aristotle and perhaps not a virtue ethicist of recent stamp, she has clearly defended non-literal narrative or fiction as a key means to human understanding of the moral implications of character in both her philosophical and fictional writings (Murdoch 1970, 1973, 1997). For another, the highly influential (especially with regard to various forms of educational and other applied ethics) contemporary virtue ethicist Alastair MacIntyre has insisted that fictional literature and narratives (as distinct from the descriptive literature or discourse of this or that empirical scientific enquiry) reflect or constitute the basic logical form of human self-understanding in terms of moral agency (MacIntyre, 1981). On such views, we may stand to learn much if not everything about good or bad human motives and conduct and what makes them so from close attention to the past and present imaginative works of Euripides, Shakespeare or Tolstoy (which may also serve to explain why such fictions have so often found their way into the educational curricula of many if not most schools).

This general perspective on the moral educational significance and prospects of what has been celebrated as great or serious literature merits serious attention. Various defences of this view, such as so-called ethicism (Gaut, 1996) and moderate moralism (Carroll, 1996, 1998), have lately appeared in the literature of aesthetic theory. That said, this view is neither uncontested, entirely well formulated nor problem-free (especially in any overstated form). In this light, we may for the moment briefly notice and dismiss the general drift of one familiar objection to the moral educational potential of literature from the direction of so-called aestheticism. Aestheticism (defended of late with specific regard to fiction by Peter Lamarque; see, for example, Lamarque & Olsen, 1990, or Lamarque, 1996) is the source of two main complaints about any suggested moral educational use of literature. First, insofar as fictions are artworks, no reading of them for the purpose of moral edification may amount to genuine literary appreciation. Second, insofar as such works are imaginative creations, they cannot be expected and must fail to shed much if any light on real human moral issues. Indeed, far from shedding further light on human moral concerns, the ascription of moral significance to any fictional literature would appear to *presuppose* some already existing moral perspective on the part of readers. For present purposes, however, the key flaw of aestheticism would seem to be some serious conflation of the fairly distinct concepts of the artistic and the aesthetic; indeed, of effective reduction of the former to the latter.

Briefly, for present purposes, while the distinction between the aesthetic and the artistic has been variously made in recent times (see, for example, Best, 1982;

Hepburn, 1984; Carroll, 1986; Carr, 1999; Stecker, 2005; McFee, 2005), it is clear that there are objects or events of aesthetic concern (such as sunsets or birdsong) that are of no artistic point or significance. And (at least notionally) there are artistic concerns or achievements (such as some *conceptual* works) of little or no aesthetic import. To be sure, there is some danger of overstating this distinction insofar as artworks entirely devoid of aesthetic qualities (such as perhaps Cage's *4'33"*) seem to be also the exception rather than the rule. Still, it seems safe enough to say that while most literary artists are concerned to give aesthetic form to their works, they are also mostly concerned to express something of substantial artistic point substance. Unlike sunsets or birdsongs, literary works such as poems, novels or plays invariably have some dramatic, psychological, moral or other point or purpose. Thus, while such poets as Wordsworth, Yeats and Eliot; such dramatists as Euripides and Shakespeare, and such novelists as Austen, Dickens and Dostoevsky are evidently creators of works of aesthetically significant shape and form, they are no less clearly concerned to express or convey substantial points or lessons to readers about the world, human association and psychological, moral or other human nature. Indeed, any failure to appreciate this would clearly miss the artistic point of such works almost entirely. This said, unlike (say) histories or newspapers, it is not the main point or intent of artworks to report or comment directly on the happenings of everyday human life and association. To this extent, there would still seem to be something in the aestheticist objection to which we will need to return following some attention to the moral prospects and limitations of any and all attention to the fictional depiction of human character.

