Introduction: What (Comparative) Literature Tells Us about Ethics

Ethics has been a central concern in literature since the earliest works treating the purposes of poetry and stories. Plato famously criticized poets for their inculcation of morally improper inclinations, advocating an extensive state censorship that would enable literature to contribute to the development of ethically upstanding citizens. Plato was not alone. Over the centuries, political and religious figures have sought to control what stories were written or read, in part for moral reasons. In a more liberal vein, the medieval Muslim literary theorists sought to explain the processes by which literary works could cultivate the Islamic virtues (see Cantarino 1975; Ibn Sinā 1974; Ibn Rushd 1966, 1986). The close relation between literature and ethics has not always been viewed as involving the guidance of literature by philosophers or theologians. Sometimes, writers did not privilege philosophy over literature but rather viewed the two as contributing more equally to a program of understanding ethics and behaving morally, and some gave literature a place of particular esteem. Thus, the ancient Sanskrit Nāṭya Śāstra (roughly, *Treatise on Drama*; n.d.) asserts that "drama teaches the path of virtue" (9) and that the study of drama is "conducive to righteousness" (2). More strikingly, Kǒngzǐ (Confucius) urged his followers to study the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shījīng*), explaining, "The Odes serve to stimulate the mind. They may be used for purposes of self-contemplation. They teach the art of sociability. They show how to regulate feelings of resentment. From them, you learn the more immediate duty of serving one's father and the remoter one of serving one's prince" (*Analects* 17.9). Confucian interpretations of poetry particularly emphasized moral themes (commonly through "moral" and "ethico-political allegory" [Cai 2018, 3, 8]). This integration of literature and ethics did not stop centuries ago. A prominent, recent example of interweaving moral philosophy with literary study may be found in Martha Nussbaum's influential explorations of literary works as repositories of nuanced ethical insight (e.g., see Nussbaum 2003).

As these instances already suggest, the study of literature and ethical theory may be concerned principally with literature (e.g., how to evaluate literary works morally) or ethics (e.g., how to think in more nuanced

ways about ethical problems in real life). In the following pages, I focus primarily on topics in ethics. Of course, I hope to have something worthwhile to contribute to our understanding of the literary works I discuss – *Julius Caesar*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and so on. But my principal goal is to advance our thought about topics in ethical theory, not about literature.

Whatever one's particular focus – literature or ethics – it is probably also clear already that we can take up two different tasks in examining literature and ethics. On the one hand, we might simply wish to explore what Plato or Kǒngzǐ had in mind in making claims about poetry and morals, or how these claims derived from or impacted the societies in which they were living, or how they reflect the sorts of normative, sociopolitical quandaries that arise in a range of complex societies. These are descriptive issues. In a descriptive approach, we are not setting out to say, for example, what is moral or immoral but merely what Plato thought about the topic, or what Athenians believed at his time, or what similar views thinkers in a range of societies have taken up and debated. As this implies, the alternative to a purely descriptive account is a normative account, considering whether we agree or disagree with Plato and what we would conclude is ethically proper in any given case.

This division – between descriptive ethics and normative ethics – is enormously important. It is certainly recognized in principle by ethicists. But writers often mix up the two and move from one to the other without carefully considering when this is or is not logically valid. This is not simply the result of intellectual carelessness. There are reasons for mixing descriptive and normative concerns that have to do with the nature of ethical reflection (as I will discuss in Chapter 1). However, this does not mean that the distinction is inconsequential. It does suggest that we might wish to consider the two together. But it actually makes maintaining the conceptual distinction even more imperative.

