

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39468-0 - Agents and Lives: Moral Thinking in Literature

S. L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER I

'Perpetually moralists' ... 'in a large sense'

I

Various interested parties keep saying that the traditional 'humanist' critical study of English literature – centred on, though not of course confined to, imaginative moral understanding and literary evaluation – is on its last legs, but I very much doubt if they are right. For one thing, their conception of that tradition is little more than a caricature of its real complexity and openness; and for another, it is hard to see any of the alternatives on offer becoming popular outside the walls of academic professionalism. Admittedly, in matters like this one's reasons inevitably involve a good many calculated guesses and unverifiable judgments – moral probabilities, as they used to be called. But it seems to me that, given a reasonably free, open and cohesive society, people are more likely than not to go on being 'humanist', at least in the sense of being interested in people, and interested in them at least as much as in abstract theories and ideologies, or impersonal forces, or structural systems, or historical information, or even the play of signifiers. They are also more likely than not, I think, to go on wanting literature to be interested in people too, to go on valuing those writings that they judge best help them to realize what the world is and what people are, to persist in distinguishing between those ideas, utterances, fictions and texts that they believe enlighten or deepen or enrich their minds and those that do not; and also persist in thinking that this is still a good ground for preferring some books to others. Moreover, I think that as we still face certain intractable questions, so they will

too: the sort of questions, I mean, that people have always disputed most bitterly – whether with others, or themselves, or with the gods – precisely because they have to be answered and yet no answer to them can be known to be right. For the questions are not so much, ‘What do we really know about the world and ourselves?’ or ‘What shall we do with what we know?’ but rather, ‘What is most important for us to know?’, ‘What is most worth our deepest and fullest attention, as having most bearing not only on what we are and do, but also on what we might become?’

Something like this, I take it, was what Bacon had in mind in saying that ‘in this theatre of man’s life, it is reserved only for God and Angels to be lookers on’;¹ and what Arnold had in mind in saying, of the fundamentally ‘moral’ bent of English poetry, that ‘a large sense is of course to be given to the term *moral*. Whatever bears on the question, “how to live”, comes under it.’² It is also evidently what Johnson meant, repeating a point that is at least as old as Aristotle, in saying (apropos education in the ‘Life of Milton’) that ‘we are perpetually moralists, but we are geometricians only by chance. Our intercourse with intellectual nature is necessary; our speculations upon matter are voluntary, and at leisure.’³ In its context, Johnson’s word ‘moralists’ is bound up with his particular kind of Christian faith, but his general point is not. People may or may not happen to understand geometry, or need to. They may choose to occupy themselves with science or not. But it is not a matter either of chance or of choice whether they are ‘moralists’ – at least in one basic sense of the word. For in *that* sense, being a ‘moralist’ is not a particular, dispensable activity of mind, nor a particular vocation or ‘choice of life’ (to use a key phrase from *Rasselas*). It is not even to live ‘the ethical-life’ or ‘the moral life’. It is to be alive as a human being among other human beings. In other words, the key fact is not moral *choice* in itself; it is rather the value-shaped, value-shaping nature of all inter-human mental activity. Choice is only one mode of such activity, one place on the whole spectrum of feeling, noticing, foregrounding, selecting, heeding, realizing, respecting, delighting, preferring, ranking, loving, valuing,

Perpetually moralists

3

deciding and all the other modes of reflective and unreflective judging. To regard people as ‘perpetually moralists’ is therefore to hold a certain view of human nature and of the status of certain questions. It is to see us as creatures necessarily engaged in intercourse with material nature, but no less so with intellectual nature – our own as well as other people’s (living, dead and unborn), not to mention that of God and the angels.

Johnson, of course, would certainly have mentioned that of God. Just before the sentence I have quoted, he remarks that, for the ‘great or frequent business of the human mind’,

the first requisite is the religious and moral knowledge of right and wrong; the next is an acquaintance with the history of mankind, and with those examples which may be said to embody truth, and prove by events the reasonableness of opinions. Prudence and Justice are virtues and excellencies of all times and all places; we are perpetually moralists...