3. Fictional attention to human virtuous and other character

There cannot, of course, be much doubt that books (of all kinds and genres) comprise much of the educational input of modern literate societies and cultures. To be sure, while some of this literature has sought to transmit scientific and technical knowledge of human material or economic progress, much has evidently been concerned with the wider moral and spiritual formation of societies and cultures. Thus, the Christian Bible and Shakespeare have been jointly cited as the basic texts of western civilization. That said, the plays of Shakespeare and other great literary figures of the western canon, beginning perhaps with Homer and the classic Greek tragedians, are evidently works of *fiction*; as, indeed, the Christian Bible is also likely to be considered by many, if not most people, in the secular climate of contemporary western society. Thus, on one extreme view, it may be said that such works could or should have no significant influence on anything of much modern concern. As already noted, however, the virtue ethicist Alasdair MacIntyre has compellingly argued (broadly in the spirit of Aristotle) that the creative and imaginative narratives of received culture are rich and indispensable sources of moral and spiritual wisdom to which human agents cannot avoid turning for guidance. From the very dawn of humanity, on this view, such narratives have been the main source or vehicle for exploration of the complexities of character, motive and conduct (even where these have been attributed to non-human agents or animals) as implicated in the human search for ultimate purpose and meaning in life.

In this light, MacIntyre (1981) regards narrative as the basic logical form of human moral understanding of self and others: as he puts it, humans essentially understand themselves as characters in stories. Again, however, this view has also been echoed by other moral theorists and is perhaps most significantly anticipated (though, from a rather different Platonic perspective) by the distinguished twentieth century philosopher and novelist Iris Murdoch. More precisely, Murdoch argued that novelists should regard it as the very purpose of fictional work to explore the moral complexities of human character and association, and professed this to be her aim in her own fictional work. While this view would appear somewhat overstated (since novels and other fictional literature have often set out with the rather less ambitious purposes of entertaining or exploring other aspects of human life), it is nevertheless consistent with a time-honoured perspective on the role of fiction and drama in the economy of human moral edification. Hence, exploration of moral character, association and conduct have certainly had a large, if not pre-eminent, role in the works of such authors of the western canon as Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, William Thackeray, Thomas Hardy, James, George Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and countless others.

Still, alongside his defence of imaginative literature as a prime vehicle of moral and spiritual narratives, MacIntyre also embraced (at least in his early and more influential major works) a non-naturalist

ethics according to which virtues are socially constructed products of essentially rival cultural and moral traditions that have also often diverged to the point of direct opposition or conflict. Hence, while still following Aristotle in construing virtues as integral to, or constitutive of, human flourishing, divergent or rival social and cultural traditions have often enshrined or celebrated different virtues or moral priorities. While this case is made by MacIntyre mainly by reference to past cultural, theological and philosophical trends (for example, in terms of the contrast between the *heroic* virtues of past pre-modern societies and the more compassionate virtues of Christendom, or between the Christianity and pagan Aristotelianism that Aquinas sought to reconcile), such moral divergence might well be expected to show up quite as conspicuously in past and present literature (and he does illustrate this by reference to Icelandic sagas and other literature). As I have elsewhere argued (Carr, 2017), Macintyre's overall presentation of this case seems questionable on the grounds that, while human literary works could be hardly other than products of their historical socio-cultural contexts, it is nevertheless apparent that the work of most past great authors (such as those already cited) is often notable for its *moral critique* of the values of such authors' own societies. All the same, it appears that attention to imaginative literature does indeed reveal quite dramatic conflicts and ambivalences between conceptions of virtue and moral flourishing, ancient and modern, that also seem quite beyond MacIntyrean or other (not least Aristotelian) resolution.

There can also, of course, be little doubt about the enormous economic, social, cultural and other changes that have overtaken human life and association (perhaps most notably in developed western countries) from antiquity to the modern day (for brief notice of these, one might need only consult Marx's *Communist manifesto*.) With respect to present literary concerns, however, we might observe two crucial periods of western European history. The first of these is the period of complex transition from medieval feudalism to modern industrialism that is generally termed the Renaissance. While, on the one hand, often nostalgic for the ideals and learning of classical antiquity, it is also a period of shifting post-medieval social and economic trends and of a new humanism of scientific discovery and artistic creation. This general period is witness to the emergence of writers of such enduring stature, impact and importance as Thomas More, Edmund Spenser, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Francis Bacon and Christopher Marlowe, whose works variously reflect such social and economic transition from the medieval to the modern (as evident, for example, in emerging class tension between an older feudal aristocracy and a rising economically powerful mercantile bourgeoisie).

Clearly, however, the other highly significant revolutionary episode of European history, occurring around the height of the Renaissance, was the Reformation. Thus, from its early sixteenth century origin, rejection of the traditional hegemony of the Roman church by various movements of religious reform also resulted (along with much bloodshed) in social, cultural, moral, spiritual, intellectual (and, inevitably, literary) ferment and revolution from one end of Christendom to the other.