In keeping with these points, *Literature and Moral Feeling* is divided into two parts. The first part addresses descriptive ethics. It also includes occasional elements of normative ethics, insofar as these arise inevitably in a descriptive project; I have tried to mark these explicitly so that they do not distort the (nonnormative) analysis. The second part addresses normative ethics (necessarily with some elements of descriptive ethics). Needless to say, I do not aim to address everything that is covered by these two categories. That would require something more like an entire library rather than a single book. Instead, I focus on two issues that have particular significance in literature. Specifically, I take up and respond to recent, influential – but, I believe, often misdirected – arguments about two topics that are centrally important to literature. These are narrative and empathy. The mutual relevance of narrative and literature hardly

requires argument. As to ethics, it has become increasingly common in recent years to link ethical thought and action with story formation. However, the basic terms of such analysis (e.g., "narrative") are often undefined, and the arguments equivocal. The second topic, empathy, bears specially on literature as it is most often the response authors cultivate in readers with respect to the protagonist of a work.[1] In other words, our engagement with a narrative is a function not only of the actions undertaken by a protagonist and the events that affect him or her, but also of just what that protagonist is feeling and our relation to his or her emotion(s). Even more than narrative, empathy has come to be a pivotal issue in recent discussions of ethics, ranging from its positive invocation in Joe Biden's campaign for the US presidency to its harsh criticism in some widely read works in philosophy and psychology. Once the terms have been clarified, narrative connects more obviously with descriptive ethics, whereas empathy regularly has normative implications. I therefore treat them in those contexts.

As suggested by the preceding references to Plato's aims, their relation to Greek concerns at the time, and cross-cultural patterns in ethical reflection, there are different levels at which we may conduct an analysis of either descriptive or normative ethics. Specifically, we might be concerned with the idiosyncratic, moral psychology of an individual. This is to some degree the case whenever we examine a literary work or philosophical argument by a single author. Beyond this, we may be interested in culturally or historically defined patterns in ethical ideas and attitudes. This too is a necessary part of almost any study of a text or set of texts, for we commonly require cultural and historical knowledge to make sense out of such texts. Finally, we might be interested in cross-cultural patterns, aspects of broadly human psychology, or social dynamics that recur in ethical thought and action across traditions. These too are necessary, for we can relate to other cultures, or even to other individuals within our own culture, due precisely to the existence of human commonalities that are specified or particularized in cultures, historical periods, and individuals.

Such cross-cultural commonalities define the most prominent and consequential level of analysis in the following pages, though again they are inseparable from their instantiation in culture, history, and individual

[1] The standard treatment of empathy and narrative is Suzanne Keen's extremely valuable *Empathy and the Novel* (2010). Though our projects are clearly related, Keen's focus is very different. She is concerned primarily with literature and readers' responses to literature, not with drawing on literary study to articulate descriptive and normative ethics. The complementary nature of the works, however, means that they can be read together with, I believe, particular benefit.

psychology. The isolation of cross-cultural patterns is made possible only through the systematic study of a range of literary traditions, thus through a (non-Eurocentric) comparative literature. Of course, the isolation of patterns does not constitute an explanation of them. Like much of my work, this project combines literary study with cognitive and affective science. Here, the principles of these fields of research and theorization provide the explanatory framework for the study of both literature and ethics. But this is not simply a unidirectional relationship. A fuller descriptive and explanatory account of literary, ethical imagination and evaluation should not only benefit from cognitive and affective science as they currently stand; it should advance cognitive and affective science as well. In both the literary and psychological projects, the present volume extends the treatment of story universals that I first developed in *The Mind and Its Stories* (2003).

More precisely, Chapter 1 takes up the task of defining ethics, considered as a set of psychological structures and processes. In other work, drawing on Murphy and Hoffman's account of the types of concept (2012, 166), I have argued that the three kinds of categorization process are highly consequential for our response to literature (see Hogan 2016, chap. 4). Specifically, we make use of rule-defined categorization, prototype-defined categorization, and exemplar-defined categorization. In some cases, approaches to ethics are distinguished by their virtually exclusive stress on one or another variety of categorization. For example, at least as commonly understood, Kant's ethical theory is rule-based. In contrast, consider the stress of some Muslim writers on following the path of the Prophet or the emphasis of writers such as Ibn Sinā on literary representations of "the actions of some persons whom others emulate and imitate by following their example in deed" (1974, 102–103). These are cases of exemplar-based moral reflection and response. Other writers refer to more than one variety of ethical discourse, but often only in passing, and with different implications about their nature and consequences. For example, Baker notes, "A community's morality . . . may be disseminated as 'dos and don'ts' [thus, rules] or by stories of moral heroes and immoral villains [thus, exemplars]" (2019, 17). In my descriptive account of ethics, all three types of concept enter into our moral responses, which is to say, our moral thought, feeling, and behavior.

