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978-0-521-86725-2 - The Ethics of Modernism: Moral Ideas in Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett

Lee Oser

Excerpt

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Introduction: literature and human nature

Human nature restores a perspective on modernism that has been lost. Without this perspective, we can see little of the modernist moral project, which is to transform human nature through the use of art. Why should we remember the block of marble, dragged through the squalid province, before the breath of genius gave it life? Or more accurately, why remember the dray and the windgalled animal that pulled it, when we bask in the favor of Toyota and Boeing, NASA and Maersk? And yet the *old question* has unmistakably returned: what good is there in human nature?

Our answer will depend on our school of thought. I understand the issue as a choice between two alternatives, both ambitious and both imperfect. One is the New Darwinism.¹ Its exponents are mostly scientists and social scientists who want to reinvent the liberal arts in the image of Darwin. Their growing success is connected to the larger role of science in uncovering intellectual fraud in the humanities.²

Steven Pinker embodies the strengths and weaknesses of the New Darwinist school. A polymath reaching a wide audience with clear prose, Pinker brings Darwinian naturalism to bear both on modernist literature and on modernity itself. In *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature*, he shows that Darwinian science contradicts modernism on such immensely important topics as sex, psychology, and the meaning of art. Woolf, in particular, attracts Pinker's scorn with her famous statement, "in or about December, 1910, human character changed."³ Pinker responds: "She was referring to the new philosophy of modernism that would dominate the elite arts and criticism for much of the twentieth century, and whose denial of human nature was carried over with a vengeance to postmodernism . . . The elite arts, criticism, and scholarship are in trouble because the statement is wrong. Human nature did not change in 1910, or in any year thereafter."⁴ As Pinker indicates, the modernist turn from human nature reaches well beyond Woolf. Wilde detested "the great Darwinian principle of the survival of the vulgarest."⁵

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Yeats spoke for a European tradition: “Art is art because it is not nature.”⁶ “Its impulses are not of a generically human kind,” wrote Ortega in 1925, referring to the modernist movement and its “dehumanization of art.”⁷ Ortega pinpointed the changes at hand: “For the modern artist, aesthetic pleasure derives from . . . a triumph over human matter.”⁸ The modernist denial of human nature might be more aptly described as a deliberate and studied refusal of human nature. Otherwise, it is Pinker’s dislike – and not his perception – of modernism that sets him apart from the modernists.

Pinker is certainly right to see a Cartesian bias in much modern philosophy, and to find its culmination in modernism and postmodernism. And he is right despite the intense efforts of the modernists themselves to overcome the Cartesian divide between subject and object.⁹ The Cartesian dominancy has its beginnings in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when Francis Bacon, Galileo, Hobbes, and Robert Boyle laid siege to the medieval fortress of Aristotle.¹⁰ It is only fair to say that, at their intellectual best, the schoolmen sowed the fields of science and learning. But at their worst they succumbed to a logic-chopping and obscure scholasticism. They buried the living spirit of Aristotle before they were themselves laid to rest, and modern science lurched violently into being. On this subject, Eliot quotes Cowley’s eloquent ode *To Mr. Hobbes*:

Long did the mighty Stagirite retain
The universal intellectual reign . . .
But as in time each great imperial race
Degenerates, and gives some new one place:
So did this noble empire waste,
Sunk by degrees from glories past,
And in the schoolmen’s hands it perisht quite at last . . .¹¹

Modern science was begotten by Descartes upon the void. Dividing the universe into mind and matter, he thought of animals as nothing more than complicated machines, constructed of passive particles. He lumped them with cabbages, sealing wax, and all the stuff of matter, which he called the *res extensa*, as opposed to the *res cogitans* or mind. Locke, finding that Cartesianism led to psychology, advanced an influential idea of disembodied personhood. Kantian ethics is denatured reasoning, and the categorical imperative is what William James calls a “cold-blooded and dispassionate judicial sentence, confined entirely to the mental realm.”¹² Hegel opened the floodgates of historicism, the relativizing of morality, which weakens the claims of universal human nature. To support his