In this light, one author whose work perhaps more than any other reflects the cultural and intellectual turmoil, tensions and ambivalences of such times (particularly in his own politically and religiously divided country) is the English poet John Milton. The moral and spiritual tensions and ambivalences in Milton's work are plain enough. On the one hand, as an advocate of religious reform, Milton aspires to purify Christian faith of what he and other reformers construe as the tyrannical and oppressive abuses of Roman ecclesiastical hierarchy. However, he does so without any fundamental rejection of the essentially authoritarian Christian narrative of sin through disobedience and redemption via (according to much Protestant theology) fairly arbitrary divine grace and forgiveness. On the other hand, however, as a proto-liberal champion of freedom of conscience, thought and speech, Milton is also an advocate of religious and political dissent from unwarranted or arbitrary (especially secular) authority or coercion.

Once these two inclinations or commitments on Milton's part are made explicit, their evident tensions or conflicts are not hard to see. They are also conspicuously apparent in the literary work for which Milton is best remembered: his remarkable blank verse epic *Paradise lost*. To begin with, it is fairly evident that the rebel angel Satan is the most prominent and memorable character of Milton's poem (if not, indeed, its actual hero). To be sure, Satan is on the wrong side of the Christian religious tracks and his downfall (in line with orthodox Christian theology) is attributed to his disobedience of a benevolent and merciful God. In this regard, Milton's narrative has Satan confessing at one point to his ingratitude for God's favours: "What could be less

than to afford him praise. The easiest recompense, and pay him thanks. How due! Yet all his good proved ill in me. And wrought but malice" (Milton, 2005).

On the other hand, Satan (in more the patrician spirit of Aristotle) seems to see no compelling reason for gratitude if divine or other benefits are bestowed *de haut en bas* by imposed, if not arbitrary, authority: "Lifted up so high, I denied subjection, and thought one step higher would set me highest; and in a moment quit the debt immense of endless gratitude, so burdensome still paying, still to owe" (Milton, 2005).

At all events, leaving aside for the moment his theologically ambivalent stance, the most striking feature of Satan is that he is a courageous rebel who is unwilling to accept a destiny of submission to the will of others and a life that is not self-determined, authentic or self-determined. On the one hand, to be sure, such self-assertion or refusal of any authority may sometimes appear to be no more than misplaced or perverse pride, or *hubris*: indeed, the Devil's tempting of Christ to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple in the gospel narratives is evidently the theological warrant for regarding Satan's pride in *Paradise lost* as the last, worst and most unpardonable of sins. But Satan's defiance of authority may clearly also be regarded as morally exemplary; as, precisely, a source of admirable virtues of courage, initiative and resilience in the face of unequal and (literally) hopeless odds and adversity. Moreover, to those with some acquaintance with literary traditions and trends prior and subsequent to *Paradise lost*, it is impossible to ignore the conspicuous (moral or other) literary predecessors and successors to Milton's Satan.

4. The devil's ancestors, disciples and heirs

It would seem that Satan's most conspicuous literary antecedent is the titan Prometheus of Greek myth, memorably dramatized by the tragedian Aeschylus in *Prometheus bound*. In defiance of Zeus, he stole fire to liberate humans from impotent submission to a divinely ordained state of nature. As Satan was punished by God to an eternity in hell, so Prometheus was condemned by Zeus to crucifixion and eternal torment by daily devouring of his liver by an eagle. To be sure, the obvious objection to any such parallel is that whereas the mythical rebel Prometheus was an apparent benefactor of mankind, Milton's rebel Satan plots the downfall of mankind by tempting Eve and subsequently Adam to disobedient consumption of the apple from the tree of knowledge. However, something may here depend on theological interpretation of the *Genesis* myth. For it seems that, in ancient gnostic pagan and Christian versions of the narrative, the mythical creator of Eden and its human occupants was not the supreme ruling spirit of the universe, but a local demiurge intent on keeping his creation in ignorant thrall to his arbitrary will. Thus, in *The Apocryphon of St John* (one of the non-canonical gospels discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945), an explicit dialogue on the *Genesis* narrative occurs between the apostle John and Jesus the saviour in which the latter takes full responsibility for encouraging Adam and Eve to eat of the tree of knowledge by asserting "But I was the one who induced them to eat" (Meyer, 1998, p. 175.) On this ancient reading of *Genesis*, the original temptation opened up a spiritually progressive route to knowledge or wisdom (enabling freedom from the tyranny of a false deity). Thus, Jesus of the New Testament gospels appears as a teacher of the knowledge (*logos*, or Word) of the true world-transcendent God which aspires to replace and transcend the oppressive and repressive law of the Old Testament Jehovah. (Gnostic construal of the *Genesis* story us also evident in the cinematic narrative of the 1998 movie *Pleasantville*; see Carr, 2023b.)