In connection with rule-based categorization, I argue that we have broad or fundamental ethical orientations that are guided by the setting of parameters within general principles. These parameters concern such issues as what sorts of action or condition fall under the scope of morality. For example, there appears to be a broad division between people who are principally concerned with ending unjustified pleasure and others

whose primary moral worries bear on undeserved pain. I explore this level of ethics in Chapter 1. Chapter 2 develops and concretizes this relatively abstract treatment of ethical principles and parameters through a close examination of the ethical concerns underlying characters' judgments and behaviors in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*.

Chapter 3 moves to the level of ethical prototypes, which give needed specificity to the very general ethical orientations defined by principles and parameters. In ethical decision and behavior, we are concerned with sequences of actions and the motivations guiding these actions. In other words, we are concerned with stories. In this chapter, I argue that the prototypes at issue in specifying our ethical orientations are, most importantly, the universal story structures that I have sought to isolate in earlier works, such as *The Mind and Its Stories: Narrative Universals and Human Emotion* (2003). As the preceding title indicates, these narrative structures are inseparable from human emotion systems. In fact, I have argued that story universals are shaped by emotion–motivation systems and that those systems account for their universality. I have also argued in other work that these story genres are of crucial importance for the way we think about and respond to various worldly concerns, such as politics. Chapter 3 extends these arguments to ethics. (As to the remaining, exemplar level of categorization, each particular literary work is itself an exemplar – or a complex of exemplars – not a prototype. I therefore treat exemplars each time I consider a literary work. However, I do not explore exemplars in broad, theoretical terms.)

Just as the second chapter provides a literary development of the relatively abstract first chapter, so too Chapter 4 provides literary developments of the cross-cultural genres treated in Chapter 3. Specifically, this chapter considers literary cases of all the prominent cross-cultural genres, examining their implications for ethical evaluation and action. In this chapter, I treat some works by Shakespeare (due primarily to his familiarity to a wide range of readers).[2] However, to expand the cultural and historical scope of the discussion, I treat a number of earlier East and South Asian works, as well as several modern works from different regions. The longest section develops a particularly detailed interpretation of the sacrificial structure in F. W. Murnau's 1922 film, *Nosferatu*. I undertake a more extensive development of this analysis in order to illustrate more clearly the impact of story structure on moral response.

[2] Shakespeare has also received considerable attention for specifically ethical concerns in his plays. For valuable, wide-ranging treatments of Shakespeare and ethics, see Parvini (2018) and Zamir (2006).

Having focused on descriptive ethics to this point, with Chapter 5, I begin the section treating normative ethics, thus what ethical ideas and attitudes I believe should guide our moral evaluations and actions. I am not setting out to articulate anything along the lines of a detailed ethical theory. The purpose of this half of the book is simply to advocate a fairly general criterion for setting ethical parameters (thus defining ethical orientation) and adjudicating among contradictory ethical-narrative prototypes. To put it simply, that criterion is an effortful generalization of empathy. The particular stress on empathy derives from the basic definition of ethics, which I present in the first chapter, before treating the varieties of ethical concepts (i.e., rules, prototypes, and exemplars). Specifically, in that chapter, I contend that ethical decisions are decisions that conflict with what I call "egocentric self-interest." This does not mean that they substitute one form of egocentric self-interest for another (e.g., going to heaven versus committing some sin). It means that, in order to count as what I will later call a "moral choice," one's action must either lack self-interest or escape egocentrism. I argue that all actions are self-interested. (I later qualify this by reference to automatic actions, which we presumably do not wish to count as moral choices anyway.) That leaves only nonegocentric – which is to say, allocentric – options. But it would seem that the only sort of allocentric self-interest we might have is driven by empathy. (There are some other possibilities, such as doing something because God wants one to do it. But my suspicion is that these are either empathic, with the actor tacitly imagining that God will be disappointed, or egocentric, with the actor tacitly considering the otherworldly consequences of his or her action.) This necessarily makes empathy central to ethics, including normative ethics. As such, it makes our evaluation of empathy crucial to normative ethics.