We today would hardly speak so confidently about ‘religious and moral *knowledge* of right and wrong’ or ‘examples which may be said to embody *truth*’. We are more likely to think of moral judgments as ‘opinions’ and moral values as intersubjective, or as having only a provisional objectivity and universality. But this area of moral probabilities, of the ‘reasonableness of opinions’, is all the ground that traditional criticism and the critical study of English literature require; and their footing in it is made no less secure by realizing that, if no intercourse with intellectual nature can be value-free, this also applies to what Johnson himself said about it or what I am saying about it now. All *that* means is that every one of us is in the same boat, and that even the most erudite, rationalistic, or speculative, supposedly non-evaluative ‘literary science’, for example, is as value-laden as *The Great Tradition* or last week’s *London Review of Books*. Indeed, one could argue, as I would, that the values with which ‘literary science’ is laden generally prove to be drearily conventional, predictable, not to say complacent – and largely because they are disguised as ‘science’, *Wissenschaft*, and not brought out into the open and argued for against other possibilities. Either that, or they prove no less drearily

crude, not to say formulaic, no more than the unself-critical application of some theory, or public ideology, or 'ism'.

Similarly with attacks on any kind of authoritative 'centre' – on an established 'canon' of literature, for example, or on the very concept of 'literature' as something different from, and 'privileged' over, other writings. What the attacker sees as the imposition of an authoritarian, quasi-religious orthodoxy, is actually the necessary cultural process of sifting out those writings that retain interest and value for different readers at different times in different social formations.⁴ And of course the anti-canonist is also taking part in this process, using the unmasking of 'values' – other people's values, that is – as an evaluative strategy. Anti-canonists are rarely without alternative texts or interpretations or judgments that we ought to find more interesting than the 'canon', more 'valid', more deserving of time and energy. In practice, they are no less perpetually and necessarily moralists than the rest of us.

All of this is obvious enough, I suppose, though it is worth reminding ourselves occasionally of the sense in which any traditionally critical study of English literature is, and must be, 'humanist'. Its central concern is with the human or moral significance of literature – 'moral' in every sense of the word, I would claim; and this is why critical evaluation, the judgment of such significance, is as essential a part of that concern as is understanding – the point being, in fact, that in moral thinking and discussing 'the reasonableness of opinions' in moral matters, understanding and evaluation are not separable, even if they are theoretically distinguishable.

Yet if all this is obvious, acting on it, or sometimes just saying it, is likely to produce an amazing degree of hostility from some academics, and not just from those with anti-'humanist' ideologies to push. They suppose that one must want literature – and criticism too – to be perpetually teaching or preaching some moral doctrine, or pronouncing stiff moral judgments, or pestering people with reminders that they are no better than they should be. Some academics seem to think that any interest in the moral dimensions of literature is merely a fashion that went out years ago. Others seem to believe that morality is

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39468-0 - Agents and Lives: Moral Thinking in Literature

S. L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Perpetually moralists*

5

essentially a matter of performing or refraining from certain external actions – a matter of visibly conducting oneself according to the code prescribed by God, or the Church, or the Law, or some other inscrutable (and usually patriarchal) authority, or perhaps by Utilitarian calculations instead. Where morality is conceived like that, it is hardly surprising if ‘moral’ becomes a ‘dirty word’ for many people.⁵ But then why conceive morality and the sphere of the moral so crudely and reductively? Perhaps, as one philosopher has suggested, it is the influence of English philosophers like John Stuart Mill and G. E. Moore that is to blame; perhaps it is also the effect of English schoolmasters and American preachers. In any case, it is a surprisingly common conception of morality, and a surprisingly common attitude to the word ‘moral’, even now and even among people who might be expected to know better.

Sometimes, of course, this academic hostility towards evaluative judgment has powerful personal reasons behind it. It may well come from a deep and quite sincere lack of moral curiosity, for instance; or from a wholly authentic incapacity to *see* differences of quality, even between arguments, let alone works of literature. Then again, it may come from the kind of political zeal that regards any form of ‘discrimination’ as élitist or an assertion of mere ‘privilege’; or from the kind of political faith that regards critical understanding and judgment as nothing but ideological warfare carried on by other means. Then again, the hostility may come from the warm, foggy ‘pluralism’ which supposes the critical study of literature to be only a matter of applying some preconceived ‘approach’ to it, and every ‘approach’ to be just as good as any other; and which therefore supposes critical evaluation to be merely ‘the evaluative approach’ or ‘the moral approach’ – one that unfortunately sometimes questions the ‘validity’ of other ‘approaches’. Or the hostility to critical judgment may come from the kind of academic quidnuncery that supposes ‘critical’ thinking and keeping at the ‘leading edge’ of the subject consist in picking up ‘ideas’ from other disciplines, and then finding literature on which to apply these ‘ideas’. Evaluation tends to be dismissed as naive, old-fashioned and not worth doing.⁶

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-39468-0 - Agents and Lives: Moral Thinking in Literature

S. L. Goldberg

Excerpt

[More information](#)