Moreover, this gnostic take on the *Genesis* narrative is also fairly evident in the poetic works of the early modern English author and artist who was an ardent admirer of Milton: namely, the visionary painter and poet William Blake. Thus, in Blake's somewhat perplexing *Prophetic books*, some such overall gnostic drift seems evident in the general construction and *dramatis personae* of these complex narratives. On the one hand, Blake's Urizen (identifiable with the oppressive conventional morality of church and state and/or the cold rationality of Newtonian scientific reason) resembles the repressive demiurge of gnostic theology. On the other hand, such characters as Los (Urthona), Luvah and/or Orc are expressive (more or less respectively) of imagination, love and passion as largely opposed to such cold reason. Of course, the rebellious powers and sentiments opposed to Urizen are inspired more by the altruistic virtues of the canonical gospel Jesus than by Satanic pride. But Blake famously observed in his *Marriage of heaven and hell* that "Milton…was of the Devil's party without knowing it". His own work (along with that of such contemporaries as Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley) plays a significant part in fueling a new romantic literary sensibility of individual independence, self-determination

and emancipation from the repressive political, religious, economic and other influences and institutions of both traditional (feudal) and modern (industrial and capitalist) society and culture. To be sure, while the literary genius of early romantics may well have been expressive and supportive of the distinctively new modern politics of freedom and democracy pioneered by the likes of John Locke and Jean Jacques Rousseau, it should not be forgotten that Blake and Wordsworth were no less strongly opposed to the utilitarianism, philistinism and human degradation that the new political and economic liberalism of industrial capitalist exploitation trailed in its wake.

In this light, one cannot doubt that the new modern moral sensibility of earlier and later literary romanticism (broadly speaking, the main drift of fiction, drama and poetry from the late eighteenth century to the end of the nineteenth century, if not beyond) seems more sympathetic to the rebellious, self-assertive and iconoclastic virtues of Milton's Satan than to the Christian virtues of humility and service to others promoted by official eastern and western churches for the purpose of encouraging lower feudal orders to know and accept their subordinate place. Thus, despite all other significant and interesting differences, such major English nineteenth century novelists as Jane Austen, the Bröntes, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy (as well as their foreign counterparts) are much concerned to promote an essentially romantic project of liberation of their heroes and heroines from various constraints of social convention, class prejudice or patriarchy that prevent them from realizing their mature moral growth, individual potential or ambition. To be sure, it cannot be denied that the fictional worlds invented by these authors (in which their various self-affirming characters pursue their imagined destinies) are (even in the case of an evident non-believer such as Hardy) also informed by moral ideals and virtues of some Christian provenance. That said, it is fairly evident, as early as Matthew Arnold's mid-nineteenth poem "Dover Beach", that a major cultural and literary break with the traditional Christian moral basis of western culture is looming on the horizon.

Moreover, it seems plausible to trace the decisive break with traditional western European subscription to the moral authority, or truth of the Christian gospels (at least, in literary terms) to the work of the nineteenth century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. While it is customary to regard Nietzsche as a founding father (perhaps along with Soren Kierkegaard) of twentieth century existentialism, he is no less aptly regarded as a philosophical spokesman of nineteenth century romanticism (itself a main source of much later existentialism). While it is also of considerable present interest that Nietzsche has lately been lauded as a type of virtue ethicist (Swanton, 2003), the virtues that he extolls could hardly be further away from the moral and theological virtues celebrated by (for obvious example) such major Christian theologians as St Thomas Aquinas. In short, Nietzsche's virtues are not at all the Christian virtues of love, humility and selflessness. On the contrary, they are significantly closer to Miltonian satanic (or perhaps, in the terms of later romanticism, Byronic) virtues of self-assertion, personal independence, revolutionary action, resistance to imposed authority and individuality of expression, showing thus much disdain for humility or servility of character. Indeed, Nietzsche's contempt for and dismissal of what he evidently considered to be the pusillanimous and feeble character of the specifically western Christian social morality of humility and selflessness could hardly be more evident:

