In Defense of Evil Stories: A Study in the Ethics of Audition

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When Odysseus sets sail from Circe's island, she advises him to stop up his ears and eyes when he passes the Sirens or he will suffer terrible consequences. He makes his crew do it, but keeps his own senses clear, asking only to be tied to the mast so he cannot act on any bewitchments. This story could almost be an allegory about the moral danger of art. In this dissertation, I defend a small part of what I take to be the Odyssean thesis: that art is worth the danger it represents, and, specifically, that what I call "evil stories" are worth the danger they represent. The phrase "evil stories" is a shorthand, for me, for the longer phrase "stories which require us, in order to understand them, to imaginatively simulate the point of view of characters who commit acts of great harm for sadistic, malicious, or defiant reasons."

I argue that *auditing "evil stories" is not, for most people, and as part of a balanced imaginative diet, so morally dangerous that they ought to be avoided*; moreover, I argue that it can be morally opportune to audit them and, in some special cases, morally obligatory.

My strategy to defend this thesis is two part. First, I formulate and respond to what I take to be the most serious reasons to suspect that auditing evil stories *is* too morally dangerous. Those reasons include: the idea that auditing evil stories is itself an immoral action (chapter 3); the idea that it is a virtue to be *unable* to perform the mental operations involved in adequately auditing evil stories (chapter 4); the idea that understanding evil actions or characters is tantamount to condoning them (chapter 5); and the idea that being fascinated by evil undercuts one's standing to condemn it (chapter 6). Second, I venture several tentative arguments in support of the idea that evil stories can actually provide opportunities for moral growth and education: the idea that evil stories provoke unique and valuable kinds of moral reflection and that we can sometimes be obligated to audit them (chapter 7); and the idea that auditing evil stories is uniquely revelatory of some kind of moral truth (chapter 8). In the course of all this rebutting and reason giving, I propose a way of thinking about the ethics of audition in general which I call "role-centered response moralism," which develops obliquely across the subsections of various chapters.

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Chapter One

The Problem of Evil Stories

In Homer's Odyssey, when the hero finally escapes from the amorous clutches of the minor

goddess Circe, he sets sail for his home port, Ithaca. To get there he must brave the shore of the

Sirens, the first in a long gauntlet of dangers. Before he goes, Circe gives Odysseus some advice:

> Race straight past that coast! Soften some beeswax
> and stop your shipmates' ears so none can hear,
> none of the crew, but if *you* are bent on hearing,
> have them tie you hand and foot in the swift ship,
> erect at the mast-block, lashed by ropes to the mast
> so you can hear the Sirens' song to your heart's content.[1]

Odysseus *is* bent on hearing. But thanks to Circe's advice, this particular adventure has the least

disastrous consequences of any in the book:

> We were just offshore as far as a man's shout can carry,
> scudding close, when the Sirens sensed at once a ship
> was racing past and burst into their high, thrilling song:
> 'Come closer, famous Odysseus—Achaea's pride and glory—
> moor your ship on our coast so you can hear our song!
> Never has any sailor passed our shores in his black craft
> until he has heard the honeyed voices pouring from our lips,
> and once he hears to his heart's content sails on, a wiser man.
> We know all the pains that the Greeks and Trojans once endured
> on the spreading plain of Troy when the gods willed it so—
> all that comes to pass on the fertile earth, we know it all!'
> So [the Sirens] sent their ravishing voices out across the air

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1 (Fagles & Homer, 1999), Bk. 12, lines 44-58.

> and the heart inside me throbbed to listen longer.
> I signaled the crew with frowns to set me free—
> they flung themselves at the oars and rowed on harder,
> Perimides and Eurylochus springing up at once
> to bind me fast with rope on chafing rope.[2]

Thanks to rope and beeswax, Odysseus avoids joining the heap of corpses around the Sirens.

One can interpret the myth as a fable about the dangers of art. Promising in lovely voices knowledge about people and places a sailor has not seen, the sirens lure him onto the rocks. They offer pleasure and knowledge at the price of danger. A sailor's options are to shut his ears so he cannot hear them — and therefore miss out on the pleasure — or to bind himself so he cannot act on what he hears. Many have considered that art poses the same dilemma. Among philosophers, the first and most famous aesthetic moralist is Plato, who recommended in his dialogues *The Republic* and *The Laws* that poets be heavily censored and even thrown out of the city if they ventured to take the usual artistic license of writing stories about gods and men that threaten to corrupt the souls of their listeners. The terms of the debate may have changed from the time when Plato was speculating about the perfect city state, to the English Puritans banning the theater, to Tolstoy agonizing about the contradictions between artistic pleasure and religious duty, to Adorno reckoning with art's place in the hearts of those who perpetrated the holocaust — but the core problem remains the same: is art morally dangerous, and if so, what should we do about it?

This dissertation is a defense of Odysseus' approach. I examine an instance of the problem, arriving at the conclusion that, on purely moral grounds, at least one notoriously dangerous kind of art is *not* so morally dangerous that we should avoid it, and that, with the

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2 Ibid. Bk. 12, lines 197-217.

proper precautions, it even offers opportunities for moral benefit. Like Odysseus, I believe that we should listen to what the Sirens have to say, even if we have to lash ourselves to the mast to do so.

Before beginning to adduce my reasons for this conclusion, I must specify and clarify certain things both about the specific instance of the problem I will discuss — what I call "the problem of evil stories" — and my method in discussing it.

The problem in general

When discussing the intersection of morality and art, one can easily make the mistake of assigning praise and blame to works of art themselves. We talk about immoral paintings and so forth. But attributing moral qualities to objects which possess no consciousness or ability to act, no motives or motive power, should give us pause. In this book, I will not talk that way.

Instead, I propose to discuss the intersection of morality and art under the rubric of "moral danger" and "moral opportunity." I take an artwork to be morally dangerous if it tends, when appropriately used, to involve a human subject in immorality — if it convinces them of wrong beliefs about morality, or provokes them into erroneous moral judgments, or causes them to act in immoral ways, or corrupts their settled dispositions. And I take an artwork to be morally opportune if it tends to involve a human subject in morality — if it convinces them of true beliefs about morality, or provokes them into correct moral judgments, or causes them to act in moral ways, or improves their settled dispositions. Moral danger is not, however, a mere binary. A work of art could be more or less morally dangerous, and the question that interests me is whether the

moral danger of a specific kind of work of art (to be specified shortly) is so great that we ought to avoid it.

This dissertation's problem, then, is whether morally dangerous art is so morally dangerous that it ought to be avoided, and this ethical question must be distinguished from two others over which a tremendous amount of ink has been spilled.

First, I am not defending a position in the debate between moralism and aestheticism. That debate concerns whether moral value or aesthetic value should take precedence when they conflict. Someone endorsing aestheticism in this sense believes that aesthetic value is so important that even if art is extremely morally dangerous, we ought to continue to create and experience it. The moralist, by contrast, believes that if art is morally dangerous, then there is nothing more to be said, and that the greatest aesthetic value is decisively overruled by moral considerations.

While the debate between moralism and aestheticism is very interesting, it's not the debate at issue in this book. My aim is to determine just how morally dangerous art is; it is a moral question; and it implies no position on the relative importance of moral and aesthetic value.

Second, I am not defending a position in the debate about ethical criticism. That debate concerns whether the moral value of an artwork affects its aesthetic value. For example, one favored locus in the modern discourse about ethical criticism is Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*.[3] Is the film aesthetically inferior because it is Nazi propaganda, irrespective of its other qualities?

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3 See, for example, (Devereaux, 1998).

As with the debate between moralism and aestheticism, the debate about ethical criticism goes a step beyond my interests in this book. My aim is not to discover or defend any intrinsic connection between moral value and aesthetic value, but simple to determine the moral danger, if any, of a certain kind of art.

And how, exactly, do I propose to do that?

The problem of "evil stories" in particular

This book is very modest. In it, I do not purport to have determined comprehensively whether or how much all art is morally dangerous in every way that it could be morally dangerous. To make the question manageable and my analysis precise — and to that degree valuable — I have limited myself in four key ways.

Stories

First, this book is not about art in general, but about stories in particular. It seems likely to me that different things might be said about the moral dangers of different forms of art, so "art" is already too nebulous a topic to make sweeping claims about. I have chosen to focus on stories because, of all the art forms in the world, stories are dearest to me; I consume them at a great clip; and I even write them. So this is a book about the moral danger of stories.

I will use the words "story" and "narrative" interchangeably throughout the book. Many theorists of narrative distinguish between them, but that degree of subtlety is unnecessary for my purposes. By story / narrative I mean a sustained, thematically unified account of the history of some character or characters: sustained, because a story is more than a single incident;

thematically unified, because a story is typically a collection of incidents dependent in some way upon one another; an account, because a story is a representation of incidents, not the incidents themselves.[4] Note that this definition of stories does not specify their factuality — whether they are fiction or nonfiction — nor does it specify the medium in which they exist or are communicated. Text, film, speech, image, dance, music, thought, or many other mediums can convey stories. My claims about the moral dangers of stories will pertain to *all* stories in *any medium*, unless I specify otherwise. Most of my examples, however, will derive from textual stories, because they are the easiest to exhibit in a book.

Auditors

Second, I am not talking about all the persons to whom stories could be morally dangerous, but specifically about the "auditors" of stories. I use that odd word to specify, in abstraction from any specific medium, a certain relation of use that one can have to a story. By "auditor" I mean to connote the act of audition (hearing) as well as the more common word "audience"; and its slight strangeness is intended to remind my reader that I am talking about stories without reference to a specific medium. An "auditor" is one who receives a story, one to whom a story is told, regardless of that story's medium.

Stories are most commonly used in three ways: they are made, they are told, and they are audited. Who makes, tells, or audits a given story depends in part upon its medium. A film is made by writers and directors and producers and actors and cameramen; told by actors and the operators of cinemas; audited by audiences in theaters, at home in front of computers, and so on.

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4 The elements in this definition have been adapted from the much fuller and more complex definitions offered by Gregory Currie (Currie, 2010) and Peter Goldie (Goldie, 2012).

A story you daydream, on the other hand, is made, told, and audited by just one person, yourself. Between these extremes, one could enumerate an almost infinite variety of distributions between different people of a given role and combinations of the three roles in one person, each variation bringing with it a host of more specific names and job descriptions. Hence my abstracted language, because I wish to speak of the use of stories without respect to their medium.

It seems to me that stories might pose rather different moral dangers to those who make and tell them than to those who audit them. The novelist might face certain dangers the novel-reader does not, for example; or the actor might face dangers that the film audience does not. I have chosen in this book to focus upon auditors, upon those who receive stories. That is why the subtitle of the book is "a study in the ethics of audition." I am asking how morally dangerous stories are in relation specifically to audition.

Intrinsic Moral Danger

Third, because this book is a dissertation in philosophy, I am, so to speak, recusing myself from aspects of the problem of art's moral danger that would require me to go beyond what I take to be the proper ambit of philosophy. For example, the question of stories' possible moral danger has given rise to several research programs in psychology and sociology. Does exposure to extremely violent stories tend to make people behave more violently? Questions like that are perhaps best addressed through empirical study of behavior, and not by the analysis of language and concepts, or by the dialectical winnowing that occurs in philosophical debate. Therefore, I am restricting myself in this book to inquiring into what I call the "intrinsic moral danger" of stories.

When I speak of intrinsic moral danger, I mean moral danger in which the danger plausibly follows directly from the dangerous story for any mentally healthy person appropriately auditing that story. This idea has three parts.

First the idea of "following directly." Throughout this book I touch on four moral dangers, those of belief, judgment, act, and character: I investigate claims that stories can lead us to believe falsehoods about morality, make incorrect moral judgments, act immorally, or become corrupted in our settled dispositions. For a story to do these things "directly" means that the story itself must be a sufficient cause of these moral catastrophes.

Second, for a moral danger to be intrinsic, I think it must be a danger for any mentally healthy or neurotypical person in ordinary circumstances. It would be absurd to suggest that pencils are morally dangerous because a psychopath would see in them a tool to put out the eyes of other people. The same reservation applies to people in deranging circumstances — in the condition we call "mad with grief" for example — whose inclination to harm themselves or others invests virtually *everything* with moral danger. For a claim about something's moral danger to be serious, it must be morally dangerous outside of these special circumstances.

Third, for a story's moral danger to be intrinsic, it must follow from an appropriate use of that story. To stick with our pencil example, it would be wrong to claim that pencils were morally dangerous because they could be used as murder weapons; but if something about using them appropriately — i.e., to write or draw — were sufficient to precipitate people into immorality, then they would be intrinsically morally dangerous in my sense. Additionally, I should make clear that when I speak of "appropriate use," I do not mean the way an object was intended to be used by the one who made it, but the way an object of its kind is intended to be used in virtue of

being an object of that kind. So, for example, just because Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will* was intended as Nazi propaganda, I don't necessarily think that watching it and failing to become a Nazi would amount to inappropriate use. A good rule of thumb for inquiring into the appropriate audition of stories is to ask, not how was this story intended by its its maker or teller to be received, but rather, how would a good auditor audit this story? The first and most obvious criterion for appropriate use in the case of a story is *understanding,* because that is the first virtue of a good auditor. For example, if someone were to object to Shakespeare's Sonnet XXIII on the grounds that they understood it to be a compelling argument for engaging in acts of terrorism, their failure to understand the poem would undermine their objections to it.

To sum up, for a story to be intrinsically morally dangerous in my sense, it must be a sufficient cause of immoral belief, judgment, act, or character, for a mentally healthy and neurotypical person, under ordinary circumstances, who understands it correctly.

Investigating the (admittedly narrow) subject of intrinsic moral danger is a proper task for philosophy because it reduces — as I will show in a more thorough fashion in chapter two — to reasoning about the ethics of appropriate use.

Evil

Fourth, and finally, I am restricting myself to investigating the moral danger of what I call "evil stories." This phrase should not be taken to mean that the stories themselves are evil, but that

they portray evil actions and the persons disposed to commit evil actions.[5] What do I mean by bringing in the highly contested concept of evil, and why have I done so?

"Evil" has a long history as a term for an extreme form of moral badness. To call a person or action evil is just about the strongest moral objection to them that we can make. Sometimes, in the history of the word and its analogues in other languages, it has simply meant quantitatively great badness. An evil person, in this sense, is someone who does *great* harm, or is *very* bad. Luke Russell, in his history and analysis of the concept of evil, calls such quantitative accounts of moral evil "thin" accounts, because they don't offer anything qualitatively different about the kind of moral badness that the word picks out. Hannah Arendt's account of evil in her famous *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, an account which controversially asserted that evil could be banal — that is, that the greatest of harm could be done by someone going about their everyday business with no particular malice, psychopathy, or sadism, someone 'just following orders' — is an example of a thin account of moral evil.[6] Most theorists of evil, by contrast to Arendt, wish to specify by the word something more qualitative than quantitative. Luke Russell calls these accounts "thick," because they assert that evil action involves some psychologically unique feature. The most commonly adduced features in thick accounts of evil are malice (acting with the primary intention to harm), sadism (acting because of pleasure in someone else's pain), and defiance (acting badly *because* it is the opposite of some law).[7]

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5 I have eschewed the inelegant and clumsy phrase "stories about evil actions and characters" because it would unnecessarily bloat this text to be constantly repeating it, but I ask my readers to bear in mind that "evil stories" is an abbreviation of that longer phrase and *not* an evaluation of the stories themselves. I don't think it makes much sense to say that *stories* are morally good or bad.