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metaphysic, he disconnects morality from our life as animals: “morality is Duty . . . a ‘second nature’ as it has been justly called; for the *first* nature of man is his primarily merely animal existence.”¹³ Influenced by Hegel, Marx describes the proletariat as suffering not just “the contradiction between its human nature and its condition of life,” but “the outright, decisive, and comprehensive negation of that nature”: a state of “dehumanization conscious of its dehumanization.”¹⁴ Nietzsche’s theory of the mask assumes an ironic distance from human nature, whose dictates the author of *Beyond Good and Evil* refers to as “a certain kind of *niaiserie* [folly] which may be necessary for the preservation of just such beings as we are.”¹⁵ Heidegger speaks of the “scarcely fathomable, abyssal’ character of the ‘bodily kinship’ of humans to animals.”¹⁶ In his Harvard dissertation, Eliot adopts the linguistic idea of man while relegating our animal nature to an extraneous background. He holds that subject-object relations for animals are “rather lived out than known” because there are “no objects without language.”¹⁷ Nor in the same work will Eliot allow that the body triggers emotion.¹⁸ The neglect by Brentano, Husserl, and other phenomenologists of our animal nature, of the body’s physiological (non-intentional) contributions to mental activity, extends through Heidegger into the influential work of Levinas and Derrida. Even the anti-rationalist, anti-Cartesian legacy in France, associated with Derrida and Foucault, repeats the Cartesian bias against human nature.

My criticism of Pinker is that he looks at human nature from the outside. For instance, when he analyzes a scene from Woody Allen’s *Annie Hall*, the native humor eludes him. The young Alvy Singer is paying a visit to the family doctor:

- MOTHER: He’s been depressed. All of a sudden, he can’t do anything.
 DOCTOR: Why are you depressed, Alvy?
 MOTHER: Tell Dr. Flicker. [Answers for him.] It’s something he read.
 DOCTOR: Something he read, huh?
 ALVY: [Head down.] The universe is expanding.
 DOCTOR: The universe is expanding?
 ALVY: Well, the universe is everything, and if it’s expanding, someday it will break apart and that would be the end of everything!
 MOTHER: What is that your business? [To the doctor.] He stopped doing his homework.
 ALVY: What’s the point?¹⁹

Pinker is asking us not to confuse “ultimate causation (why something evolved by natural selection) with proximate causation (how the entity works here and now.)” He comments: “The scene is funny because Alvy

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has confused two levels of analysis: the scale of billions of years with which we measure the universe, and the scale of decades, years, and days with which we measure our lives.”²⁰ But the confusion of two levels of analysis is not terribly funny in itself. You might smile gently at the boy who reports “a big problem” when he sinks a toy boat. What makes Allen’s joke work is that Alvy sees more than his mother and the doctor see. Apparently, he sees more than Pinker, too, for Pinker is of the same mind as Dr. Flicker, who dutifully remarks that Brooklyn “won’t be expanding for billions of years yet Alvy . . .”

As Baudelaire would suggest, Allen’s comedy is “grotesque.” In his seminal essay “On the Essence of Laughter,” Baudelaire writes: “the laughter caused by the grotesque has about it something profound, primitive and axiomatic, which is much closer to . . . innocent life and to absolute joy than is the laughter caused by the comic in man’s behavior.”²¹ Alvy’s grotesque innocence touches a range of profound possibilities: that no theodicy is true, that justice cannot be, that there is no final cause, no divine pattern, no God, nothing to accommodate the world to us. In his cosmic sweep, the grotesque comic is “absolute,” but “he can only be absolute in relation to fallen humanity.”²² That is why Alvy’s mother argues, “What has the universe got to do with it? You’re here in Brooklyn! Brooklyn is not expanding!” Brooklyn is fallen humanity. But of course the grotesque comic leaves no room for analysis: “There is but one criterion of the grotesque, and that is laughter – immediate laughter.”²³ We grin immediately at Alvy’s axiomatic and naive explanation (“What’s the point?”) because at bottom it is profound and primitive. Pinker, it must be said, has lost track of his own subject. Feeling anxiety? *Don’t confuse two levels of analysis.*