> Our weak, unmanly social concepts of good and evil and their tremendous ascendancy over body and soul have finally weakened all bodies and souls and snapped the self-reliant, independent, unprejudiced men, the pillars of a *strong* civilization. (Nietzsche, 2012, p. 163)

Indeed, it is not merely that Nietzschean virtues seem significantly satanic, but that they are invoked and celebrated to the end of opposition to Satan's very own enemy, namely, the Christian God, whose final demise was also famously pronounced by Nietzsche. For many, of course, such radical departure from or opposition to received Christian faith and morality will be sufficient to dismiss the Nietzschean perspective as false, immoral and even demonic. In this light, the influence of Nietzsche's satanically virtuous *Übermensch* on the toxic twentieth century Nazi ideology will also no doubt spring to mind. That said, aside from his formative influence on the mid-twentieth century philosophy and fictional literature of existentialism, it is hard to think of a major literary figure of early to middle years of that century who was not influenced by some reading of Nietzsche, including, amongst many others, James Joyce, Henrik Ibsen, D. H. Lawrence, George Bernard Shaw, Eugene O'Neill, Oscar Wilde, W. B. Yeats, Thomas Mann, Hermann Hesse, Andre Gide and Albert Camus. Many new literary traditions (such as stream of consciousness fiction, the neo-symbolist literature of existentialism and

new social realist fiction) were also undoubtedly influenced by the problematization of traditional Christian morality of the new twentieth century climate of secularism, to which Darwin and Marx, as well as Nietzsche, clearly contributed. However, a large proportion of such post-Nietzschean literature is aptly construed as neo-romantic by virtue of its significant concern with themes of the human search for authentic identity, self determination and liberation from the shackles of convention pioneered by nineteenth century forbears. Thus, for example, the (especially female) protagonists of D. H. Lawrence are much exercised with the issue of escaping traditional patriarchal gender or sexual constraints in a way that is not at all dissimilar in spirit from the aspirations of Charlotte Brönte's *Jane Eyre*. Still, it may be that the Nietzschean quest for the uncompromising honesty and integrity of personal independence and authenticity is best captured by the declaration (as well as the actions) of Dr. Stockman in Ibsen's *Enemy of the people*, that "the strongest man is he who stands most alone".

At all events, this abundance of past and more recent fictional literature serves only to compound the immense difficulties in the way of efforts to discern any clear moral compass for human moral development via primary or exclusive attention to human character in the rich heritage of literary tradition. It cannot be doubted that much (if not all) ancient and modern imaginative literature has often primarily sought to plumb the psychological and moral depths and complexities of character in a potentially infinite range of individual and social contexts and circumstances. However, the greatest, most memorable and enduring of such literature has often been just as if not more concerned to explore the frequent ambivalence and conflict of such character and can rarely be taken (as aesthetic formalists are wont to complain) to provide certain or unequivocable advice of much direct relevance or application to everyday human life. Indeed, we are all too often shown how agents of many admirable qualities (such as Homer's Achilles) can be capable of morally bad or squalid conduct and those of weak, corrupt or deplorable qualities (such as Sydney Carton in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*) may yet be redeemed by actions of morally positive or altruistic conduct. Thus, however sympathetic we may be towards the desire of Shakespeare's Hamlet (perhaps the most conflicted and ambivalent of all literary characters) for revenge on Claudius, it might well seem ill-advised to endorse his final murderous expression of this sentiment in similar circumstances (even if it might make any sense to speak here of *similar* circumstances). Likewise, however much we might admire Milton's Satan for his impressive courage and heroism (which the poet also shows to be mixed with other morally less desirable qualities), we might, at the very least, want to question the morality of the ends to which such qualities are directed. In any case, whether we finally judge such characters to be morally good or bad, right or wrong, will ultimately depend on moral values that we bring to such fictions rather than derive from them.