6 (Arendt, 1963.)

7 The literature on evil is enormous, but here is a major proponent of each of the three "thick" accounts of evil. (McGinn, 1997) adopts a purely sadistic account of evil. (Calder 2013) outlines a theory of evil focused on malice. Augustine is easily the most famous proponent of the idea that evil is defiant, describing a kind of perversity in which bad is done for the sake of its badness (as in his famous account of stealing from a pear tree), in his *Confessions*.

I do not mean for this dissertation to wade into the debate about the nature of evil. The reason I am bringing in the idea at all is related to my strategy for defending stories against claims that they are morally dangerous. Such accusations are most often made against stories depicting immoral actions and characters. In order to remain rigorously focused on the question of moral danger, I don't want to be side-tracked by quibbles over whether condoning or imitating the actions and persons depicted in a given story would be morally wrong. A good way to avoid such sidetracks is to pick for my examples stories depicting actions and characters so very wrong that almost everybody would agree in condemning and seeking not to imitate them. I am using the word "evil," in this book, as an efficient term to pick out a set of actions that almost everyone would agree in condemning — greatly harmful actions committed for sadistic, malicious, or defiant reasons. Are these kinds of actions individually or collectively a qualitatively unique kind of moral badness? That is *not* the question I am interested in here, where I use the term "evil" simply to refer to these kinds of actions. When I speak of an evil person, I mean someone with a settled disposition to commit actions of these types.[8]

It bears repeating that it does not matter to me, for the purposes of this book, whether those definitions are adequate analyses of evil action and evil personhood, or even whether evil *is* actually a qualitatively distinct kind of immorality; instead, I am merely using the phrases "evil action" and "evil personhood" as useful shorthand to pick out a set of actions and persons that we can all agree in condemning. Happily for my purposes, the stories most often accused of being morally dangerous and the ones featuring actions and persons most people would agree to condemn converge in the category I am calling evil stories.

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8 These definitions of evil action and evil persons are adapted from (Russell, 2014), 130, 192.

I am focusing upon what I am calling "evil stories" because if such stories can be defended against claims of moral dangerousness, it seems likely, *a fortiori*, that stories about less egregious characters and actions could also be so defended. And thus defending evil stories is a parsimonious way of defending stories in general.

My thesis and how I will defend it

A dissertation is not a mystery novel, so I will unveil my conclusion at the outset: I will conclude that auditing evil stories is not, for most people, and as part of a balanced imaginative diet, *so* morally dangerous that they ought to be avoided; moreover, I will argue that it can be morally opportune and, in some special cases, morally obligatory.

My view of philosophical argument is that one's case is successful to the degree that one responds to the strongest possible objections to one's thesis and provides credible reasons to accept it. Therefore, my strategy will be, first, to formulate in the strongest way I can what I take to be the most serious reasons to suspect that auditing evil stories *is* morally dangerous. Those reasons include: the idea that auditing evil stories is itself an immoral action (chapter 3); the idea that it is a virtue to be *unable* to perform the mental operations involved in adequately auditing evil stories (chapter 4); the idea that understanding evil actions or characters is tantamount to condoning them (chapter 5); and the idea that being fascinated by evil undercuts one's standing to condemn it (chapter 6). Then, I will venture several slightly more tentative arguments in support of the idea that evil stories can actually provide opportunities for moral growth and education: the idea that evil stories provoke a unique and valuable kind of moral reflection and

that we can sometimes be obligated to audit them (chapter 7); and the idea that auditing evil stories is uniquely revelatory of some kind of moral truth (chapter 8).

In the course of all this rebutting and reason giving, I will propose a way of thinking about the ethics of audition in general which I will call "role-centered response moralism." This idea was a happy byproduct of my reflections on the topic of evil stories and my exposure to the work of my dissertation director, but it may ultimately prove to be the most valuable result of the investigation in my future philosophical work, as I want to think and write about role-centered moral theory more directly in subsequent work. The idea of role-centered response moralism develops over the course of several separate discussions, so I want to make note of its distinctiveness here, in the first chapter, to alert my readers to an interesting subplot of what follows.

But first, in chapter 2, I will set up the context for subsequent debate, by showing the probable locus of any moral danger evil stories might pose: the imaginative simulation of evil points of view. I have found that many interlocutors who instinctively agree with my conclusion take the point of view that evil stories are morally dangerous enough to be avoided to be so ludicrous as to be undeserving of serious response. Therefore I want to proceed with care to show why I take moral concerns about evil stories very seriously. A preliminary step will be to show how such stories put us into terrifying proximity to the dark desires and skewed vision of evil minds.

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Chapter Two

Simulative Imagination

A story, whatever its medium, is actualized in the imagination of its auditor. In *The Nutcracker* ballet, we watch dancers and listen to music, and by means of these signs imagine the story of a girl who enters a world where her toys have come to life. In *The Iliad*, we read lines of poetry and by means of these signs imagine the story of an ancient siege. So far, so commonsensical an account of narrative imagination.

To justify the concerns of those who fear the moral danger of evil stories, we need something more than this basic account. Why should auditing an evil story be dangerous if it amounts to passive spectating? By way of providing something suitable — building a plausible account of narrative imagination that sets up the possible dangers such imagination could lead us into — I will draw from an account most fully worked out by Gregory Currie.[9] From his expansive theory of the ontology and psychology of narrative, I will be taking just enough to explain how evil stories involve us in the intimate simulation of evil points of view.

Primary and Secondary Imagination

When we follow a story, our imagination works on at least two levels. The first level, which Currie calls primary imagination, consists of "imaginings about the story's characters and

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9 I will be drawing upon (Currie 1995; Currie and Ravenscroft 2002; Currie 2010).

situations."[10] Primary imagining, however, is often insufficient to enable an auditor to understand a story. Sometimes "we imagine various things *so as to* imagine what is fictional."[11] This kind of imagining he calls secondary imagination.

When Currie makes this distinction he is talking specifically about texts, but I think something like the distinction between primary imagination and secondary imagination can also be found in any narrative medium. For example, we are given to know that the rats and the toy soldiers in *The Nutcracker* ballet are fighting each other through the explicit testament of the choreography: we can *see* them fighting. But to imagine what Clara, the girl sucked into this other world, is feeling about the battle, we must contribute something to the story that is not explicitly provided in the telling of it: secondary imagination.

> We don't learn much by imagining that a certain fictional character has a certain mental state; we learn more from the acts of imagining we have to engage in in order to work out what mental state the fictional character is in. We imagine ourselves to have the same relevant beliefs, desires and values as the character whose situation it is. If our imagining goes well, it tells us something about how we would respond to the situation, and what it would be like to experience it: a response and a phenomenology we can then transfer to the character. That way we learn something about the character.[12]

Much of the imaginative work that stories prompt us to do, which we would otherwise never attempt, comes in the act of secondary imagination. When we are auditing a story we are

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10 (Currie 1995), 256.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 257.

engaged in trying to understand it, and we find ourselves imagining what it would be like to be

or experience things that, if we encountered such people or witnessed such events in real life, we

might simply pass by or engage with in a different way. Characters whom we would avoid or

abhor or try to stop in real life we seek to understand through secondary imagination when we

encounter them in stories.

Simulation

Secondary imagination could involve simply reasoning from what we know about a character. To

supplement our primary imagining of *The Nutcracker*, for example, we might ask ourselves, "if a

young girl found herself suddenly shrunken to the size of her toys, and they came alive and

started fighting with rats, how would she probably react, given what I know of young girls and

this young girl in particular?" But another way to conceive of secondary imagination is that it

actually requires us to *simulate* the point of view of a character. Call these two different

conceptions of secondary imagination the "reasoning conception" and the "simulating

conception."

What's the difference?

The reasoning conception is that when we secondarily imagine something we "establish the

initial conditions" of a situation and "some general principles about how a person in that

situation […] will be likely to respond" and "reasoning from these premises, we then draw a

conclusion about the effects — mental, visceral, and behavioural — of being in that situation."[13]

By contrast, the simulating conception is that "I *take on*, temporarily, the beliefs and desires I

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13 Ibid., 252.

assume someone in that situation would start off by having […] they work their effects on my mental economy, having the sorts of impacts on how I feel and what I decide to do that my ordinary, real beliefs and desires have."[14] Moran offers another way to conceive of the difference in these two kinds of imagination:

> Imaginatively adopting a perspective on something involves something different from the sort of imagination involved in ordinary counterfactual reasoning. […] imagination with respect to the cruel, the embarrassing, or the arousing involves something more like a point of view, a total perspective on the situation, rather than just the truth of a specifiable proposition. And imagining along these lines involves something more like genuine rehearsal, "trying on" the point of view, trying to determine what it is like to inhabit it.[15]

The simulating conception of imagination comports better with psychological research and the phenomenological experience of secondary imagination, and it also does a better job, for my purposes in this chapter, of suggesting why it might be dangerous to read stories about evil actions and evil characters.

The simulating conception is backed up in psychological literature by a line of research inaugurated by Daniel Kahneman, research into judgment heuristics. Simulation is, in fact, a kind of imagination we employ all the time. It manifests itself in our cognitive bias toward expecting outcomes we can easily simulate.[16] Simulation is a heuristic in that it allows us to work

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14 Ibid.
15 (Moran 1994), 105.
16 (Tversky and Kahneman, n.d.), "The Simulation Heuristic."

out quite complicated predictions for behavior and to intuitively perceive quite deep emotions in another person (or a character) without pausing to perform difficult conscious calculations.

Neither Currie nor (to my knowledge) Kahneman brings up Konstantin Stanislavski, but long before researchers like Kahneman proposed imaginative simulation as a judgment heuristic, this legendary 20th century actor-director discovered the utility of the simulation heuristic as a practical tool for discovering how another person would behave. As director of the Moscow Art Theater, Stanislavski sought a method to teach actors how to vividly inhabit their roles night after night with no decrease in vividness or fascination for the audience. The method he invented — now known as method acting or, to actual actors, simply as The Method — involves cultivating an imaginary inner life as the character you are attempting to portray, and allowing yourself to unconsciously produce movements, tones of voice, facial expressions, and so on on the basis of an inner simulation. No amount of analysis and forethought can produce acting as realistic as the kind which grows spontaneously from an actor simulating the inner life of their character. Stanislavski famously wrote:

> [I]n the process of action the actor gradually obtains the mastery over the inner incentives of the actions of the character he is representing, evoking in himself the emotions and thoughts which resulted in those actions. In such a case, an actor not only understands his part, but also feels it, and that is the most important thing in creative work on the stage.[17]

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17 Quoted in (Magarshack 2010), 375.

I think this is a perfect illustration of the value of the simulation heuristic. Heuristics aren't simply ways of avoiding the hard work of analysis; they can produce subtle and profound results we are simply unable to achieve with conscious, explicit theoretical analysis.

Efficient story*telling* depends on an auditor's reliable willingness and ability to perform simulative imagination. Spelling out all the information about where and how and why a character does anything that is communicated by the simple sentences of a good novelist, for example, would intolerably bloat a book. More efficient writing will leave more "to the reader's imagination," a phrase that, I would argue, refers specifically to secondary imagination. As the novel ages as an art form, readers seem to be growing more and more impatient with the extended descriptions of setting, omniscient narrator moralizing, and long character monologues by which older novelists conveyed a lot of the information that contemporary novelists leave to simulative imagination, or which they concisely insinuate through free indirect style. In other words: we seem to rely on simulation more and more as this narrative medium matures.

What do you simulate in the case of simulative imagination? A point of view. And what is a point of view? Currie describes it like this:

> Narrators have points of view in just the sense that any finite agent has one: point of view arises from an agent's limitations of access to and capacity to act on the world. Finite agents have locations in space and time, with consequently limited access to other such locations, and must, in order to act, possess mental states which are *egocentric*: they are states which specify how things are in relation to oneself. [18]

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[18] (Currie 2010), 88-89.

A point of view, then, is a subset of a character's ostensible mental states, the "egocentric" subset. This doesn't mean selfish mental states, but mental states that uniquely reflect a character's position and limitations, physical, mental, and moral. When I walk into a room, I may enter the same sensory field as anyone else entering that room, but I will notice different things; what I notice will be limited by the capacities of my sense organs, colored by my present beliefs and emotions and by the memories I associate with what I notice; and I will have different desires and goals and measures of value that will alter how the things I notice appear to me as possible tools.

Thus simulating a viewpoint involves taking on — role-playing, if you will — ways of perceiving, beliefs about the world, and desires that set apart a character's experience of the world. To make clear what I mean, and to bring home its existential significance when it comes to simulating the point of view of an evil character, I will work through an example of simulating each of those aspects of a point of view.

Simulated Perceptions

One distinctive feature of a character's viewpoint is what they notice about the world. To see what I mean, consider the opening credits of the show *Dexter*.

The sequence shows the eponymous main character waking up, slapping a mosquito, shaving, cooking breakfast, and dressing for work, the wrinkle being, of course, that he's a psychopathic serial killer. When he slaps the mosquito, the camera zooms in on the splatter of blood. When he shaves, we get a macro shot of skin bristling with hairs and a razor hovering above a throat. He cuts himself slightly, and dabs the blood: we witness the blood soaking the

gauze in slow-motion. He cuts a piece of meat for his breakfast, crushes eggs, and we see each cut and crush with enhanced sound effects and gruesome texture. He squeezes half a grapefruit over a pulper and we see the mangled red flesh of the fruit. By the time he is tying his shoes — macro shot, the slithering rough sound of the laces pulling through the eyeholes suitably amplified — the point has been made.

This isn't itself secondary imagination — since it's spelled right out in the visual language of the show — but it amounts to a training for how to simulate the serial-killer character's point of view. In the subsequent stories in each episode (which never, frankly, rise to the artistic efficacy of that opening), we are more deeply engaged in the story because we can simulate the way Dexter sees the world. The opening credits of *Dexter* teach us how to do that: everything reminds him of ripping flesh and dripping blood, and the least interaction with the world is homologous, for him, to physical violence.

To supplement a story with secondary imagination often means understanding what is given to us in primary imagination through the perceptual framework of a point of view: noticing what a character would notice, and grasping objects through the sorts of metaphors and associations that would occur to them.