Pinker finds human nature where he looks for it: on maps and charts, sets of data, lists of probabilities, and comic strips. Being a reductive kind of Darwinist, he cannot permit himself to speak of human teleology. He supplies moral precepts, and he supplies a statistical account of human nature, but he omits to consider that precepts will not work unless they motivate people to realize their best potential. Strictly speaking, he has no ethics. He makes do with a kind of analytic good sense: “For efforts at social change to be effective, they must identify the cognitive and moral resources that make some kinds of change possible.”²⁴ On the surface, this looks reasonable enough. But morality demands a great deal more than the resources of genetic science. The moral life as we live it eludes what John Stuart Mill called “the analysing spirit”²⁵ – which is why Mill suffered a crisis in his mental history. Morality is more particular than

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“efforts at social change” that are guided by maps and charts, sets of data, lists of probabilities, and comic strips. So it is unsurprising that Pinker’s rules, injunctions, and pleadings for good behavior lack depth.

The last generation has seen the revival of Aristotelian virtue ethics, which offers the second of the alternatives before us.²⁶ The rivalry stems from the scale and gravity of the models. In Pinker and the New Darwinism, science would parlay its mixed blessings into “supreme cognitive authority”²⁷ over other disciplines. Pinker calls for giving “high priority to economics, evolutionary biology, and probability and statistics.”²⁸ By contrast, Aristotelian science is wrapped in a moth-eaten metaphysic.²⁹ But Aristotle stays closer to the concrete actuality of moral life. As opposed to Pinker’s scientific mono-vision, the legacy of Descartes, Aristotle’s diverse fields of knowledge reward the local workers, so that the discoveries of the scientist do not rule out the traditions of the poet. Most important, Aristotle considers the world from a central human vantage point, whether he is weighing rival perspectives in science and philosophy, or commenting on Homer. He is never alienated from himself, into a narrow specialization or an empire of facts. Because he defines true self-love in terms of noble acts, ideals can garner praise and public approval (*Nic. Eth.* 1169a7).³⁰ Aristotle therefore defies the atomization of moral life, and resists the mechanical worldview of Bentham or Pinker.

Since ethics begins with free will, let us approach Aristotle through *On the Soul*. Against the materialists of his era, and Democritus in particular, Aristotle held that the soul originates movement “through intention or process of thinking” (406b25). It was the first step toward a possible middle way between the idea of the soul as a subtle arrangement of material parts, such as we find in modern reductivist science, and the idea of the soul as a ghostly substance, such as we find in Plato and Descartes.³¹ Writing in the *Monist*, Eliot sums up Aristotle’s position: “Soul is to body as cutting is to the axe: realizing itself in its actions, and not completely real when abstracted from what it does.” Eliot rightly comments that Aristotle’s “view is seen as an attempt to get away from the abstractions of materialism or of spiritualism with which we begin.”³² But while his *Monist* account stands up, Eliot as poet joins the modernists in the broad Platonic tradition, where the soul precedes its bodily and social existence. Pinker is a materialist who grants “a wisp of mystery,” i.e., who grants a spirit named *wisp* power to cast out the devil *mystery*. Aristotle, as Eliot explains, approaches the soul through the body. “The affections of soul,” Aristotle says of the emotions, “are inseparable from the material substratum of animal life” (*On the Soul* 403b18). In consequence, he