5. Conclusion: art is not life

While we have lately taken modern aesthetic formalism to task on the grounds of its misguided confusion between, or reduction of, artistic to aesthetic significance, we are nevertheless now better placed to comprehend the real point behind formalist or aestheticist resistance to artistic moralism or other *instrumental* construal of the ultimate ends or purposes of art. To be sure, insofar as extreme aesthetic formalism (of, as it were, art for art's sake) has often appeared to hold that genuine artistic appreciation must be exclusively focused on the intrinsic formal or aesthetic properties of artworks, it would seem to confine all significant art to (perhaps non-cognitive) entertainment or distraction. Thus, it precludes the prospect of much real human instruction or learning from literary or other art. But this clearly cannot be right. In the first place, as our second prefatory quote from Northrop Frye indicates, this risks emphasis on the integrity of fictions to the exclusion of their seriousness. In the second place, however, it also fatally ignores the crucial distinction between the language of history and other *descriptive* human literary contexts or purposes and its more *philosophical* deployment in poetry that Aristotle draws in our first prefatory quote from his *Poetics* (a work that may also be fairly considered the foundational text of western aesthetic theory).

To be sure, Aristotle's distinction is perfectly in line with a very basic tenet of much post-Kantian formalist and other modern aesthetic theory which aims to observe a quite fundamental distinction between the language or semantics of ordinary descriptive discourse (which is also employed in history or the sciences to report the contingent facts of past or present human experience) and the literary or other artistic language or semantics of human imaginative creation of, for example, tragedy or other art. Briefly, in the terms of modern analytical (post-Fregean) philosophy and log-

ic, the fictional language or narrative of imaginative artworks is *intensional* (not to be confused with *intentional*) rather than *extensional*. That is to say that, while the propositions that we encounter in a novel, such as Jane Austen's *Emma* or Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist,* have evident *sense*, or meaning, within such fictional contexts, they do not (unlike the propositions of ordinary, historical or scientific discourse) have any *reference* to events in the actual world beyond such contexts. Thus, the narratives in which such propositions or (pseudo) statements occur are entirely the constructs or inventions of human *imagination* and should not be confused with the real world of empirical experience. Moreover, while this point might seem so trivial as to be hardly worth making, it is of quite wide-ranging educational import. To begin with, while most people of mature years will have little difficulty distinguishing the non-literal or fictional narratives of fairy story or Greek mythology from the purportedly factual reports of history or science, much modern mischief continues to be caused by failure to distinguish what are clearly the myths of past religious traditions (perhaps especially of the Old and New Testaments of the Christian Bible) from actual historical record. At all events, there can here be little doubt that this basic distinction of the non-referential language of art and fiction from forms of referential discourse lies at the heart of latter-day aesthetic formalist objection to any and all attempts to derive moral or other lessons from imaginative narratives.

That said, it seems no less mistaken to hold (as, at least, more extreme of such aestheticists appear to have held) that, because fictional narratives have no direct external reference, there can be little or nothing of any wider worldly value or relevance to be gained from them. Indeed, this is quite evidently *not* the position of Aristotle in our introductory quote, where he quite explicitly affirms that "poetry is something more philosophic and *of graver import* than history". Indeed, it might here be noted that, while some distinguished modern advocates of the educational significance of fictional literature (such as Iris Murdoch 1970, 1227) seem to have held that narrative fiction has more human relevance the closer it approximates to *real life*, it would to the contrary appear that the highest of literary regard has more often been accorded to works of evidently pure fantasy (such as Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, Milton's *Paradise lost* and Shakespeare's *The tempest*; not to mention the parables of Jesus) at the very farthest remove from any actual (empirical) human experience. This, to be sure, clearly underscores the general danger of failing to distinguish the real human significance of imaginative fiction from that of literal description. For while generations of readers have greatly profited by way of profound human insight from Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (without the least illusion as to the non-literal or figurative character of such stories), it is evident that many more have quite failed to appreciate the real human import or significance of the no less fictional narratives of *Genesis* or *Kings* by literal readings of these biblical books.