On the other hand, it must be said that the ways of the righteous have not always been especially winning. Given the legal-religious (and highly questionable) conception of morality that has dominated our culture for so many centuries – the conception of it as a necessarily single, coherent, and objective system, with a higher authority than that of any individual, imperative in form and function, prohibitive and punitive in effect, applicable to everybody, and designed to ensure the best all round – it has always offered a useful and not unenjoyable opportunity for anybody who likes bossing people about, even if only himself. And of course, there has never been a shortage of volunteers. On the whole, their efforts seem to have contributed more to the history of mankind than to its righteousness; but one notable result of their good work has been a wide and persistent confusion between morality itself and the rigid and domineering style of some of its chief proponents. It would help reasonable discussion a good deal, for example, if we could always keep in mind the difference between being *moral* and being *moralistic*. The latter is a derogatory term; to use it is itself to make an adverse moral judgment about certain ways of being moral or certain ways of making moral judgments. In fact to describe someone as ‘moralistic’ is to make exactly the kind of moral judgment – the kind we cannot help making, whether we realize we are doing so or not – that illustrates how we are ‘perpetually moralists’.

Related to this are some other pretty off-putting habits to which moralists are prone. One is identifying morality with the particular moral emphases of one’s own society or class. There is something of this in Johnson, of course, and it is also quite obvious in Matthew Arnold, even in the essay on Wordsworth where he warns against it: ‘Morals are often treated in a narrow and false fashion; they are bound up with systems of thought and belief which have had their day; they are fallen into the hands of pedants and professional dealers; they grow tiresome to some of us.’ All too true, of course, even today. Yet Arnold evidently thinks that morals really consist in the specific duties and ideals he then spells out: ‘You have an object, which is this: to get home, to do your duty to your family, friends, and fellow-

countrymen, to attain inward freedom, serenity, happiness, contentment.’⁷ Very worthy, no doubt, but it does sound rather like one of Her Majesty’s Inspectors of Schools boarding the train after a hard week in Coketown. Certainly, as a summary of ‘how to live’, or as the basis on which to make moral sense of, say *Antony and Cleopatra*, it seems not wrong exactly, but too limited, too ‘Victorian’ or ‘bourgeois’, too bound up, as we might put it, with ‘a system of thought and belief which has had its day’. But of course the kind of judgment we are making in saying this is one we all have to risk; even our own deepest thoughts and beliefs have to stand the siftings of time.

Another bad habit of moralists is to suppose that moral judgments must be, explicitly or implicitly, prescriptive – that is, tell us how to act. I say ‘bad’ habit because those people to whom morals have grown ‘tiresome’ do have a point – indeed, several points. For one thing, there are many personal predicaments, and many social, economic and political ones, that seem impossible to change just by applying to them prescriptive moralizing and the good deeds that might go with it. As some people see the matter, the only way to deal with such cases is to act in a suitably radical manner on their root causes, no matter how high the cost might be to various individuals – and to blazes with ‘bourgeois morality’. And sometimes, perhaps, that is the best that can be done. Then again, even those of us who live in happier circumstances seldom feel so faultless that we positively want to be morally judged; and if we do have to be judged, we might well prefer to leave the matter entirely to God (if He exists – or come to think of it, even if He doesn’t). There is probably no one who does not feel, sometimes at least, that the less we could hear about ‘morals’ and ‘standards’ and ‘values’, the better life would be. Yet if these are understandable attitudes, and sometimes thoroughly justified, they are hardly non-moral. On the contrary, they once again represent the sort of judgments – this time about the relative importance or value of certain kinds of moralizing in the whole fabric of human life – that makes us, willy-nilly, ‘perpetually moralists’.

But there is another sort of reason altogether why people fear and shun moral judgments: they are bothered and confused

about the nature and force of such judgments. Whenever they cannot apply a single, specifiable, objective and authoritative criterion (or set of criteria) along with clear-cut procedures of judgment – for example, the sort of commandments and procedures that Religion once supplied, and for which Science, Law, and Ideology now seem the only alternative sources – they become afraid to judge (‘who am *I* to judge?’). On the other hand, they believe that the absence of any such specific, objective and authoritative criteria and procedures makes moral judgments entirely ‘subjective’ and therefore so easy to make that anybody can do it off the top of his head – or off the top of his ‘feelings’. So why bother making them anyway, unless it is to lean on others? Thus any claim on people by standards higher than their own makes them either afraid (‘what *authority* has the judge got?’) or resentful (‘who is *he* to judge, anyway?’), or most commonly a bit of both.