To provide background for my description, explanation, and defense of empathy, in Chapter 5, I draw on current cognitive and affective science to outline an account of human emotion and empathy. I take it that the account I articulate is compatible with what research tells us about emotion and empathy. Nonetheless, it differs from common accounts of both in some consequential ways. For example, I do not view empathy as a narrowly defined concept that refers to sharing the same emotion as a target. Rather, I take it to be a scalar concept that refers, fundamentally, to experiencing the same emotional valence as a target (positive or negative). That positive or negative empathic feeling is based on one's own experiences, which may be more or less similar to those of the target. As the source of one's empathic response becomes more similar to that of one's target, one's empathic experience is likely to increasingly approximate the target's particular feelings (not only the valence of those feelings). In keeping with the pattern established in the

first part of the book, the sixth chapter turns to a literary development of the theoretical points, presenting a close examination of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

Though the term "empathy" is relatively recent,[3] there has been a long history of valuing the ability to share a target's feelings. (On the importance of distinguishing "the history of the phenomenon" from that of "the term," see Matravers 2017, 2.) The point is by no means confined to the modern West. For example, in the *Analects*, Kǒngzǐ (Confucius) says, "My way [dào] is one thing." One of his disciples explains, "The way [dào] of Heaven [tiān] is loyalty [or devotion {zhōng, 忠}] and empathy [shù,恕]" (4: 15; translation altered from Legge). Zhang elaborates on the latter, writing that "the concept of empathy, shu, is a further extension of the idea of benevolence," with benevolence being the cardinal Confucian virtue. Zhang continues, "The term *shu* means 'to put oneself in the position of another and to look at the world from that perspective …. The character itself combines the graphs for the mind/heart with that meaning 'to be like'" (2003, 285).

Several influential writers, such as Paul Bloom and Jesse Prinz, have recently argued against empathy. In Chapter 7, I take up and seek to refute the main arguments of the anti-empathy writers. For the most part, my contention is that the arguments at issue actually suggest the need for more empathy, not less. Crucially, many of the arguments show the problems with spontaneous empathy. But the whole point of an ethical advocacy of empathy is that we should not rest content with spontaneous empathy but should undertake the effort to extend empathy (e.g., to members of out-groups). Chapter 8 develops these points further in connection with the close interpretation of a literary work. In this case, I have chosen to take a contemporary American play, Tony Kushner's widely admired, award-winning treatment of the AIDS crisis, *Angels in America*. This chapter also develops a concept of "critical empathy" designed to respond to some potential problems raised by critics of empathy.[4]

Since I devote half the book to advocating a particular ethical attitude, readers might reasonably conclude that I feel ethical evaluation is a very good thing. In fact, I tend to believe it is often (though not invariably) good when aimed at one's own actions but almost always a fairly bad thing when aimed at other people's actions. To make matters worse, we

[3] It is also ambiguous (see Batson 2009).

[4] Though my concept of critical empathy is different, the general principle is not unlike Jackson's view that "empathy … should be incorporated into critical reflection" (2021, 113).

appear to have a greater inclination toward the latter than toward the former. In a brief afterword, I turn from descriptive and normative ethics to a third form of ethical study, metaethics (cf. Keown 2005, 21). There, I set out these qualifications, urging that ethical blame should be very narrowly restricted, principally because our attribution of free will should be narrowly restricted.