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affords the soul a degree of freedom, not “freedom to do anything it desires,” which is the extreme version of ensoulment that Pinker attacks.³³ The very words *soul* and *mind* are custodians of the human world and the human scale of things, the realm of beauty in the *Poetics* (1450b36). To quote the wisdom of R. S. Crane, the “humanities . . . are distinguishable from the natural and the social sciences by their special concern with those aspects of man’s achievements in sciences, in institutions, and in arts which are most distinctively human in the sense that their causes are not completely reducible either to natural processes common to men and animals or to superpersonal conditions and forces affecting all members of a given society.”³⁴

On the Soul remains a highly controversial book, perpetually equipped to create factions. M. F. Burnyeat makes the point that Aristotle saw animal matter as being different in kind from other matter. Descartes took a new turn, and saw all matter as one substance. Analyzing Aristotle’s theory of perception, Burnyeat suggests that “the physical material of animal bodies in Aristotle’s world” has an ingrained awareness. Computers cannot “do to air” what animals “do to air,” which is to “make it smellable, hearable.”³⁵ Therefore, the current functionalist-materialist account of Aristotle, which frees “our mental life from dependence on any *particular* material set-up,”³⁶ cannot be true, because there is ultimately something mysterious and indispensable about animal life in Aristotle’s view. (Incidentally, computers show no signs of coming to consciousness, despite bold predictions.)³⁷ So I agree with Burnyeat in his critique of the current functionalist account of Aristotle. But I disagree with Burnyeat that we must line up behind the Cartesian mind-body dualism and “junk” the Aristotelian philosophy of mind. Dualism, “the ghost in the machine,” has too little to say about the interaction of mind and body.

To pursue the affinities between *On the Soul* and *The Principles of Psychology* would require an excursion well beyond the present work, but it is helpful here to underscore a fact that has been recently and memorably observed, namely, that Aristotle and James oppose the modern perspective on the mind-body problem established by Descartes.³⁸ James anchors the self, as a moral agent, in the physical conditions of our animal life. His understanding of emotion takes Aristotelian insights into modern physiology:

A disembodied human emotion is a sheer nonentity . . . The more closely I scrutinize my states, the more persuaded I become that whatever “coarse” affections and passions I have are in very truth constituted by, and made up of, those bodily changes which we ordinarily call their expression or consequence;

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and the more it seems to me that, if I were to become corporeally anaesthetic, I should be excluded from the life of the affections, harsh and tender alike, and drag out an existence of merely cognitive or intellectual form.³⁹

The passage stands in the profoundest contrast to post-Kantian aesthetic theory, which suspends the physical presence of the body in favor of the world-constructing faculties of mind. Modernist art is aesthetic art. Individual consciousness is the privileged medium of the modernist view of things. In Yeats, Eliot, Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett, ethics is itself a form of aesthetics. James's insight into the role of the body puts a radical question to Yeats's quest for "bodiless emotion,"⁴⁰ to the theory of "esthetic stasis" in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, to Eliot's moral idealization of "the mind of Europe," to Woolf's "moments of being," and to Beckett's abstract disgust at "the eudemonistic slop."⁴¹ Woolf contrasts the Greeks and the moderns: "Accustomed to look directly and largely rather than minutely and aslant, it was safe for them to step into the thick of emotions which blind and bewilder an age like our own. In the vast catastrophe of the European war our emotions had to be broken up for us, and put at an angle from us, before we could allow ourselves to feel them in poetry or fiction."⁴² These examples could be multiplied without end, and I have traced their Cartesian antecedents. Yet on the topic of emotional response, Antonio Damasio considers James to be "well ahead of both his time and ours," for the reason that James had "seized upon the mechanism essential to the understanding of emotion and feeling."⁴³