Simulated Beliefs

Beliefs one would reject in real life are also often necessary to simulate a character's point of view. Free indirect style, a term from literary criticism indicating a method of cluing in a reader to a character's thoughts and feelings purely through the language used in seemingly objective description, is a great example from modern novelistic technique of how storytellers can cause us

to simulate a character's point of view. The critic James Wood explains and illustrates free indirect style like this:

> Free indirect style is at its most powerful when hardly visible or audible: "Ted watched the orchestra through stupid tears." In my example, the word "stupid" marks the sentence as written in free indirect style. Remove it, and we have standard reported thought: "Ted watched the orchestra through tears." The addition of the word "stupid" raises the question: Whose word is this? It's unlikely that I would want to call my character stupid merely for listening to some music in a concert hall. No, in a marvelous alchemical transfer, the word now belongs partly to Ted. He is listening to the music and crying, and is embarrassed—we can imagine him furiously rubbing his eyes—that he has allowed these "stupid" tears to fall.[19]

Virtually every serious novelist today uses description as a way to insinuate a perceptual point of view into their reader's imagination. We see how a character evaluates the world they perceive, and what they believe about it; and to successfully understand them we must simulate those beliefs. What will Ted do next, if he believes his tears are stupid?

Moreover, even apart from the modern technique of free indirect style, the ability to simulate a character's beliefs has always been important to the most venerable and most frequently used literary technique of them all: dramatic irony. Dramatic irony is the effect produced by allowing the auditors of a story to know something the characters in the story do not. Nearly every Greek tragedy derives its tension from dramatic irony. The audience for those plays already knew the

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19 (Wood 2008), 10.

outcome of the stories they were seeing dramatized; so do we, reading or rereading them today; but the knowledge that Oedipus has married his mother and killed his father only enhances the dread with which we watch him stumble into that knowledge for himself. Dramatic irony wouldn't produce its powerful effects without the ability to simulate a character's different beliefs about a situation: what they are ignorant about, what they believe wrongly, and so on. The tragedy-reader's dread for Oedipus relies in large part upon their simulation of his peaceful ignorance and the shock of discovery.

Simulated Desires

Finally, to understand a character's actions, to enter thrillingly into their deliberations and efforts in pursuit of a goal (which is what we often want from a story), we have to understand and internalize their desires, even if we do not otherwise share, or even condone, those desires. For example, in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, to understand the plot or follow the machinations and subterfuge of the Prince of Denmark or to feel the suspense of the high stakes play-within-the-play and the duel, we have to perceive events in light of Hamlet's desire to avenge his father. Personally, I find revenge a repulsive desire, and hope that even if someone greatly wronged me I wouldn't desire it; but for the duration of *Hamlet*, I root for him to succeed in vengeance.

"Shakespeare has the ability to establish the revenge ethic as one of the givens in terms of which the action of 'Hamlet' is to be judged," writes Philip Devine.[20] This is because we more or less adopt — at least for the purposes of and the duration of our attempt to successfully audit a

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20 (Devine 1974)

story — the desires of a protagonist. Indeed we have to, in order to successfully simulate their point of view.

Imagination's Buffer

The simulative work of the imagination is different from the work of perception, belief, and desire in an actual life because it is "disconnected from their normal perceptual inputs and behavioural outputs."[21] In the first place, simulation is not fueled by the same kind of perception as non-imaginative mental life. If I find myself simulating the annoyance of Achilles at having his prize, the slave girl Briseis, stolen by the ranking warlord Agamemnon, whether I am reading about it or watching a play about it or even daydreaming about it, the perceptual inputs are virtual rather than real; I am responding to the presence, so to speak, of something absent. Likewise, if the simulation is to remain a simulation, then the things I imagine doing — say sulking in a tent beneath the prow of my trireme — are not ordinary behavioral outputs, but virtual behavior. Simulative imagination takes place in a sort of bubble disconnected from the physical world around the auditor.

Another way to put all this is that while you imagine something, a buffer exists between your mind and the non-story-conveying parts of the world. Many of the subsequent arguments for and against the idea that evil stories are morally dangerous will depend upon what this buffer accomplishes and just how strong it is.

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21 (Currie 1995) 209.

Simulating Evil Points of View

This account should by itself have begun to suggest the concerns that evil stories raise about

moral danger: how is it possible to spend time in such proximity to evil minds, even simulating

in great detail their perceptions, beliefs, and desires, without thereby doing something wrong,

being mislead, or needlessly complicating the clarity of your moral vision? Does the buffer

between imagination and real life keep out the corrupting influence of an evil point of view, or is

auditing an evil story like voluntarily putting one's mental citadel under siege, or allowing

sappers to tunnel beneath its walls? To such questions we now turn.

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Chapter Three

Response Moralism

One of the most reader-implicating scenes in all of literature opens with the following injunction to the reader: "I want my learned readers to participate in the scene I am about to replay; I want them to examine its every detail and see for themselves".[22]

This sentence is from Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. In what follows, the narrator Humbert Humbert initiates us into the lascivious point of view of a pedophile. Pretending to be playing with his charge, the little girl Dolores whom he calls Lolita, he seats her on his lap and imperceptibly masturbates while distracting her from this covert sexual assault by prattling a nonsense rhyme. Here is a small portion of the extraordinary and disturbing scene:

> Under my glancing finger tips I felt the minute hairs bristle ever so slightly along her shins. I lost myself in the pungent but healthy heat which like summer haze hung about little Haze. Let her stay, let her stay... As she strained to chuck the core of her abolished apple into the fender, her young weight, her shameless innocent shanks and round bottom, shifted in my tense, tortured, surreptitiously laboring lap; and all of a sudden a mysterious change came over my senses. I entered a plane of being where nothing mattered, save the infusion of joy brewed within my body. What had begun as a delicious distention of my innermost roots became a glowing tingle which now had reached that

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22 (Nabokov 1997), 79.

state of absolute security, confidence and reliance not found elsewhere in conscious life. With the deep hot sweetness thus established and well on its way to the ultimate convulsion, I felt I could slow down in order to prolong the glow. Lolita had been safely solipsized.[23]

I don't think there is any more distressingly precise and evocative description of sexual objectification and assault in literature. To read with attention and understanding is to simulate Humbert Humbert's point of view: it even seems to be, to borrow his own phrase, "to participate in the scene," and it makes you feel sullied, tainted for having inhabited such a mind.

Is it wrong to simulate Humbert Humbert's point of view?

Response moralism

That the act of auditing a story might itself be morally wrong is not the most common objection leveled against evil stories, but it seems to me logically to be the first that ought to be considered by anyone trying to defend them. More common are claims that stories corrupt or mislead, or that auditing them well is an ability that correlates with bad character, without itself being wrong. Perhaps the reason that the act of audition itself tends to escape scrutiny is that it can be difficult to see how this act, private, internal, taking place behind the buffer of the imagination, can possibly matter.

A few philosophers have, however, assayed the job of defending something like the claim that the act of auditing certain stories is wrong in itself.[24] They focus specifically on a dimension

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23 Ibid., 81.
24 Notably, (Gaut 2007; Hazlett 2009; Smuts 2015)

of audition that they call "emotional response," and they denominate the position that one's emotional response to a work of art can be wrong "response moralism." For instance, most of them look for a way to defend the claim that enjoying violence or getting turned on by pedophilia in a story is a morally wrong response.

I consider any account of response moralism tantamount to an argument that certain acts of audition can be morally wrong, because one's response in this sense is *part* of the act of audition.

All of the philosophers engaged in the debate about response moralism must deal with one major obstacle to the idea, an obstacle that crops up everywhere in discussions of fiction and responding to fiction. Hazlett calls it the "reality argument."[25] It goes like this: since morality concerns how we treat (and how we think about or respond emotionally to) other people, and since responding to the characters in a story is not responding to real people, it cannot be immoral to respond in a certain way to the characters in a story.

The way in which response moralists respond to this objection differentiates them. I have encountered at least three different versions of response moralism, which I will call aretaic response moralism, category response moralism, and intuitive response moralism. None of them seem adequate to me, and I will explain why for each version.

Aretaic Response Moralism

Aretaic response moralism, as my name for it suggests, is a response moralism based on virtue ethics. Hazlett cites Deveraux as its main proponent, and this is what she writes on the subject:

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25 (Hazlett 2009) 245.

Pleasure in [...] a work of art that celebrates sadism or pedophilia [...] might lead one to ask not just about what one may become, but about who one is now. The point is an Aristotelian one. If virtue consists (in part) in taking pleasure in the right things and not in the wrong things, then what is my character now such that I can take pleasure in these things?[26]

This argument claims that the object of one's pleasure indicates something about one's moral character. If true, this would raise some thorny problems for evil stories, because, as we have seen, the work of secondary imagination essential to understanding perverse characters often requires us to simulate wrong desires and perceptions, among which must be included wrong pleasures, like that of Humbert Humbert in using Dolores for his sexual gratification. Aretaic response moralism would avoid the "reality argument" because the wrongness of taking pleasure in wrong things does not appear to depend on any relation to other people, real or imaginary.

But I think aretaic response moralism fails as an account of response moralism. Any successful response moralism must give us a reason to call a response itself immoral. Devereaux's account actually puts the immorality at two removes from the response itself.

First, she indicates that lack of virtue consists, not in wrong pleasure, but in taking pleasure in the wrong things. This is a good distinction to make in light of her claim to be making an "Aristotelian point," because Aristotle believed no pleasure could be bad in itself. Aristotle believed that all pleasures were unimpeded activities of a natural state. As Richard Kraut observes, "It follows from this conception of pleasure that every instance of pleasure must be good to some extent. For how could an unimpeded activity of a natural state be bad or a

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26 (Devereaux 1998) 241-242.

matter of indifference?"[27] In book VII of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle argues against

objections that all pleasures are bad, and that some pleasures are bad.[28] It follows from his

refutations of these positions that he believed all pleasures were good. What he did seem to

acknowledge was that the excessive pursuit of some pleasures, the baser sort, could be wrong if

pursuing them excluded the higher sort. So on a genuinely Aristotelian account of pleasure, not

pleasure itself but, so to speak, a given type of pleasure's role in the overall economy of a

person's pleasures is the morally blameworthy thing.

But Devereaux seems to push the wrongness another step back even beyond taking

pleasure in the wrong things. Her rhetorical question — "what is my character now such that I

can take pleasure in these things?" — suggests that the real problem with expressing one's lack

of virtue through taking pleasure in the wrong things is what this expressing expresses, viz., a

bad character. Such an idea would be consistent with an account of virtue ethics that locates

moral goodness or badness fundamentally in character, in settled disposition; but it would be

inconsistent with response moralism, because the character being expressed, and not the means

of expression, is the truly bad thing. We can see this by trying the thought experiment of

imagining a person having a one-off response of pleasure in the wrong thing, but who otherwise

possesses a settled disposition not to take such pleasures. Such a person would not necessarily be

morally condemnable from Devereaux's standpoint, because the essential moral quality — their

character — could remain good despite this deviation.

For these reasons, I think Aretaic Response Moralism fails as a form of response

moralism. I should add that it's not clear to me Devereaux would herself consider it a form of

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27 (Kraut 2016)
28 (Aristotle 2014) *Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VII, chaps. 11-14.

response moralism, since I am only treating it as a version of response moralism in light of Hazlett's choice to consider it one and to criticize it as such. Devereaux's claims do bear striking similarity, however, to another kind of objection to evil stories that I will discuss in Chapter 4, under the heading of Imaginative Resistance.

Category Response Moralism

Hazlett offers an account of response moralism which escapes the reality argument by insisting that a response to a fictional character is also a response to real people, because some of the content to which one responds in a fiction work is nonfictional content. To do this, he relies on two ideas he calls the import and export principles.

The import principle:

For all true p in C_F, assume p is true in f, unless you already know p is false in f . [29]

Or, in other words, for any proposition in the class of propositions about our world that are similar to propositions about the fictional world, assume that proposition is true in the fictional world unless you know it to be false there. For instance, Hazlett notes that we import the assumption into *The Lord of the Rings* that people need to eat to stay alive, but not our assumptions about how banking works. I would integrate the import principle with the theory of simulative imagination, by saying that we simulate a character as if the same rules apply in their

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29 (Hazlett 2009), 251.

world as in our world and as if they think in the same way that we think, unless the fiction gives us reason to believe those patterns do not apply.

The export principle complements the import principle:

For all p in C_F that are true in f, assume p is true, unless you already know p is false.[30]

Or, in other words, for any proposition in the class of propositions about our world that are similar to propositions about the fictional world, assume that proposition is true in our world if it is known to be true in the fictional world. For instance, most of what I believe about the social role of dancing in England in the 1800s is derived from reading and watching dramatizations of Jane Austen: most peoples' historical imaginations are probably likewise stocked primarily from historical fiction in books and films. This is the export principle in operation.

Hazlett believes that the import and export principles can save response moralism from the reality argument:

Imagine a (serious, realistic) fiction that asks its consumer to delight at the suffering of some character. This will be (other things being equal) a story in which it is fictional that suffering is amusing, and the proposition that suffering is amusing will be in the similarity class for the fiction. By convention, the author and the consumer will both assume that the consumer will employ the Export Principle. In virtue of this, the fiction (strictly speaking, its author) implies that suffering really is amusing. Given that, real

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30 Ibid.

suffering is part of the content of the fiction. When I emotionally respond to its content, I am thereby emotionally responding to the suffering of real people.[31]

I call this category response moralism because it relies on equating real and fictional objects of response by claiming that responding to either one of them is responding to a category that includes both of them. Finding a fictional suffering amusing is taken to be finding suffering in general amusing, fictional or not.

But I object to this account of response moralism because it doesn't actually seem to follow from the import and export principles. This is because emotionally responding to a particular instance of a thing is *not* the same as responding to a category of things. Speaking for myself, I rarely have emotional responses to general categories like suffering in the abstract. (This is indeed fortunate, since I would likely be emotionally incapacitated in light of my beliefs about the prevalence and intensity of suffering in the world.) Instead, I respond emotionally to particular instances of suffering. When I was about thirteen, I read *Crime and Punishment* and was horrified and deeply moved by the dream in which a horse is mercilessly beaten; that was quite possibly the strongest emotional response I have ever had to a story — I had to pause reading and go cry for a while — and its intensity directly followed from the evocative specificity of Dostoevsky's account. By contrast, most days I barely spare a thought for the widespread and continuous violence committed against animals in our world. The import and export principles, however, rely upon this kind of abstraction.

This failure of Hazlett's argument stems from his elision of judgment and emotional response. His account seems plausible at first only because something like the export and import

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31 Ibid., 252.

principles do seem to hold with respect to our judgments about the representative accuracy of fiction, but fall apart when you try to conceive of emotional response in the same way. To make his claims on behalf of response moralism follow from his account of the import and export principles, he would have to show the in what relevant respects exporting a judgment about a category and exporting an emotional response to something are similar.