This is not the occasion to explore the jumble of moral attitudes and moral confusions that mark scientifically-advanced, secular, liberal-democratic societies in our time; but, given that jumble, it is not hard to understand why people try to reduce moral judgments – of situations, or people, or books, or whatever – as far as possible to some *other* kind of judging that makes them feel less uncomfortable. They try to turn judging moral issues into something like judging heights, for example, or (to take various other kinds of judging) something like judging horse-races, or gymnasts, or Persian cats, or washing-machines, or wines, or cricketers, or legal actions – that is, any other kind of judging that involves certain (either more or less) specifiable, ‘objective’ criteria and is capable of some (either more or less) definite and (either more or less) authoritative decision.

I suppose that everyone teaching the critical study of English literature has found as I have that one almost always has to try to untangle some of these confusions and fears in students before they feel able even to try to read and think critically for themselves. If you ask them for a literary judgment – what they make of a poem, for example – they will usually propose such absurdly high criteria for ‘objectivity’ that any judgment, moral, political or literary, is bound to fail the test. As teachers

of political philosophy have also found, students need to be shown what is inadequate about the very subjective/objective dilemma that can freeze them rigid.⁸ They need to see that literary judgment, like moral and political judgment, involves understanding much more than one can express verbally or even be fully conscious of. It also involves one's own qualities of character; a responsibility to, and commitment of, one's self; and a willingness to be part of a community – an ongoing social and cultural tradition or 'form of life' – to which one appeals for other views of the object, a similar concern for its nature, and that 'pool of criteria from which we draw justification for our judgments'.⁹ Above all, I have found, students need to be reminded that, whether or not people can explain how they do it, they do somehow manage to judge political candidates or policies, for example, or religions, or possible marriage-partners, or friends, or social causes to commit themselves to and how far to commit themselves. Nor only these, but a host of other matters that involve conflicting and often incommensurable moral values, potentially endless debate about the 'reasonableness' of any opinion, but not any single, clear, specifiable, indisputably 'objective' and authoritative set of criteria and procedures. For all one's fear, one can (and does) make such moral and critical judgments – in fact, one has to.

Such judgments do not (as is often supposed) depend on a set of abstract moral or political truths which is simply applied to the institution or situation being judged, so that the correct judgment can be read off by anyone capable of elementary deductions. Rather, they depend on, and bring into play, a more difficult capacity: what Aristotle called 'practical wisdom', and many later writers (including Dr Johnson) called 'prudence'. Indeed, literary students might do well to read some of the classic accounts of political judgments, since the same applies to literary-critical judgments too. What they require is not a set of abstract truths about poems – a valid literary or critical 'theory' – which is simply applied to poems to produce a (or the) correct reading, but rather the equivalent of 'practical wisdom': what might be called 'practical criticism' if that term had not been annexed (probably irredeemably) by

a particular academic routine of minute ‘explication’ associated with I. A. Richards and the American ‘New Criticism’ of a generation ago. But the ‘practical judgment’ required by the literary critic is ‘practical’ in the same sense as in ‘practical wisdom’: the word signifies the same kind of rational but unformulable process, the same kind of difficulty in developing it and learning how to exercise it, and the same necessary involvement in the long, continuous, many-stranded, pluralistic, and ever-changing ‘conversation’ (or debate, or ‘form of life’) that is our socio-cultural tradition. Our participation in that tradition is what enables us to understand language, which is also to understand the various forms of human rationality, speech and action; and it is that understanding which both presses and enables us to evaluate, to form judgments. Thus, for academics to reject ‘practical judgment’ in the study of English literature is, to that extent, to shut the door on that socio-cultural tradition – and to prevent students from entering it as well. In fact, it is to ‘politicize’ not just culture, but judgment itself – to replace it with conformity to some supposedly better, more ‘valid’ (or ‘pragmatic’) ideology; and it is important that we realize this as clearly as possible.

II

In speaking of the characteristic concern of English poetry with ‘moral ideas’, Arnold was clearly right to add that the term ‘moral’ here was not to be taken in a limiting sense,

because moral ideas are really so main a part of human life. The question, *how to live*, is itself a moral idea; and it is the question which most interests every man, and with which, in some way or other, he is perpetually occupied. A large sense is of course to be given to the term *moral*. Whatever bears upon the question, ‘how to live’, comes under it.¹⁰

Arnold’s echo of Johnson (‘perpetually moralists’) is perhaps deliberate, but there are some characteristically Arnoldian confusions in the way he handles the point. One is visible in this passage itself. Inasmuch as moral ideas are a *part* of human life, however ‘main’ a part (and Arnold’s famous calculation