"Let us assume," says Aristotle in the *Politics*, "that the best life, both for individuals and states, is the life of virtue, when virtue has external goods enough for the performance of good actions" (1324a). What is "the life of virtue"? To begin with, a virtue governs a passion: virtues and passions are "bound up" together in our "composite nature" (*Nic. Eth.* 1178a16). Aristotle defines virtue as "a state of character concerned with choice, lying in a mean" relative to each individual, since we are all different (*Nic. Eth.* 1106b36). The choice is determined by reason working with practical wisdom, which is an acquired talent for living well, for directing activity towards the most fruitful ends. Aristotle connects the virtues to their effect: the life of virtue is a state of flourishing called *eudaimonia* or "happiness." To be *eudaimon* is to experience the wholeness of a fortunate human life striving to achieve its full potential. Happiness is "a virtuous activity of soul" (*Nic. Eth.* 1099b27). Dealing with moral matters on their own level, Aristotle is blunt about the limits of his analysis: "We must be content . . . to indicate the truth roughly and in outline, and in speaking about things which are only for the most

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part true and with premisses of the same kind to reach conclusions that are no better" (*Nic. Eth.* 1094b19). Aristotle's moral judgment is never absolute, though neither is it relativist. I agree, in this instance, with Martha Nussbaum: "the Aristotelian virtues, and the deliberations they guide, unlike some systems of moral rules, remain always open to revision in the light of new circumstances and new evidence. In this way . . . they contain the flexibility to local conditions that the relativist would desire, but . . . without sacrificing objectivity."⁴⁴ Aristotle observes a ground pattern of common feeling and behavior, on which a multitude of local patterns can be embroidered. For a global society built on the rapport of diverse nations and corporations and peoples, disregard for the ground pattern is potentially as dangerous as disregard for the local patterns.

In his commentary *Aristotle's Ethics*, J. O. Urmson offers a lucid account of what Aristotle means by character. Urmson numbers four general states of character in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Each of these states is applicable to any particular emotion, with no emotion being, in itself, good or bad. He illustrates the four states with "a sort of table":

	Want	Aim	Act
Excellence	Good	Good	Good
Strength	Bad	Good	Good
Weakness	Bad	Good	Bad
Badness	Bad	Bad	Bad

The table refers to merit in "emotional want, the aim or choice settled on after deliberation, and in action." Urmson supplies an example that shows, I think, a nice comic touch: "The four states could get a modern illustration from the even-tempered man who has no difficulty in waiting coolly in a traffic jam, the hot-tempered man who successfully restrains himself, the hot-tempered man who tries to remain calm but cannot and the man who curses and hoots at all and sundry with complete self-approval."⁴⁵ The even-tempered man possesses the virtue of self-control; he has driven the roads before, knows what to do, and willingly does it. The permanent authors, Homer, Plato, the Greek tragedians, Dante, Chaucer, Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Dickens, abound in characters who fit the analysis. Other characters, tragic figures like Oedipus and Hamlet, and soul doctors like Nietzsche's Zarathustra, test, expand, and defy our moral knowledge.⁴⁶ But in any case, moral legibility depends, at least in part, on readers who can readily understand Urmson's example, *mutatis mutandis*.

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What I shall call *the Aristotelian body* is central to western literature for four main reasons. First, it is integrated with a soul that has a purchase on reality, keeping art in close contact with actual life. Second, it is both individual and social, for man is a political animal and his good depends upon his life with others (*Pol.* 1253a2).⁴⁷ Third, it fosters ethical narrativity, the story of “a life that can be conceived and evaluated as a whole.”⁴⁸ And fourth, it has moral particularity written all over it. Emotions take place in the body, which physically acts out its moral life. Woolf censures Dickens’s “psychological geography” precisely because his eye seizes upon physical characteristics.⁴⁹ Pickwick, an “observer of human nature,”⁵⁰ shows how Dickens himself observes human nature: he watches the body acting. He is a mimetic writer who lays considerable stress on action.