Intuitive Response Moralism

Smuts believes he can avoid the reality argument and justify response moralism very simply, by relying on the intuitive method of G.E. Moore. He bases his defense of response moralism on a claim from *Principia Ethica* with which he agrees: that it is wrong to enjoy suffering, simpliciter.[32]

Forget real or fictional people or mucking about with the mediated moral judgment of virtue ethics, Smuts suggests; we can simply assert that it is bad to enjoy suffering, and this axiological claim will extend to responding to art insofar as we enjoy suffering in it. But why should we take that assertion to be true? Because "in the contest of intuitions, response moralism is triumphant."[33]

Frankly, the contest of intuitions that Smuts stages is a pretty indecisive contest. It includes no attempt to consider cases in which enjoying suffering might seem intuitively neutral or good, and it extends to a mere three examples which he explicitly calls "intuition pumps" (a phrase that was coined by Daniel Dennett in *Consciousness Explained* to mock thought experiments designed to produce cheap and prejudiced supporting intuitions — though Dennett

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32 (Smuts 2015) 26.
33 Ibid., 29.

now sometimes refers to intuition pumps as legitimate philosophical tools). I will consider and expose the weakness of his three "intuition pumps" and then propose that it is equally easy to make countervailing intuition pumps, and therefore intuitive response moralism runs aground on the all-too-predictable shoals that lie in wait for ethical intuitionism: the subjectivity of intuitions.

Smuts' first intuition pump involves a scenario in which you go the grocery store and fall to the ground horribly and visibly injuring yourself; then, as you are treated, a crowd gathers to laugh at and enjoy your pain:

> [E]ven if you did not notice the snickering, even if you falsely believed that the crowd was thoughtfully concerned, their pleasurable reactions would be morally bad. They should likely feel guilty or, at least, ashamed for having such reactions. We would frown on them for feeling this way. Most plausibly, the crowd is worthy of disesteem.[34]

I admit that this intuition pump works on me. I find that, yes, I want to condemn a crowd that would secretly take pleasure in my pain. But it has two failings that prevent it from adequately justifying response moralism. First, it would easily fall prey to the "reality argument." It's quite possible that what makes this intuition successful is that the object of the emotional response of pleasure is a real person in pain. Second, not only is this person real, but in the thought experiment *you* are the person suffering. One of the easiest ways to prejudice someone's moral judgment is to mix it up with egoistic concerns that may or may not be morally decisive. *Of course* we find the idea of a group of people secretly enjoying our pain reprehensible. But think

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34 Ibid., 27.

back to the last time you felt *schadenfreude* for the failure of someone you consider evil, perhaps a politician whose policies you deplore, and in whose fall from power you took delight. Such feelings may be wrong, but not — to me at least — intuitively so. Thus this intuition pump really is a pump, in the worst sense, because it elicits an intuition for hidden and prejudicial reasons.

It is easy to alter the conditions of this thought experiment to make it less effective. Imagine, for example, that the person who has fallen and injured themselves is not you, and that this person is well known to be an evil person (in the sense of evil personhood I defined for the purposes of this dissertation: someone disposed to commit acts of great harm for sadistic, malicious, or defiant reasons). He falls and horribly injures himself. Otherwise allow the thought experiment to run the same: every measure is taken by you and the rest of the crowd to aid this person and secure medical help for them. But you also feel a secret pleasure, which you carefully do not display, or display in ways the person does not notice. "He had this coming to him," you think. Suddenly the thought experiment seems far less successful in pumping the relevant intuition.

Smuts' second intuition pump is taken from G.E. Moore:

> If we then consider what judgment we should pass upon a universe which consisted solely of minds thus occupied [with thoughts of cruelty], without the smallest hope that there would ever exist in it the smallest consciousness of any object other than those proper to these passions, or any feeling directed to any such object, I think that we cannot avoid the conclusion that the existence of such a universe would be a far worse evil than the existence of none at all.[35]

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35 (Moore 2012), 209.

The language here is not terribly clear, but presumably Moore is asking us to imagine a world in which everybody has only sadistic thoughts. This intuition pump does not work on me in a way that renders me prepared to accept as plausible the general claim that it is wrong to enjoy suffering. Among other things, this intuition pump only seems to work at all, on me at least, because I think how sad it would be not to enjoy other kinds of thoughts, and because I can't imagine enough sadistic pleasures to adequately fill a person's mind full-time. It is simply too far-fetched and complicated an intuition pump to successfully pump my intuitions in the relevant respect.

Finally, in an effort to avoid the typical muddiness of Moore's language and imaginings, Smuts proposes a refinement of the sadistic possible world experiment that goes like this:

> Imagine two worlds, each having just one inhabitant. In world A, the survivor spends her free time thinking nice thoughts. She often imagines cats playing with rubber bands on sunny window sills. In world B, the survivor lives a similar life, but rather than imagine cats, he imagines torturing children with a pair of pliers and a blowtorch. Is either world preferable?[36]

Far from clarifying matters, I find that this thought experiment actually produces no intuitions at all, but merely a large number of questions — not because I find torturing children a more pleasurable prospect than playful cats, but because I get hung up on the idea of judging a preferable world. What differs in these two worlds is the habitual contents of the consciousness

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36 (Smuts 2015) 28.

of their respective sole inhabitants. So I find myself inclined to judge the persons involved rather than their worlds. Our grounds for preferring one world to the other would have to be that one contains a rather less pleasant person than the other. But even here, my attempt to produce an intuition gets hung up on the lack of context for the situation I am being asked to judge. Why do these two people occupy their thoughts with such different imaginings? Since my intuition will inevitably turn upon which of them I consider to be a better person, and since the contents of one's typical imaginings tells me nothing about whether one is a worse or better person, I am unable to produce an intuition. Perhaps the person who imagines kittens all day does so in order to avoid thinking about all the horrible things they did in the past; or perhaps the person who imagines the torture of children does so because they have been traumatized by such torture in the past and can't help but rehearse it. Such contexts would affect my evaluation of which is more likely to be the better person, and therefore which is more likely to be the "preferable world," and without such contexts it's difficult to make any evaluation. Smuts' intuition pump is notably deficient in pneumatic power, producing, instead instead of moral intuitions, only the strong methodological intuition that this is not a useful way to think about moral problems.

Moreover, at this point in my attempts to run his thought experiment, I always run up against the idea of psychopathic sadists and masochists, people neurologically conditioned to experience feelings of pleasure upon giving or receiving pain. The existence of such people is actually a problem for all generalized claims that the enjoyment of suffering is wrong: what if the pleasure one feels at such suffering is involuntary? Even if one does not believe that there are people neurologically compelled to enjoy giving or receiving pain, most people have at least temporary memories of involuntarily enjoying something. Just a few months ago, after a long

day of administering oral examinations to my students, I was exhausted and needed to conclude one final exam. The student entered and he was wearing a bow-tie, because he had dressed up for the examination. He began to answer my questions in a way that clearly indicated he hadn't studied, and tried in the most transparent ways to avoid answering my questions by using lots of long empty phrases. He grew increasingly uncomfortable as I tried to ask questions that would require a precise answer. Against my own will, because I considered it inappropriate and inopportune, I had to choke back hysterical laughter at the situation. To finish his exam, I had to cover my mouth with my hand and painfully bite my inner cheek to suppress my hilarity. This was extremely involuntary amusement.

The very existence of complications that set up serious roadblocks to replicating Smuts' intuitions make his thought experiments fail as a confirmation of his hypothesis. Recall that the claim being defended is that it is wrong to enjoy evil. Perhaps all Smuts needs to do is to show that it is *sometimes* wrong to enjoy evil? No: because of the particular strategy he has adopted to get around the reality argument, the claim he needs to defend in order to derive response moralism from it is that it is *always* wrong to enjoy evil. If it is always wrong, then it is wrong in the case of fiction as in the case of reality. The simplicity and the universality of the claim is why it appeals to Smuts within his larger argument, but it is precisely that simplicity and universality which make it indefensible through the intuition pumps he has chosen.

Moreover, in order for the "contest of intuitions" that Smuts believes he has conducted to have even the semblance of being a fair contest, shouldn't he consider thought experiments designed to pump the opposite intuition? Otherwise he hasn't conducted a contest any more than we would say a boxer had conducted a contest if he entered the ring by himself and then claimed

victory for avoiding KO. I would raise as a counter-example the phenomenon of slapstick humor. A commonplace of clowning, child's cartoons, theater, interpersonal humor, and the like, slapstick humor often involves provoking reactions of amusement on the basis of depictions of painful physical accidents and the frustration of buffoonish villains with murderous intent. Many people have giggled at some point in their life at a cartoon character or an actor slipping on a banana, or at Sylvester the cat or Wiley Coyote failing to murder their respective avian victims. Does Smuts consider such amusement morally wrong?

As, in my experience, is often the case, the attempt to support a moral generalization on the basis of a few intuition pumps is an ineffective form of ethical reasoning.[37]

My alternative: Role-centered response moralism

If neither aretaic, category, nor intuitive response moralism really works, does that mean we're out of options for a defensible response moralism? I don't think so.

As I see it, an adequate response moralism must accomplish two things: first, it must provide good reasons why some responses themselves can be wrong; and second, it must not fall in the face of the reality argument.

One reason it is (apparently) so difficult to provide a response moralism that fulfills these two conditions is that while, in normative ethics, we have several very clearly worked out

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[37] In general, I think philosophers would do better to use their own intuitions not as strong reasons in support of claims but in two other ways: (1) as a heuristic that might point the way that reason could follow, but equally easily might simply mislead. Whether it is possible to construct an argument that does not purely rely on intuition to support the intuitive claim determines the value of this heuristic in a given instance. (2) As a constraint on speculative reason. If one finds one's arguments committing one to strongly counter-intuitive claims, then that argument must adduce stronger reasons than a non-counterintuitive argument in order to be credible. You might say intuitions map out where are argumentative effort will most usefully be expended, but can't substitute for that work itself.

accounts of how to determine whether something is morally right or wrong — at the very least, the traditional big three of consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics — there often seems to be something missing when it comes to practically applying such accounts to individual cases, outside of certain paradigmatic cases (lying, stealing, murder, and so on). In the case of consequentialism and deontology, we end up relying on complicated and far-fetched calculations of harm and benefit, or on highly dubious and selective intuitions like those of Smuts, in a way that can have the deplorable effect of making ethical theory seem nothing but a massively complicating feature in moral decision making; and in the case of virtue ethics, it can be difficult to find a way to connect character, the locus of moral badness or goodness, to individual actions. I call the missing thing *meso-level* moral concepts. They are meso-level because they mediate between universal moral principles and individual moral judgments, having neither the universality of the one nor the particularity of the other. In this way, such meso-level moral concepts function rather like positive laws, which are expected to adhere to abstract conceptions of justice or fairness or high-level statutory principles, but which still require interpretation and application by judges to individual cases. Among the best such meso-level moral concepts that I have encountered are *morally important roles*. A moral theory which closely relies upon and incorporates such roles is much better equipped to consider the edge cases of moral decision-making in ordinary life (i.e., most cases).

By a "role-centered moral theory" I mean a way of understanding moral life as a matter of acquitting oneself well in a variety of morally determinative relationships. Simply put, what one ought to do is what will enable one to fulfill one's morally important roles in the lives of others. I understand a morally important role as one that is directed toward the well being of another, that

appears across different cultures and times, and repudiating which would generally be considered abnormal.[38]

One of the things that most appeals to me about role-centered moral theory is that it could, conceivably, function within any of the major systems of normative ethics. One could account for the *moral* part of the moral importance of certain roles through consequentialist, deontological, or virtue ethical arguments. For example, an obvious instance of a morally important role is that of parent. It is easy to defend the importance of good parenting by examining the consequences of good and bad parenting, or by consulting our intuitions or the most widely promulgated political and religious codes of law, and good parenting could easily integrate into an account of character and virtue.

As guides to behavior, morally important roles are direct, easily applicable, and already taught wherever human communities attempt to live together in peace. To use the role of parent once again as an example, it is clear that figuring out how to be a good parent is a considerably more precise and well-developed guide to conduct that attempting to figure out how to be a good person in general. In point of fact, what is involved in being a good parent seems to follow from what it means to *be* a parent in a natural way, such that a clear description of the role involves describing the virtues it entails. So one of the tremendous advantages of a meso-level moral principle of this kind is that it bridges the so-called is-ought distinction that has appeared to yawn, chasm-like across the main road of ethics, since Hume. A role-centered moral theory more

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38 I am adapting the idea of role-centered moral theory from (García 1985), which he, in turn, developed out of a hint from (Strawson 1962). I am borrowing my conditions for a morally important role from private communication with Garcia in 2017. As with what I have borrowed from Gregory Currie, I take liberties with some of the subtleties of the theory I am using, simplifying and summarizing to extract what I need for the purposes of this book. Moreover, the idea that morally important roles constitute meso-level moral concepts is not defended by Garcia, but a claim of my own. While I am fascinated by the possibilities of role-centered moral theory, this book does not constitute a defense of it, except insofar as it proves a useful source for developing an account of response moralism.

or less suggests that you can conquer the massive and epistemologically difficult undertaking of attempting to be a good person by carefully being good at your morally significant roles.

My proposal is that we could develop a successful response moralism out of role-centered moral theory. If we posit a role-centered moral theory, then a wrong response to an artwork would be any response that causes one to fail in or become less fit for a morally significant role in another's life. For example, if a response to an artwork causes you to fail as, or renders you unfit to be, a good parent to your child, then it is a wrong response.

This account of response moralism would provide reasons to consider some responses themselves morally wrong. It would also escape the reality argument objection, because a response's rightness or wrongness would have nothing to do with the ontological status of the object of the response itself, but with the role (invariably directed toward a real other) which the response affected.

The question role-centered response moralism raises for evil stories is this: does simulating an evil point of view cause one to fail in or become less fit for a morally significant role in another's life?

"Auditor" as a morally important role in itself

Which of one's morally important roles are affected by auditing a story?

The first possible such role is that of auditor itself. Auditing is a role with clear and widely agreed upon virtues (such as understanding), but it's not obvious that it counts as a morally important role.

To recap: for a role to be morally significant, it must be directed toward the wellbeing of others; it must be a role found across a wide-variety of places and times; and wherever and whenever it is found, repudiating it or lacking interest in it is a sign of abnormality or mental illness.

Being a good auditor for stories is indeed a role that can be found across cultures and times. Some have even posited interest in stories as the defining trait of the human species.[39] The role is found in several universal forms, and several particular but culture-spanning forms.

Stories are vehicles for communication, and thus the role of auditor is — one might say — a sub-role in many of the less controversially morally important roles. A good father is a good auditor to his child, a good citizen is a good auditor of political messages and debates, a good husband is a good auditor to his wife, and so on. One of the first strong expressions of moral judgment in many children's lives occurs when they accuse an adult of reading their favorite story slightly wrong. (A little girl once objected to my reading the phrase "it is not" as "it's not" because she *knew* it was supposed to be uncontracted and it appalled her that I would fudge the accuracy of my reading.) In this way the role of auditor pervades our morally important roles to the extent that they require communication and understanding.