But then, how can stories or narratives that clearly do not report on or refer directly to actual human events or affairs be said to have meaning outside or beyond their distraction or entertainment value? On the face of it, Aristotle's more particular response to this question (at least, as applied to ancient Greek drama), in terms of the *cathartic* power of tragedy to purge or purify human emotions of pity or fear, may appear less than helpful. While it may be true up to a point that audiences are often moved in this fashion by tragedies or other literary narratives, this does not seem to be the case of all such works (though it would also appear that other works are instructive in ways that tragedy is not). Thus, the more generally compelling Aristotelian point evidently lies in his understanding of the language of poetry or other literary art (as distinct from that of history) as concerned with the *universalization* or *typification* more than description of human actions or affairs. Following Aristotle's lead, the great twentieth century literary critic Northrop Frye usefully distinguishes the language and idioms of imaginative literature from the descriptive discourses of science and other more literal enterprises as "myths of concern" (Frye, 1974). It should also be clear here that Frye is here strictly faithful to Aristotle's own use of the term *myth* to denote the stories or narratives of his purely imaginative and fictional poetry. In these terms, while such purely fictional constructs can have no direct reference to human actions or affairs (and it would be a dire mistake to assume they have such application), they may yet be potent sources of human instruction or education by way of the characteristic poetic devices of metaphor, analogy, parable, allegory, satire, irony and other imaginative, semantic and conceptual tropes and idioms that are no less clearly vehicles of insight into the human condition. So, while it would be mere folly to construe Swift's *Gulliver's travels*, Cervantes' *Don Quixote* or Kafka's *The trial* as reporting on actual historical events, we may yet stand to learn much about human folly as such from the large and small

characters of Swift's *Gulliver*, about true human wisdom and humanity from Quixote's apparent madness, and about the potential dystopian nightmare of human bureaucracy from the fictional fate of K in Kafka's frightening parable.

With regard to particular present concerns about moral learning from literature, then, we clearly need to distinguish two different respects or levels in which fictional literature may be implicated or embroiled in moral (or, more specifically, character education). On the one hand, we do need to take on board aestheticist, or formalist, caution against drawing any clear directly applicable conclusions for everyday practical conduct from imaginative poetry or literature. Apart from the consideration that the characters of fictional narratives are just precisely *characters* in *stories* (so that the conduct attributed to them can have real point or purpose only in the context of such stories), we have seen that no very reliable moral conclusions can be drawn from either real or fictional perceptions of human character and that any such judgements that we may apply to them must derive from other sources of reflection. Indeed, as the introductory quote from Frye implies, insofar as the primary aim of fiction or other art is not to describe the actual world but to construct imaginative possibilities, it is actually liable to artistic failure if it explicitly professes any non-artistic and propagandist function (as in the case perhaps of much so-called social realist painting). Still, all this said, any extreme formalist or aestheticist denial of the moral significance or value of fictional literature is no less clearly belied by the Aristotelian distinction of the *philosophical* purposes of poetry from the descriptive function of history. Thus, while the *heroic* Satan of Milton's *Paradise lost* (or other literary figures) may afford us little direct practical guidance for conduct in the non-fictional world, this fictional character, as well as others, can nevertheless provide rich food for philosophical thought on the wider and more general conceptual or normative contours of potentially human character and conduct. This might well be put by saying that although we would not be well-advised to seek practical *instruction* on character and conduct from Milton's Satan, one may yet regard *Paradise lost* as a potent source of *education* concerning the wider and more principled normative and moral contours of human life. In this regard, indeed, such more *philosophical*, objective or *disinterested* acquaintance with great literary works may also serve to avoid the potentially lethal hazards of currently vaunted personal role-modelling approaches to moral and character education, which clearly risk exposing the young or gullible to quite the wrong sorts of undesirable influence from others (Carr, 2023a). But while Milton's masterpiece may persuade us that Satan has virtues of some such loose designation, we may therefore also hope to gain from the wider context and scope of this powerful narrative (and by comparison of this character and his story with those of other great fictions) a broader or more *educated* vision of the limits and defects of human character and conduct as such.

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Author's biography

David Carr. Emeritus Professor of the University of Edinburgh and was until recently Professor of Ethics and Education at the University of Birmingham (UK) Jubilee Centre for the Study of Character and Virtues. He is author of four books, editor or co-editor of several major collections of essays on philosophy and/or education and his papers have appeared in such journals as *Mind*, *Philosophy*, *Philosophical Quarterly*, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, *Philosophical Studies*, *Journal of Value Inquiry*, *British Journal of Aesthetics*, *Educational Theory* and *Oxford Educational Review*. Much of his work has explored aspects of virtue ethics and, more recently, the impact of literature and various other arts on moral character.