In contrast to the Aristotelian body, what I shall call *the modernist body* is an aesthetic body. It is an image in the mind, an incorporeal voice, a ghost of style. It is epitomized by the persona or mask.⁵¹ To trace its nineteenth-century sources would require a wide survey, ranging from the continent to England to the US, but the major sources certainly include the post-Kantian legacy of transcendental idealism (the body as *Vorstellung*); the flaneurs, dandies, and dancers of the symbolist movement; pierrots and marionettes; Blake’s giant “spiritual forms”; Pater’s “imaginary portraits”; the speakers of dramatic monologues; minstrel shows; vaudeville; as well as phonograph,⁵² radio, and early cinema. In “The Truth of Masks,” Wilde remarks: “A Truth in art is that whose contradictory is also true.”⁵³ It follows that the modernist repertoire of masks and personae strikes Aristotle dumb. Character acts well or badly, but the mask reveals the ambiguities of art.

Influenced by Wilde and Nietzsche, Yeats developed his theory of the mask in opposition to the dull morality of the herd. “Active virtue,” he writes, “as distinguished from the passive acceptance of a code, is . . . theatrical, consciously dramatic, the wearing of a mask.”⁵⁴ In his 1918 review of *Per Amica Silentia Lunae*, Eliot singled out Yeats’s next sentence for approval: “Wordsworth . . . is so often flat and heavy because his moral sense, being a discipline he had not created, a mere obedience, has no theatrical element.”⁵⁵ It is the decadence of modern usage that allows “virtue” to suggest that an artist should always act artistically, as if practical wisdom had no bearing on the passions.⁵⁶ This confusion about “virtue” as well as “moral sense” breeds further confusion in the modernist lexicon. Yeats’s *personality* is roughly equivalent to Eliot’s *impersonality*: both men denigrate the practical self engaged in the business of life.⁵⁷

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Personality, writes Yeats, “is greater and finer than character . . . When a man cultivates a style in literature he is shaping his personality.”⁵⁸ Eliot’s transfusion into style is much the same: “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.”⁵⁹ Or to revise: “great literature is . . . the transformation of a personality into a personal work of art . . .”⁶⁰

Though Eliot and Yeats are poets of masks and disembodied voices, it is a peculiar fact about Eliot that as he aged he came to uphold standards that point in the direction of Aristotle: mimesis, the moral import of action, the agency of character. In his 1953 lecture “The Three Voices of Poetry,” Eliot returned to the topic of the mask. He might have been ruminating on J. Alfred Prufrock, Tiresias, or the “brown baked features” of the “familiar compound ghost”: “What we normally hear, in fact, in the dramatic monologue, is the voice of the poet, who has put on the costume and make-up either of some historical character, or of one out of fiction . . . [D]ramatic monologue cannot create a character. For character is created and made real only in action.”⁶¹ Unmasking the monologist, Eliot was in revolt against his own movement. He was trying to return character to its central place in the literary tradition. *The Waste Land*, a good counter-example, is the reverie of a mask, a bodiless voice incapable of action: “Tiresias, although a mere spectator and not indeed a ‘character,’ is yet the most important personage in the poem, uniting all the rest.”⁶² Here, Eliot’s use of quotation marks (‘character’) calls the very concept of character into question, just as *The Waste Land* abandons the mimetic conventions behind the concept.

Joyce, Woolf, and Beckett espouse the doctrine of the mask as well. The Dublin of *Ulysses* is populated by masks, as Joyce forges his characters into the semblance of their Greek archetypes. In *Nighttown*, that man of many ways, Leopold Bloom, is the man of a thousand faces. Supported by cinematic effects, he races through his psyche’s theatrical wardrobe, facing each new situation with a different mask. When Woolf describes “the bright mask-like look of faces seen by candlelight,”⁶³ she is salvaging art from the depredations of time. Beckett adopts the doctrine only to rail at it. After Molloy, Malone, and his other personae have departed, the Unnamable says, “Bah, any old pronoun will do, provided one sees through it.”⁶⁴ The mask in Beckett comes full circle from Yeats. It no longer offers any improvement over nature or time or society. It is commonplace (“Bah” as in “baa”), the identity through which one “sees” the world and expresses oneself: in a world bereft of meaningful choices, there is only the meaningless play of masks.⁶⁵