Most communities also feature more specialized formal auditors to fulfill what Talcott Parsons' called the social function of pattern-maintenance. Nations, religious groups, ethnic groups, families, corporations, and so on, all rely on institutional memories, often preserved in the form of stories, to individuate and recognize themselves, to guide their future decisions and behavior by historical exemplars, and to remember the final and proximate ends of whatever their association happens to be. These specialists in social pattern maintenance take myriad

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39 That is one of the overall themes of [(Boyd 2009)](#).

specific forms. The medicine man or shaman, the court and university historian, the journalist, the tale-spinning grandparent, the pastor or priest, the folk singer or bard, and so on. The key point for our purposes is that to be such a transmitter necessarily involves also being a good auditor: their function is to transmit stories, to receive them and pass them on. We consider societies and smaller communities that don't possess such specialists wrong and damaged. There's a reason that in both *1984* and *Brave New World* the story of the past is suppressed, forbidden, or obscured: loss of social pattern through the destruction of institutional memory is a nearly universal feature of dystopia as a genre. Lowry's wildly popular young adult novel, *The Giver*, concerns the crucial significance of formal audition of institutional memory, and illustrates the devastation wrought by its loss.

I think it's fair to say that auditor is a morally important role because it pervades history and the variety of human communities, that not caring about it or failing at it is generally considered wrong and abnormal.

But what follows from that? Is there a kind of response that would cause one to be a poor auditor, such that we could devise a response moralism on the basis of it? It seems to me that there obviously is: as with any morally significant role, to repudiate it is wrong, and to do it badly is wrong.

Surprisingly, the results of this argument is a response moralism that seems to *enjoin* us to audit evil stories if they are told by people in whose lives we have morally important roles, or if those stories are crucial parts of institutional memory. Since this chapter is supposed to be responding to objections to evil stories, I will put a pin in this idea and return to it at the end of the book, when I consider positive reasons we might morally benefit from auditing evil stories.

Audition and the failure of the imagination's buffer

There is a second and more appropriately critical way in which auditing evil stories could affect our morally significant roles. Let me explain by way of an example. Suppose a man is the primary caregiver to a small child. Further suppose that this man struggles with pedophiliac desires. But he tries to suppress them and does not allow them to influence his behavior or thoughts about his child.

Now ask yourself: would it be morally dangerous for such a man to read *Lolita*?

I don't mean here to perform the philosophical move I earlier criticized, of supporting a philosophical claim merely by attempting to pump my reader's intuitions. What I want to do is use the suggestion of this heuristic intuition to see if the intuitive wrongness of a pedophiliac reading *Lolita* can lead us to a more objectively justifying reason to suspect that such a person ought not to do so.

The majority of people I have canvassed — and it is my own opinion as well — find something objectionable in a pedophiliac reading *Lolita*, but not necessarily in a non-pedophiliac reading it, even a non-pedophiliac who is, for example, a daycare attendant. I propose that our intuition is reasonable because we suspect that a pedophiliac would be unable to maintain what I earlier described as the imagination's buffer, whereby an imaginative simulator's perceptions, beliefs, and desires remain "disconnected from their normal perceptual inputs and behavioural outputs."[40]

Currie expands upon the dangers of a weak or faltering buffer like this:

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40 (Currie 1995) 259.

Now if imaginings do, for all of us, involve some danger of leakage or flooding, imagining values radically different from our own carries with it a real danger. Our own, long-standing values, whatever their drawbacks, have got us by, we have probably learned how to satisfy them in rudimentary ways, and others close to us have learned to understand and live with those values as we exemplify them. If imagining alien values carried with it the possibility that we may actually come to have those values through failure of inhibition, such imaginings expose us and those around to real danger, though one we have scarcely begun to quantify.[41]

The strength of a given person's imaginative buffer is probably not a matter than can be precisely determined by philosophical methods. It seems a more appropriate study for empirical psychology. But using common sense, we can hypothesize that a variety of types of people would probably struggle in this way. For example, certain mental illnesses might render one unusually susceptible to breakdowns of the imaginative buffer. Also, those given to wrong desires which correspond to desires necessary to simulate the viewpoint of a story — such as our hypothetical *Lolita*-reading pedophiliac — would likewise be susceptible. We might also list the uncultured or unsophisticated, who might be unable to rely on the reflective distance that characterizes experienced auditors. For example, I remember, as a very young reader, how it used to distress me to read the perspective of someone who fundamentally disagreed with the worldview in which I had been raised: so strong did the recommendation of something simply appearing in a book seem to me, uncultured as I then was, that I would be physically

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41 Ibid.

discommoded by the disagreement, suffering indigestion and headaches.[42] Furthermore, we might hypothesize that it is possible to become temporarily susceptible to weakness of the imaginative buffer, whether for a physiological reason, illness or intoxication of some sort, or for a psychological or emotional reason, as in the case of those "mad with grief" or anger. In these exceptional cases, it does seem reasonable to suppose that evil stories present a moral danger. The danger they present is that the act of simulation will become the act of imitation, because the buffer between perceptual inputs and behavioral outputs will break down.

What I believe this preliminary and unscientific list suggests is that role-centered response moralism highlights enough danger in the imaginative simulation of evil viewpoints to make us cautious in choosing to audit such a story. But it does not seem to represent a danger so severe as to justify avoiding evil stories altogether, for auditors who are mature, healthy, culturally experienced, and not given, themselves, to the wrong desires dramatized in a story. For such people, their proficiency and commitment to their roles would not be threatened by auditing an evil story.

Audition and wrongly stocking the moral imagination

Evil stories might also plausibly be said to make one less fit to fulfill one's morally important roles by wrongly stocking the moral imagination.

I use the phrase "moral imagination" in the sense defined by Biss: it is "the capacity to generate new possibilities for both morally required and meritorious actions."[43] To explain, here is Biss comparing lack of moral imagination to the more familiar idea of *akrasia*:

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42 (Bettelheim 2010) discusses the influence of fairy tales on the views of children in terms which resonate with my experience of youthful susceptibility.
43 (Biss 2014), 1.

[A] moral agent might see things that call for moral attention without conceiving how to address the situation. This is a kind of moral impotence, or powerlessness, as opposed to akrasia. An agent with a strong will and a poor imagination does not fail to do what she knows she should, rather she feels she should do something, but does not know what.[44]

In other words, moral imagination is not the capacity to do the right thing, or the capacity to recognize what is good, but the capacity to come up with right things to do. I may be committed to being a good man, have a fully worked out normative ethics, and the strength of character to do what I think is right, but then a situation may arise in which I am at a loss as to what I should do because I can see no way to apply my principles or exercise my virtues in action.

For example, several years ago one of my students came to talk with me during my office hours, and told me that her little sister had been attending a school where, a few days before, a mass shooting had occurred. She broke into tears and began to tell me that she was now fundamentally distraught, and that she had begun to visit a psychiatrist because she was showing symptoms of PTSD. I was totally unprepared to cope with the situation or the person crying in my cubicle. I felt a great deal of concern and sympathy, and I badly wanted to do the right thing, but I had no idea what that might be. I was suffering from a poverty of moral imagination in Biss's sense.

It so happens that one of the ways we stock our moral imaginations — that is, one of the ways we learn how to generate appropriate actions to apply our moral principles and exercise our

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44 Ibid., 14.

virtues — is by studying exemplars and learning about roles.[45] After my troubling session with the sobbing student, I was determined to figure out how to respond most helpfully should a similar occasion arise in the future. So I did two things. First, I consulted several more experienced teachers about the appropriate role of a college professor in comforting their students, or in engaging with them on a personal level about their private lives at all; and second, I asked those more experienced teachers if they could share similar experiences and how they had responded. In response to both questions, what I received were anecdotes: stories.

Stories are perhaps our primary, and likely our best, means of stocking the moral imagination. In an article on the cognitive benefits of reading stories, Cochrane notes that among other benefits, "narratives provide character models that we can apply to real-life individuals."[46] For example, someone attempting to think how to act and how not to act to avoid culpable pride may be greatly aided in this imaginative work by the memory of Jane Austen's *Emma*. Likewise, the next time a student started crying when they visited me, I thought about the stories I had been told of similar experiences, and found myself able to come up with responses that fit my moral commitments and enabled me to act in the present situation.

One danger of evil stories, then, is that if we stock our imagination full of exemplars of vice, we'll have a much easier time thinking of the wrong thing to do than thinking of the right one. If malicious, sadistic, and defiant exemplars flood your memory when you are faced with a morally difficult situation, your ability to do the right thing may be greatly obstructed.

This possibility figures in role-centered response moralism because moral imagination is crucial to filling one's morally important roles. Two examples of a lack of moral imagination

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45 A recent book attempts to derive an entire moral theory from this phenomenon: *Exemplarist Moral Theory*, by Linda Zagzebski. Oxford University Press: 2017.
46 (Cochrane 2014) 307.

leading to inadequate role-filling are the stock characters or stereotypes of a single father trying to raise a girl, and the young lover who's read too many (or exclusively) romance novels.[47] These stereotypes exemplify the twin dangers of a poorly stocked moral imagination — the single father may not know what would be best for a young woman, because he hasn't enough experience of the unique difficulties and problems she will face — and of a wrongly stocked moral imagination — the romance-novel junkie finds their romantic relationship inadequate or suffers from too-high expectations for it, on the basis of a moral imagination stocked with unrealistic exemplars.

But wrongly stocking the moral imagination seems problematic at the level of imaginative diet rather than individual evil story. Someone who read exclusively the Marquis de Sade's fantasies of rape and torture, or watched nothing but snuff films, or tolerated no stories but those about serial killers, would be far more at risk of wrongly stocking their moral imagination than someone who audited all kinds of stories. It seems to me, therefore, that wrongly stocking the moral imagination is not appropriate to an account of *response moralism* per se, though I will return to it in another chapter and another context. This is because the act of responding to a given evil story probably doesn't have a significant effect on one's capacity to fulfill morally important roles, while the overall composition of one's imaginative diet may well have such an effect.

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47 It should be noted that I don't endorse the idea that a single father can't possess the moral imagination to raise a daughter, nor the idea that a reader of romance novels is unfitted for real life romantic relationships. They are merely well-known archetype. Examples: for the single-father with a poor moral imagination, the father in the comic book and film *Kickass*, who raises his daughter to be an assassin and is accused of stealing her childhood through this testosterone-fueled and bloodyminded upbringing; for the reader-to-excess of romance novels who can't function in real adult relationships, Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.

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Chapter Four

Vicious Unresistance

The book *A Clockwork Orange*, by Anthony Burgess, in addition to inspiring the kind of debate that evil stories tend to stir up, is also a philosophical novel that touches directly on one of the arguments against evil stories.[48]

Alex, the protagonist, is a young teenager in a near future dystopia. He leads a gang of young men who roam around the city and countryside at night, beating up the old and weak, fighting other gangs, breaking into the houses of private citizens to steal from them, hurt them, and rape them. They speak an invented slang called Nadsat, and the novel is written from Alex's point of view, narrated in Nadsat, without explanations for the slang words, so that as you read, you gradually learn to speak Nadsat yourself.[49] In the first act of the story, Alex's gang turns on him and betrays him to the police when he is in the act of breaking and entering an old lady's home, and just after he has killed her. He's nabbed by the police and given a long jail sentence. In the second act, we find him several years later in jail. There's a new treatment for criminals called The Ludovico Technique, which will ostensibly "cure" them of their criminal propensities. Alex is chosen to undergo this treatment.

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48 It was, for example, banned from library shelves in several US cities and panned as dangerously immoral in early reviews.

49 Anthony Burgess, in an essay on his book, observed: "As the book was about brainwashing, it was appropriate that the text itself should be a brainwashing device. The reader would be brainwashed into learning minimal Russian [because Nadsat is a Russian-English slang hybrid]. The novel was to be an exercise in linguistic programming, with the exoticisms gradually clarified by context: I would resist to the limit any publisher's demand that a glossary be provided."

What the Ludovico Technique amounts to is behavioral conditioning. They strap Alex into a chair, with his eyes pried open so that he is forced to stare at films of violence, and at the same time they administer a serum that causes him to feel terribly sick. This treatment continues until he involuntarily associates sick-feeling with violence. If he so much as imagines a violent course of action, he falls to the ground in agony. He has internalized the outer compulsion of law. After the first day of his treatment, one of the men administering the Ludovico Technique explains it to him like this:

> 'You felt ill this afternoon,' he said, 'because you're getting better. When we're healthy we respond to the presence of the hateful with fear and nausea. You're becoming healthy, that's all. You'll be healthier still by this time tomorrow.'[50]

Because this is a philosophical novel — I would classify it as a *conte philosophique* like Voltaire's *Candide* — Burgess naturally also dramatizes the opposite point of view. A chaplain in the jail where Alex is held before they release him back into the world on the strength of the Ludovico Technique observes that, "The question is whether such a technique can really make a man good. Goodness comes from within [...] Goodness is something chosen."[51]

This story illustrates, bluntly but vividly, the debate about the second major objection on moral grounds to auditing evil stories: that the ability to imagine an evil point of view is a sign of viciousness, and the inability to do so of virtue. This objection stems most famously from a passage in an essay by David Hume.

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50 (Burgess 2011) 71.
51 Ibid., 56.

Imaginative Resistance

In "Of the Standard of Taste," an influential foray into aesthetics, Hume offered the following observation:

> [W]here vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation; this must be allowed to disfigure the poem, and to be a real deformity. I cannot, nor is it proper that I should, enter into such sentiments; and however I may excuse the poet, on account of the manners of his age, I never can relish the composition.[52]

This short passage is a *locus classicus* in the history of philosophy which has inspired a quantity of commentary probably out of proportion to its profundity. It has been taken up by the proponents of ethical criticism, who argue that evil stories are aesthetically disfigured; and, more importantly for my purposes, it has given rise to a large literature on the subject of "imaginative resistance." Hume says that when he reads a story about a bad person (someone with "vicious manners") and this person isn't presented with the kind of disapprobation Hume believes the person deserves, he "cannot, nor is it proper that I should, enter into such sentiments." What exactly does he mean by "cannot"?

There are many kinds of imaginative resistance — that is, inability or extreme difficulty in imagining something. I may be unable to imagine something because it is too complicated.[53] Or

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52 (Hume 1757), 246.
53 For an expansive list of the various ways kinds of resistance that belong under the rubric of imaginative resistance, see (Weatherson 2004).

it may be so foreign, so far beyond my experience, that I don't know what I am supposed to imagine, and therefore cannot imagine it. But the kind of imaginative resistance that matters for the purposes of this book is the kind that stems from moral disagreement.

In Hume's famous passage, he doesn't seem to be describing an inability to imagine characters with vicious manners. Indeed, we may infer from the proviso "without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation," that were he to read a story (or in this case poem) about a character with vicious manners in which they *were* marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation, then he would be able to "enter into" it and might perhaps even approve of it. Moran intriguingly glosses this distinction as follows:

> The difficulty, apparently, does not have to do with the imagining of characters with moral *beliefs* different from our own, but rather with imaginatively entering into a fictional world where moral *reality* is different from what we take it to be.[54]

This is certainly one way to explain what Hume means, and it accords with a hypothesis by Philip Devine: that an author has creative control not just over the universe of his story — where he is, for example, free to assert that our laws of physics do not apply — but over the 'moral reality' of his story as well, where he is free to assert that murder is good and theft is honorable.[55] Perhaps, then, what Hume means by an account which is not "marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation," is one in which not just the immoral character, but evidently the fictional world itself, runs according to a different moral reality. On this account of imaginative

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54 (Moran 1994), 97.
55 (Devine 1974) 392.

resistance, an auditor might be unwilling or unable to enter a world constructed by an author whose posited morality they find rebarbative. But while, for all I know, this freedom may very well appertain to a creator of stories, I propose a simpler explanation for Hume's inability to "enter into" an evil story: he is unable and unwilling to simulate an evil point of view.

An account of moral imaginative resistance in terms of unwillingness to simulate a point of view seems simpler to me because the idea of a fictional moral reality runs up against problems of interpretation. What about a narrative would tip an auditor off to the fact that a fictional 'moral reality' was posited in the narrative's fictional world? Presumably any such signs must be either the words or deeds of a character or narrator, or else a failure to adhere to what is known as poetic justice, i.e. when good things don't happen to those we would consider good, nor bad to those we would consider bad. But both of these signs are also frequently used by story-makers who by no means intend to posit a fictional 'moral reality.' Characters are often wrong in their speech and in what their deeds suppose, and narrators often unreliable; and the suspension of poetic justice is just another tool in the bag of plot tricks, and doesn't necessarily say anything about the 'moral reality' of a given fictional world.

One of my favorite genres of novel is the grimdark fantasy, in which everyone has bad intentions, heroes always die, and catastrophes are never averted unless to be replaced by worse catastrophes.[56] This genre checks just about every plausible box for signaling that the author is imposing an invented moral universe on the reader; and yet each of these effects is just as easily explained as a purposeful contravention of moral intuitions imported from our world. One way of conceiving the difficulty of putting across a fictional moral reality is to conceive of it in terms of the import rule (discussed in chapter three). How could a story signal that we ought not to

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[56] See, for example, the novels of Joe Abercrombie, such as *The Blade Itself*.

import our propositions about what is right and wrong, in an unambiguous way that couldn't be mistaken merely for the portrayal of an immoral character or the use of an unreliable narrator or the suspension of the convention of poetic justice? I can think of no method, nor any story that does this.

By contrast, it is easy to explain moral imaginative resistance in terms of simulation. Simulating an evil point of view is at least temporally distinct from disapproving or blaming it. It's very difficult both to simulate a point of view and, at the same time, disapprove of it. When the disapproving is strong and inescapable, the simulating must be suspended. In fact, I experienced this while reading *A Clockwork Orange* in preparation for writing this chapter. Early in the first act, Alex and his gang invade a writer's home and rape his wife in front of him, so violently that (we learn later in the book) she dies. I wasn't prepared for that scene, or for simulating the perception of it from the point of view of Alex — which is what the scene encourages — and found myself cringing from it so much that I had to put down the book and take a walk before I could continue to read with proper attention.[57]

How can this phenomenon of imaginative resistance be turned into an accusation of moral danger? It can, if we attach — as Hume does — *propriety* to the inability that characterizes imaginative resistance. That is, evil stories are morally dangerous if the inability to simulate evil points of view is a sign of good character, and the ability to do so a sign of bad character.

Before I continue, I must make an important distinction. This claim about evil stories is not tantamount to a sub-variety of response moralism. Hazlett explains the difference like this:

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57 Indeed, as I was consecutively reading all the books that I use as examples throughout this dissertation, I often had to take breaks to get hold of myself: an unrelenting diet of evil stories is extremely draining.

Response moralism, if true, might explain why there is imaginative resistance. But response moralism does not entail the existence of imaginative resistance, and the existence of imaginative resistance does not entail response moralism.[58]

In other words, for a virtuous person to be unable to simulate an evil point of view does not require that such simulation be morally wrong in itself — it could merely be a sign or expression of something deeper that is wrong; but if such simulation is, itself, morally wrong, that would certainly explain why a virtuous person would be unable to do it. This possible disjunction between response moralism and imaginative resistance is why I have chosen to talk about imaginative resistance in a separate chapter.

It seems to me that there are two plausible ways to explain why imaginative resistance would correlate with virtue: unwillingness or inability. The virtuous person might be unwilling to simulate an evil point of view because they find it wrong to do so; or the virtuous person might be unable to simulate an evil point of view because they are baffled by that point of view or incapable of overcoming their feelings of disgust for it. Jacobson helpfully classifies this difference as the difference between a virtuous audience and a morally sensitive audience: "Let us stipulate that the virtuous audience will resist feeling, in aesthetic contexts, what they deem it wrong to feel; while a morally sensitive audience will be unable to feel that way."[59]

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58 (Hazlett 2009) 241.
59 (Jacobson 1997), 186.

The Virtuous Audience

The first explanation of moral imaginative resistance, the resistance of what Jacobsen calls "the virtuous audience," basically reduces to response moralism. As Jacobsen puts it they "resist feeling [...] what they deem it wrong to feel," which requires that they do believe feeling certain things can *be* wrong; or, in other words, they are response moralists.

As I've previously argued, the best form of response moralism seems to be role-centered response moralism. From the perspective of role-centered response moralism it would only be virtuous for a certain abnormal subset of candidates to abstain from simulating evil points of view; and on some occasions — in the communicative intercourse that characterizes other morally important roles, and if one has the role of a social pattern maintainer within a given community — it might actually be virtuous to simulate evil points of view. I could not, however, find a compelling account of response moralism that would apply to any normal auditor such that being virtuous would require them to resist certain imaginings.

The Morally Sensitive Audience

The second explanation of moral imaginative resistance, that of the morally sensitive audience, understands resistance as a sort of reflex or involuntary debarment from some kinds of imagination, which stems from but does not consist in virtue. The morally sensitive audience is morally sensitive because they are virtuous; because they are morally sensitive, they cannot enter into the simulation of an evil point of view; but that sensitivity is not itself virtuous or an exercise of virtue.

In my view the weak point in this account of imaginative resistance is the connection between so-called moral sensitivity and virtue. It is not clear that sensitivity of the kind that would debar one from the ability to simulate certain viewpoints follows from being virtuous, and being sensitive in this way does not necessarily entail that one is virtuous.

But before I explore those objections fully, what does moral sensitivity / resistance because of inability consist in?

In the first place, moral sensitivity must be a condition in which one cannot *choose* to imagine the thing one is resisting. One is *constrained* to resist a given imagination. This is consistent with, for example, the imaginative resistance I experience in attempting to read the rape scene in *A Clockwork Orange*. I wanted to read the book, and to do so with attention and imaginative involvement, for the purposes of this writing; but I was briefly unable to do so, had to stop and return later.

But what could cause such constraint, such that it might plausibly be connected to being virtuous? I can think of only two possible answers: moral sensitivity must either amount to bafflement or disgust.

Bafflement

If moral sensitivity amounted to bafflement, then the explanation for imaginative resistance would be that it was actually the kind of resistance I described earlier, the kind that stems from inability to imagine something too foreign or complicated. But this incomprehension or bafflement would have the special feature that it *followed from* virtuousness. To put it more

bluntly, this account of moral sensitivity requires that the virtuous be *ignorant* in virtue of their virtuousness in some respect which prevents them from simulating an evil point of view.

There is surprisingly widespread support for the idea that virtue involves a kind of ignorance, especially with respect to evil acts and persons. In his philosophical account of evil, Luke Russell includes, among a list of common folk intuitions about evil, the idea that it is incomprehensible.[60] People frequently refer to evil actions in this way. Perhaps the best known instance is the holocaust. Much has been written to claim that it is inconceivable, unsayable, incomprehensible, and even that it *ought not* to be conceived or spoken of, because silence is the only adequate response or the only response that respects the agony of the holocaust's victims.[61] But what might it *mean* to say that an evil like that of genocide is "incomprehensible"? Luke Russell suggests there are really just four possible interpretations: evil could be incomprehensible in the sense that (1) it doesn't fit into our view of the world, (2) we are unable to dwell on it for any length of time, (3) we are unable to identify its causes or motives, or (4) we are unable to imagine ourselves performing such evil.[62] Of these four analyses of the possible meaning of the incomprehensibility of evil, the second belongs to disgust, which I will discuss shortly, but the other three all identify plausible kinds of ignorance that might appertain to evil. I will discuss each and ask whether it plausibly correlates to virtue.

First, evil persons or acts could be incomprehensible "in the sense of being shocking, of failing to fit into our existing understanding of the world, or into our current conceptual scheme" — and thus, on this analysis, one's incomprehension would stem from ignorance that such evil

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60 (Russell 2014), 56.
61 E.g., Adorno's famous dictum that "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," or the sort-of-consensus among the so-called "post-structuralists" that silence might be an appropriate response to the Holocaust — See (Rose 1996) and (Emcke 2013) for a full account and attempted refutation of this position.
62 (Russell 2014) 56-9.

things could be.[63] It is not uncommon to be shocked into incomprehension in this way, to hear in a story about a character doing X, where X is something we have never considered that seems to vile or ridiculous that we can't imagine it. This kind of incomprehension, however, seems to have more to do with ignorance or inexperience than with virtue. Nothing about being virtuous *requires* one to be ignorant of the evil actions that are possible or that have actually occurred.

Second, evil persons or acts could be incomprehensible "in the sense that we are unable to identify their causes or the motives from which they are performed" — and thus, on this analysis, one's incomprehension would stem from ignorance, not that such evil things could be, but of how they could come to be.[64] We might classify this as a psychological ignorance. If an evil act is, as I have stipulated for the purposes of this book, a greatly harmful act done for malicious, sadistic, or defiant reasons, and a virtuous person is, let us suppose, someone disposed not to be malicious, sadistic, or defiant, then the virtuous person might have trouble imagining their way into those motivations. Yet it is possible to imagine a motivation that is not habitual to oneself. I have a horror of owning too many things, and feel weighed down and unhappy when overburdened with possessions, but I have no trouble imagining a collector's greed to possess more stamps or coins or art. Likewise, supposing that a very virtuous person had managed to more or less extirpate malice, sadism, and defiance from their repertoire of motivations, it does not follow that they would necessarily be unable to imagine them as motivations. To restrict virtue to those unable to imagine such motivations would be almost as ridiculous as to restrict it to those who are shocked and surprised by the very existence of evil. As in the previous case, it would seem to tie virtue unreasonably closely to a kind of ignorance, not a kind of purity.

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63 Ibid. 56.
64 Ibid.

Finally, evil acts might be incomprehensible because "we cannot imagine performing [them] ourselves, even if we were in the same situation as the agent" — and thus, on this analysis, one's incomprehension would stem from ignorance not as a kind of missing content, but as a lack of skill.[65] Just as one could be an ignorant pianist out of inability to read music, one could also be an ignorant pianist out of inability to actually execute the music one can read. What's interesting about this kind of incomprehension of evil is that, like the inability to play music, one can be trained to overcome it. Luke Russell points out that "there are a range of social and environmental conditions, such as those present in the Milgram experiment, that would cause many of us to commit extreme culpable wrongs" and those unable to conceive of themselves as committing a given evil act, often *become* able to conceive of themselves doing the evil things when they learn how others have been trained.[66] Likewise, I remember when I was very young and my piano teacher played a piece of music that seemed so far beyond my abilities as to be impossible, but then she told me that I shouldn't worry, every great pianist began as a pianist who could not imagine moving their fingers so quickly and so precisely, all of them learned. So is there any reason to suppose inability to imagine how one could become vicious correlates with virtue any more than ignorance does? On the contrary, it seems to me that such inability to imagine oneself as vicious is more likely to correlate with moral incontinence, with akrasia and impulsive wrong-doing. A knowledge of the possibilities of one's own character, a recognition of malice, sadism, and defiance as possible motivations for *oneself*, is vital in order to avoid acting on such motivations. Believing that you yourself could never do something evil seems like a great way to make yourself susceptible to evil behavior.

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65 Ibid., 57.
66 Ibid., 60.

Thus while there are various plausible ways to understand why some people might find evil acts and persons incomprehensible, it is wrong to associate such incomprehension with virtue.

Disgust

This leaves an explanation of imaginative resistance in terms of disgust. As with evil, I am using a word whose analysis is a matter of great debate within philosophy, but I don't particularly want to enter into that debate.[67] I am simply using the word to mean an involuntary feeling of revulsion. When I say "an explanation of imaginative resistance in terms of disgust," I mean an inability to simulate an evil point of view because of involuntary revulsion. This seems like the best description of the imaginative resistance I felt when reading *A Clockwork Orange,* for example.

Evil acts and persons are a common source of such revulsion. For example, I know people who are unable to watch horror films because of their disgust-reactions at violent and creepy malice. But evil acts and persons are not the only cause — or even the most common, I suspect — of disgust. There are also many people who experience wholesale disgust toward whole categories of people. I have known people who felt disgust toward other "races," toward other sexual orientations, toward partisans of other ideologies or parties, toward the very young or the very old, or merely toward the unfamiliar in general. I bring up the wide range of things that instigate disgust in order to suggest that it is not right to assume a given feeling of disgust stems from moral considerations. It could just as well stem from immoral considerations, or from inexperience, or from trauma, or from any number of other sources.

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67 See *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust*, by D. Kelly, MIT Press: 2011, especially the first chapter, for a review of the literature debating the nature of disgust.

Why, then, would anyone consider disgust at evil acts and persons which could prevent someone from simulating an evil point of view to be a sign or expression of virtue?

You might answer that a virtuous person approves of what is right and disapproves of what is wrong, and that disgust at what is wrong — and in the case of evil, what is very wrong — is a natural consequence of such disapproval. This position avoids making the mistake of simply equating the disgust-reaction with recognition of wrongness, instead pointing to a specific category of disgust in which the disgust might justified. It seems possible, therefore, to suppose an imaginative resistance on the basis of a "correct" or virtuous disgust is possible; but what is more difficult is to argue that disgust is *caused* by virtue (and not merely justified by it), such that failing to feel disgust is a sign of vice. Yet the only disgust-based accounts of imaginative resistance that will have implications for whether we ought to audit evil stories must establish this kind of causal connection.

The problem with using disgust as a sort of weather-vane to indicate a person's character is that in doing so we are tying an involuntary reactive feeling to character. Like most feelings, a disgust reaction can be stronger or weaker on the basis of a host of circumstances. For example, I find wet clothes disgusting. I have a classic "yuck!" reaction to spilling water on myself during a meal. I also run, and often, after a long run, find my clothes completely soaked with sweat; but in that case the wet clothes don't disgust me at all. My disgust for wet clothes is evidently largely dependent upon the context in which my clothes are wetted. Another example of the variability of disgust is the fact that repeated exposure to something disgusting can deaden disgust-reactions. I worked for a year as a transporter in a heart hospital, often handling recently deceased bodies in order to take them to the morgue. At first, I found contact with dead flesh

provoked a strong disgust reaction. But as it was my job, and because I had to repeat the contact regularly, I soon overcame my disgust reaction entirely and was as comfortable handling the body of a corpse as of a living person. Neither of these examples of disgust is tied to moral considerations in the way that what I have called virtuous disgust is; but they nonetheless illustrate the contingency of disgust as a feeling. We can feel disgust for all kinds of reasons, and the feeling can be deadened by all kinds of circumstances: so why would we build so contingent a reactive feeling into our account of virtue?

Nonetheless, it is possible to concede the idea that a virtuous person has 'appropriate feelings' — that they ought to be disgusted by disgusting things, outraged by outrageous things, and so on — without allowing that those appropriate feelings ought to render them incapable of understanding a text through simulative secondary imagination. In the first place, because of the bodily and contingent nature of disgust as a reaction, it can be overcome by familiarization. When I was temporarily so disgusted by *A Clockwork Orange* that I couldn't continue reading, I was able to continue reading later. While I may justify my temporary inability to comprehend the book on the basis of moral disapproval of what it portrayed, the disgust abated after a brief period away from the book. Had my character fluctuated in the interim, becoming bad enough to permit me to look upon what I should have been too disgusted to apprehend? More likely my moral disapproval was as strong as ever, but the disgust reaction it occasioned had been allayed by time and foreknowledge of what I had to read. Second, a virtuous person feeling appropriate disgust may find that they simultaneously feel many other things as well that enable them to carry on with simulative imagination despite the disgust. Arguably, only the beauty and cleverness of Nabokov's prose make *Lolita* a tolerable reading experience. For some virtuous

auditors, the melange of feelings they react with to a story may help them to overcome a debilitating disgust, just mixing a bitter bill into a banana helps a child endure a taste they dislike. Third, a virtuous person might find themselves experiencing a strong disgust reaction but the same virtuousness that makes them disgusted may constrain them to listen with understanding anyway — a possibility I will explore in a later chapter. The point of these three observations is to argue that while it appropriate disgust *may* (though I do not think it is) be part of a plausible account of virtue, *debilitating* disgust may not be.

For these reasons, the phenomenon of disgust-based imaginative resistance does not seem to tell us much about whether we should or should not audit evil stories, even while it may account for why virtuous people find it difficult to do so.

Conclusion

We could sum up my position in this chapter by reverting once again to *A Clockwork Orange*. The protagonist Alex, after being brainwashed to feel sick if he contemplates violence, is the perfect thought experiment in imaginative resistance. I have argued that there is no necessary relation between the inability to entertain an evil point of view and the ignorance or disgust which would prevent you from doing so. Thus even my own revulsion, a temporary imaginative resistance from the most painful scene in a book, is not necessarily cause for praise, nor an indefeasible sign of virtue (though it might be a defeasible indicator of a certain kind of virtue).

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Chapter Five

Dangerous Understanding

On May 23, 2014, a young man named Elliot Rodger killed six people and injured fourteen with gun and car, before crashing his vehicle in a police chase and taking his own life by shooting himself in the head. Shortly after this horrific incident became national news, a long autobiographical document he had written, called *My Twisted World*, became widely available on the internet.[68] I read it. I read at first with morbid curiosity, and then with painful intensity, because I recognized the genre in which he had cast his life.[69] In the manuscript, you learn that one of his many desultory ambitions was to write an epic fantasy novel. He had deluded himself into thinking this was an easy way to become famous and make lots of money, which might ultimately lead to women admiring him enough to sleep with him:

> Indeed, it was strange to hear my mother say that I could become a talented writer, but it did give me an idea. I started to wonder if I actually could become a writer. I could write an epic fantasy story that will be made into a movie, and I will become rich from it. Being rich will definitely make me attractive enough to have a beautiful girlfriend. It was

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68 (Rodger 2014)

69 Though I have not written about it in this book, it's interesting to note that some philosophers raise the possibility that a danger of stories in general — not just evil stories — is that we can come to see our lives in terms of genre. (Goldie 2012) in particular raises this point, arguing against Alasdair MacIntyre, who claimed that we need to figure out the kind of story our lives are part of to decide what we ought to do: "it is possible—but it is not wise—to see one's life as that of a loser, a victim, or someone who is locked in a tragic relation with another, and fate compulsion will quite likely determine that this is just how things will turn out." 170. Elliot Rodger is practically a paradigm case of the kind of danger Goldie was talking about.

not impossible, and working towards it would give me something to live for. I mulled it

over in my mind for a while.[70]

Of course writing a book isn't easy and doesn't automatically make you rich and famous, and

Rodger never wrote his novel. But he did write an autobiography, and he wrote it unmistakably

in the subgenre of epic fantasy, except in this story the lowly pig-herder doesn't grow up to

become the world-saving hero, but to be the world-breaking dark lord. This is the clear flavor of

the grandiose tones in which Rodger announces the project of his manuscript:

> This is the story of how I, Elliot Rodger, came to be. This is the story of my entire life. It
> is a dark story of sadness, anger, and hatred. It is a story of a war against cruel injustice.
> In this magnificent story, I will disclose every single detail about my life, every single
> significant experience that I have pulled from my superior memory, as well as how those
> experiences have shaped my views of the world. This tragedy did not have to happen. I
> didn't want things to turn out this way, but humanity forced my hand, and this story will
> explain why. My life didn't start out dark and twisted. I started out as a happy and blissful
> child, living my life to the fullest in a world I thought was good and pure…[71]

The book proceeds to detail the growth of his sense of thwarted entitlement, which ultimately

coalesced into a conviction that women were unjustly withholding sex from him, and that men

who enjoyed sex with women when he didn't were proof that the world was not fair, and that the

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70 Ibid., 69.
71 Ibid., 1.

only way to make things right was to kill as many people as he could. It is horrifying, and Rodger was clearly somewhat delusional. But what riveted me to his manuscript was a sense that this book really could help me understand him — not necessarily by taking on his self-interpretation, but in the way that a novel with an unreliable narrator can teach you to understand that narrator.

As I am wont to do, I told several of my friends all about the text I had been reading. Some of them responded with the same mixture of horror and fascination as myself; but others objected to my reading anything by Rodger at all. If he disseminated this text in the hope that people would read it and understand him, wasn't I fulfilling his intentions in murdering all those people, giving him the publicity he wanted, making it, in a sense, "worth it" for him to have done what he did? Here, by committing an atrocity, he had successfully got the attention of a reader who would otherwise never have given anything he wrote a second glance. Moreover, his writing had brought me to a place where I felt like I understood him. How, my critical friends wondered, was that okay? Surely we shouldn't even try to understand mass murderers, except possibly for the sake of preventing others like them in the future? Wasn't there a real danger that in attempting to understand what Rodger had made of his life, I would end up forgiving him or even sympathizing with his acts?

To Understand Is to Forgive

This reaction to my decision to read Rodger's *My Twisted World* illustrates yet another potential objection to auditing evil stories. They might be morally dangerous because they weaken our

resolve to condemn evil, leading us instead to condone or sympathize with evil people. As throughout this dissertation, I want to pose this objection in terms of simulation.

Understanding a person can mean many things, but in the context of evil stories, as illustrated by the case of Elliot Rodger's autobiography, I propose to interpret it as knowledge of what an action was like, and why and how it was done, from the perspective of the actor. We understand someone when we know why they did what they did, and what it was like for them to do it. In the context of stories and story-characters, imaginative simulation is the primary method for acquiring such knowledge. (Even when it is explicitly stated what an action felt like, sophisticated readers, ever on the watch for dramatic irony and unreliable narrators, will often still imaginatively simulate a point of view to discover what it was *really* like.) As I explained in the chapter on imaginative simulation, simulation is a form of secondary imagination necessary to make sense of depicted action, to connect behavior to motivation, intention, and character. The goal of a simulation is to achieve a state of mind in which we can feel how it would be to do the sorts of things a character is being depicted as doing. It is a tool for the production of empathetic knowledge.

At the same time, it is widely believed that the proper response to wrong actions — and especially evil actions — is condemnation. Evil stories might be morally dangerous if they inhibit or act against this response of condemnation. What my friends presumably suspect, as well as everyone who raises this objection to other evil stories, is that empathetic knowledge inhibits or acts against the proper response of condemnation.

Perhaps the easiest way to approach this topic is through analyzing its cliché form, the old saw that "to understand is to forgive," and attempting to adapt it to the situation of the auditor of an evil story.[72]

Forgiving, Excusing, Justifying

To begin with, it is important to distinguish certain possible results of understanding that resemble, but aren't identical with, forgiveness. I want to distinguish forgiving from excusing and justifying. To make this distinction, it will be helpful to imagine the jury for a murder trial. One man has killed another man by running him over in his truck. The jury is listening to the presentation of evidence.

Now suppose they receive good evidence to suppose that the victim of this vehicular homicide had snuck over behind the accused's truck and lain down behind his back wheel, so that when the driver pulled out of his driveway, he crushed and killed the man on the ground, despite taking every normal precaution, looking out his rearview mirror and over his shoulder and so on.

In such a case, the jury might well determine that this killing was involuntary. They would not condemn the accused, but rather *excuse* him. To excuse in this sense is to understand and endorse reasons to the effect that the action in question was not culpably intended.

Now, alternatively, suppose that the jury instead received good evidence to suppose that the victim of this vehicular homicide was chasing the accused around, blasting a shotgun at him. The

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72 It seems to have its origin as a French proverb ("tout comprendre c'est tout pardonner"). I have seen it attributed to Pascal, but cannot track down a place in his works where he uses the expression. It can be found quoted in French in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, in German in Goethe's *Faust*, and in a host of lesser works. It is now a truism, a proverb in the truest sense: a piece of apparent wisdom of unknown provenance.

accused jumped into the cab of the truck to take shelter from his homicidal pursuer, and when the victim kept blasting away, he turned on the truck and hit him with it to defend his own life.

In such a case, the jury might well determine that this killing was an appropriate act of self-defense. They would not condemn the accused, but rather *justify* him. To justify in this sense is to understand and endorse reasons to the effect that the action in question was, all things considered, the best thing to do.[73]

Now, to forgiveness. As Pettigrove analyzes it, there are three possible conceptions of forgiveness:

> There are three models we might use to understand forgiveness. First, there is what we might call the debt-cancelling model. Forgiveness is understood as the act of writing off a moral debt. The utterance, "I forgive you" serves as a way of releasing a wrongdoer from moral indebtedness. Second, there is the emotional model of forgiveness. According to this model, forgiveness is fundamentally a matter of changing one's attitudes toward the wrongdoer. We react to wrongdoing with resentment, anger, hatred, contempt, etc., toward the wrongdoer. Forgiveness involves a reduction of these hostile reactive attitudes and, typically, the restoration of pro-attitudes toward the one who has wronged us. Third, there is the volitional model of forgiving. This model highlights what we do when we forgive another. Forgiveness, on the volitional model, involves foreswearing hostile reactive attitudes and a commitment to the well-being of the one who has wronged us.[74]

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73 This definition of justifying is adapted from (Pettigrove 2007), 163.
74 Ibid., 159.

This is a useful analysis, but, I think, somewhat inadequate. Rather than calling these three things "models" of forgiveness, I would call them possible elements of forgiveness. As various other conceptions of forgiveness that Pettigrove mentions, and the one he defends in another paper, show, most actual conceptions of forgiveness involve some combination of these elements.[75] What are the elements? I would concisely list them as: (1) the declarative illocutionary act of forgiving, (2) the shift of hostile reactive attitudes to pro-attitudes, and (3) the shift from willing ill to willing well toward the forgiven one.

This analysis of the possible elements of forgiveness leads me to make two observations: first, *none* of these elements is equivalent to understanding. Thus, in the strictest sense, to understand *is not* to forgive. Instead, I think we should modify the claim about understanding's relation to forgiveness to something more plausible, such as, "to understand leads us to forgive," or "to understand promotes forgiveness."

Second, the first possible element of forgiveness does not ordinarily apply to the auditor of a story. Unless the story in question is also *about* the auditor (imagine the victim of being run over by the truck had survived and were sitting in the courtroom listening to the accused's account of what happened), then the auditor ordinarily does not possess the appropriate standing to, as Pettigrove puts it, write off the moral debt in a declarative illocutionary act. Such standing belongs exclusively to the person harmed. But forgiveness as a matter either of shifting attitudes or of shifting will, or as a combination of them, is possible for an auditor even if they weren't the party harmed by the person to be forgiven.

What relation do excusing and justifying bear toward forgiveness in the sense of forgiveness appropriate to our discussion? They could be involved in the process that would lead one to

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75 See, (Pettigrove 2004).

forgive. One might forgive the man accused of vehicular murder because one has convincing reasons either to excuse or to justify his actions. But, importantly, in both cases, the forgiveness is predicated on a realization that the action was not, in the fullest sense, wrong-doing. In the context of an evil story, appropriate understanding, therefore, will not lead to excusing or justifying the evil character: their actions *are* wrongdoing, acts of great harm committed for sadistic, malicious, or defiant reasons.

It is important, at this juncture, to reassert something from the first chapter of this book. I am talking about *evil characters*, not merely immoral characters whose vices are balanced out by their virtues. It might be helpful to borrow a distinction from Eaton between antiheroes and rough heroes. An antihero "lacks traditional heroic qualities," and "is plagued by human frailties," but "these flaws do not condemn the antihero" because they are "mild in the grand scheme of things," "forgivable or at least exculpable," and "outweighed by some virtue(s)".[76] But in the rough hero the non-heroic qualities are "grievous," ("usually a sociopath, an outlaw, a murderer, a sex criminal, a sadist, or Satan incarnate"), "integral" to his personality, fully intended, remorseless, unforgiven by the story, and not outweighed by virtues.[77] It's easy to see how an antihero can seem less condemnable on closer inspection — as Eaton puts it, his virtues outweigh his vices; but this is not the case for an evil character, a rough hero.

Thus, in the case of evil stories, any account of forgiveness following from understanding must be distinct from excusing or justifying. Otherwise this forgiving is a product of *mis*understanding, or we're not really dealing with an evil story. What we are talking about in the case of forgiving an evil character on the basis of understanding them better, therefore, is a case

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76 (Eaton 2012), 283.
77 Ibid., 284.

of what Hieronymi calls "uncompromising forgiveness," a forgiveness that maintains the judgment that what the forgiven one has done is wrong, and nonetheless forgives them.[78]

With all the above restrictions, it should now be clear that our question in this chapter is actually this: does achieving empathic knowledge through the simulation of an evil point of view promote uncompromising forgiving, emotionally or volitionally, of an evil character, in a morally dangerous way?

First I will discuss the causal question, then the question of moral danger.

Order of Imposition, Perspective, Identification

There seem to be several ways that empathic knowledge could lead us to uncompromisingly forgive an evil character. Pettigrove helpfully breaks down three possible analyses of how understanding could promote such uncompromising forgiveness:

> [Understanding] may [1] mitigate our sense of the wrong done. It may [2] alter our sense of the primary message communicated by the wrongdoing. And it may [3] trigger empathy in a way that discloses the possibility of being reconciled with the wrongdoer.[79]

I will consider how each of these promotions of forgiveness might work out in the case of auditing evil stories, using my own experience with Elliot Rodger's *My Twisted World*.

First, finding an action intelligible or more intelligible or differently intelligible can mitigate our sense of its wrongness, particularly because of the influence of order of impositions.

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78 (Hieronymi 2001), 546.
79 (Pettigrove 2007), 175.

Before I began to read *My Twisted World*, all I knew about Rodger was what he had done at the end of his life. I also gathered, from comments in a news story or two, that he frequented noxious web forums for men's rights activists (MRAs) and pick-up artists (PUAs). MRAs believe that a certain amount of sexual pleasure is a human right so precious that others have a duty to provide it: in particular, lonely and sexually unsatisfied men have a right to demand sex with women they desire. PUAs believe that certain techniques of dominance and negative persuasion will cause women to jump into bed with them, because — they believe — of features of the female psyche hardwired by evolution. On the basis of the news and immediate journalistic context, therefore, I assumed Rodger was an unusually aggressive proponent of either or both MRA or PUA culture: a violent flowering of what I consider to be abhorrent subcultures in modern society.

What I discovered, however, when I read his autobiography, is that his association with MRA and PUA culture was more or less fleeting, and his malice toward women he found attractive and the men they found attractive grew directly out of his envy rather than expressing some more intellectual ideological position. Murdering people because, ultimately, you envy them is highly condemnable. But for several reasons, it was more intelligible to me than murdering people because you are committed to an absurd and easily refutable ideology.

One of the discoveries of psychologists who study persuasion is that we are more or less likely to accept impositions upon our time and energy depending upon the order in which they are proposed. If a large imposition follows a larger imposition, we are more likely to accept it than if it were proposed in isolation or in a different order.[80] Something like this seems to occur

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80 For example, Robert Cialdini discovered that if you stopped random passersby on a sidewalk and asked them to volunteer to chaperone some juvenile delinquents on a trip to the zoo, they were significantly more likely to accept if you first asked them to volunteer to counsel juvenile delinquents two hours a week for a year. The ask was more

when we come to understand that a wrong action was, while still fully wrong, committed for reasons we find slightly less abhorrent, or slightly more intelligible, than we at first thought. As Pettigrove puts it:

> The [...] retreat from our least charitable construal of the wrongdoer's act to the construal offered by mitigating understanding may frame the situation in such a way that we are readier to forgive than the reduction in offense might account for on its own.[81]

A second way in which understanding might promote uncompromising forgiveness has to do with shifting our perspective on a harmful action. Pettigrove again:

> If we tell the story of the wrongdoer and his deed without invoking the particular perspective of the victim, then, at least in many circumstances, we will be less likely to give as much weight to the claim that the wrongdoer's action makes about the one wronged. Instead, we are likelier to hear the claim that the wrongdoer's deed makes about some instrumental objective (this course of action was a way to effectively, albeit immorally, accomplish some end) or about the wrongdoer himself.[82]

This stems from the fact that a given action has multiple significances. This can be seen in the way that a single action can support multiple descriptions based on what it meant to different

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acceptable if it followed a larger one. Thus *order of imposition* affects the acceptability of an imposition. (Cialdini 2001), 77.
81 (Pettigrove 2007), 169.
82 Ibid., 171.

people. For instance, Elliot Rodger's final actions might be variously described as murder in cold blood, as another instance of the all-too-common American phenomenon of mass shooting, and, as he describes them, "a war against cruel injustice." His 100,000 word autobiography amounts to a very long and detailed account of what it could mean for him to understand his crime as such a war.

Rodger is not the best example of this, however, since I believe his self-interpretation of his action was false. That he never had sex or even a girlfriend is not exactly "cruel injustice." We can easily imagine, however, an evil action in which the actors reason for committing the deed was not based on falsehood. For instance, in the 14th century French peasant revolt, some truly horrifyingly evil things were done by the peasants. On one occasion, peasants killed and roasted a knight in front of his family, then forced the family to eat him.[83] They were motivated by the recognition that the wealth extracted from their labor by the aristocratic class was unjustified, and that it was no longer even balanced by a reciprocating protection, as mercenaries and armed raiders were pillaging, raping, and killing without opposition throughout the countryside. The peasants conceived of themselves as correcting an intolerable injustice and symbolically causing the depredations of the nobility to rebound upon themselves. Considered from any angle, what they did was reprehensible. But it seems more intelligible from their perspective than from, let us say, the perspective of one of the knight's uncomprehending children.

In the act of imaginatively simulating an evil point of view, we are, among other things, accounting for an evil action from the perspective of the evil-doer, which might conceivably promote forgiving him, at least in the sense of mitigating our anti-attitudes and stances of ill-will against him.

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83 This is recounted *The Chronicles of Jean Le Bel*.

It must be said, however, that both of these means by which understanding could promote forgiveness seem very weak in the case of evil stories. My examples reveal that weakness. Uncompromising forgiveness is difficult in the case of an evil person, and merely reordering the imposition of their greatly harmful act or shifting our perspective upon it is unlikely to give rise to a full blown forgiveness. The final mechanism that Pettigrove suggests, however, is somewhat more plausible. He suggests that in coming to understand a wrongdoer through a narrative in which they are the protagonist, we tend to identify with them, and: "[I]f I can live with myself, and I can see myself acting as the other did, then I come to see that I can live with the other even though she has [done wrong]."[84]

This requires some unpacking. Identification is a word commonly thrown around in both academic and lay discussion of story-reading. We hear people complaining about a book because there were no characters they could identify with. And we read psychologists like Gerrig discussing identification as one of the psychological processes involved in experiencing narrative worlds.[85] Thus identifying with a character can mean anything from rooting for a character to succeed, to a more specialized psychological process. For our purposes, the best way to understand what is meant by "identifying with" a character, however, naturally follows from the act of simulating their point of view.

To run an adequate simulation of a point of view, we have to adopt for a time a character's motivations and emotions and attitudes. The very ability to do so requires *some* prior acquaintance, on our own part, with motivations, emotions, and attitudes of a like nature. For example, in order to conceive of the intensity of Elliot Rodger's envy, which ultimately turned

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84 Ibid., 175.
85 See (Gerrig 1993).

into murderous malice, I had to be acquainted, to some degree, with the phenomenon of envy in the first place. Could someone who had never felt envious in their life perform the secondary imaginations necessary to comprehend much of *My Twisted World*? I doubt it.

A consequence of the very *ability* to simulate a given point of view, therefore, is a kind of identification. Rodger experienced envy; I have experienced envy. I can imagine an exacerbation of envy to the point that it turns into malice. According to Pettigrove, this is one mechanism whereby my understanding could lead me to forgive Rodger. If I can identify with him in the very thing that made him evil, and if I can live with myself, then I am more likely to be able to forgive him.

In the interests of honesty, however, I must point out that despite the plausibility of this mechanism of forgiveness, in actual practice it can go quite the other way. When I read *My Twisted World*, one of the sources of my fascination with it was, indeed, an identification with the ordinariness of the origin of Rodger's motives. But by the end of the book, I wasn't so much inclined to forgive Rodger on account of his envy, as to harshly scrutinize envy in my own life, recognizing the sort of malice it could turn into. Thus, in this case, the empathic knowledge of imaginatively simulating an evil character's point of view did not make me more likely to forgive *him*, but less likely to forgive *myself*.

At this point, and especially in light of that last note, one might object that this chapter is one of the few cases in this book where my choice to focus on evil stories rather than merely immoral stories has prejudiced the debate in my favor. The danger that understanding will promote dangerous forgiveness seems considerably greater in the case of an anti-hero than of a rough hero. The anti-hero is less obviously condemnable, and scrutiny and understanding reveal actual

virtues in him; whereas the rough hero, on inspection, does not disclose anything admirable, but at best discloses something less reprehensible than we first thought (through order of imposition or choice of perspective), or causes us to hesitate in our condemnation through the recognition that we possess the seeds of the same vices. Doesn't this mean we're more likely to forgive the anti-hero than the rough hero? I'm prepared to admit it. But fortunately it doesn't much matter, because the real crux of the issue is whether forgiveness itself is a morally dangerous proposition. I will consider that in the next section.

The Moral Danger of Forgiveness

All of this discussion has only set the table for the important question: supposing that understanding does promote forgiveness in the ways I have outlined, is that morally dangerous?

I think a good deal of the perceived moral danger of forgiveness derives from confusing it with excusing and justifying. As we have seen, however, to excuse or justify an evil character, a "rough hero," on the basis of empathetic knowledge would be either to misunderstand the story or a sign that the character wasn't actually evil in the first place. If auditors are often misled by reading evil stories into supposing evil characters are not so evil, then this would seem to be an argument not that evil stories are morally dangerous, but that we need better trained and more experienced auditors. What I mean is that insofar as understanding involves genuine empathetic knowledge, and the object of this empathetic knowledge is actually an evil character or rough hero, then excusing or justifying them is a failure to understand. So if one objects to any forgiveness that is promoted by such understanding, the objection, to be plausible, must rest on an account of forgiveness that excludes excusing and justifying.

What, then, of uncompromising forgiveness? Is it morally dangerous for my ill-will and negative reactive attitude toward a genuinely evil character to be mitigated, or even eradicated, if I maintain my judgment that what they did was wrong? Bear in mind that since this forgiveness is *uncompromising*, i.e., does not involve excusing or justifying, we are *only* talking about a mitigation of attitude and will.

Here we touch upon one of the oldest problems of ethics: is it incumbent upon those who are good or virtuous to react negatively toward and wish ill upon those who are bad or vicious? This question reminds me of Bk. 1 of Plato's *Republic*, when Polemarchus suggests to Socrates that justice is doing good to those who are good and harm to those who are bad.[86] In response, Socrates asserts that, ""it's not the work of the just person to do harm, Polemarchus, either to a friend or to anyone else, but [it is the work] of his opposite, the unjust person."[87] By contrast to Socrates in this instance, many ethicists argue that some or all kinds of wrongdoing deserve at least the willing ill that is involved in punishment; others, that the harm involved in punishing a wrongdoer is a way of willing their good. — But I don't want to get sucked into a separate discussion of the ethics of punishment, of restorative versus retributive justice, etc. It is enough for our purposes, I think, to raise the point that the appropriateness and desirability of willing ill, or reacting with negative attitudes to the judgment that a person is immoral *is reasonably contested*. It is odd to assume, as if it were obvious, that stories which promote uncompromising forgiveness — forgiveness which does not justify or excuse — are necessarily morally dangerous, because it's odd to assume that such forgiveness is wrong. On many accounts of how

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86 Actually, first Polemarchus suggests it is doing good to one's friends and harm to one's enemies; but Socrates points out that many people are mistaken in who their friends and enemies really are. And then Polemarchus amends his suggestion to say that justice is doing good to those of one's friends who really are good and harm to those of one's enemies who really are bad.
87 (Plato 2007), 335d.

we ought to respond to the judgment that someone is doing something wrong, or immoral, or even evil, such forgiveness is even virtuous.

(I must add at this point what should be — but does not seem to be in the world at large — two obvious caveats about forgiveness. Forgiveness is only something that can be offered by the victim of what is forgiven. It can't be offered by someone on behalf of someone else. And, second, uncompromising forgiveness, while it may involve the eradication of ill-will and negative reactive attitudes toward a person disposed to commit evil actions, does *not* involve ceasing to feel repugnance toward evil action itself.)

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have dealt with the accusation that to understand an evil character — as simulating their viewpoint in order to understand a story might very well lead us to do — is to forgive them, and that this forgiveness is morally wrong. In the first place, I argued that we should distinguish between justifying, excusing, and forgiving; then I argued that where forgiveness in the strictest sense is promoted by understanding, there's nothing necessarily morally wrong about it.

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Chapter Six

Enjoyment and Moral Standing

One of the TV shows I enjoy is called *Justified*. Extrapolated from a short story by Elmore Leonard, *Justified* is about a trigger-happy federal marshal who is transferred from Florida to his hometown, in Kentucky. His primary antagonist through the show's six seasons is his former best friend and fellow coal-miner Boyd Crowder. Crowder is a vicious white-supremacist, bank robber, casual murderer, gang leader — a real snake. He is imprisoned early in the first season and undergoes a prison conversion to Christianity and pacifism, the question of the reality of which provides the most interesting subplot of the first season and the unique tension of the whole series. Frankly, I watched it for Boyd Crowder. His ruthless and bloody character-arc is really about the question of whether he is an antihero or a rough hero: but either way, he is unquestionably a hero in the series, largely because he is more eloquent and thoughtful than any other character in the show, including its protagonist. Yet he's a white supremacist and an intensely vicious criminal. A friend of mine once asked me how I can square my fascination with a white supremacist and my commitment to antiracism.

The Right To Say "Be Good"

I think my friend was offering a version of a criticism of evil stories that stretches throughout the whole history of discourse about them, but which I have never seen more vividly expressed than in the words of John Gardner, in his book *On Moral Fiction*. There, he writes: "To worship the

unique, the unaccountable and the freaky, is—if we're consistent—to give up the right to say to our children, 'Be good.'"[88] This is vivid, but rather unclear. What does it mean to have a right to say "be good"? I am going to try to formulate and analyze this objection. I believe in its strongest form it goes like this: To enjoy stories about the kinds of actions and persons you oppose removes your moral standing to blame them.

Why is the *enjoyment* of evil stories relevant to a dissertation investigating whether they are so morally dangerous that we ought to avoid auditing them? It is relevant because part of the simulation involved in the secondary imagination necessary to understand a story may include simulating enjoyment. Evil stories present a moral danger because they provide us with opportunities to enjoy stories about such actions and persons: they might make it all too easy to give up our moral standing, or, as Gardner puts it, to lose the right to say "be good." To test the claim, I must first attempt to define moral standing and what factors determine one's moral standing, then see if enjoying stories about evil actions or characters affects any of those factors.

Moral Standing

Moral standing in the sense in which I use that phrase in this chapter, has to do with one's right to make moral judgments (positive or negative). Just because someone has done something wrong, just because they are blameworthy, does not necessarily give everyone a right to blame them.

It should be noted immediately that "moral standing" is sometimes used as a synonym for "moral status" — the condition in which a being is worthy of moral consideration, capable of

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88 (Gardner 1978), 22.

being wronged, and so on.[89] There are many disagreements among ethicists about what gives a being moral status, and whether certain beings (such as embryos or higher-functioning animals) possess it. I am *not* using "moral standing" in this sense.

"Moral standing" can also be used in the sense in which we say someone is "in good moral standing," in which case it generally functions as a synonym for possessing a good moral character or for doing the right thing. This is also not the sense in which I am interested in "moral standing."

The concept of moral standing in the sense in which I am using it has its origin in everyday moral debate. G.A. Cohen explains these everyday origin as follows:

> When a person replies to a critic by saying: "Where do you get off criticizing me for that?", she is not denying (or, of course, affirming) the inherent soundness of the critic's criticism. She is denying her critic's right to make that criticism, in a posture of judgment.[90]

I would add that the same is possible in response to praise. A disabled friend of mine was once praised by a well-meaning man for "bravely" ascending a staircase, and she responded to him with great vehemence that it wasn't "his place" to praise her for this. Just as in Cohen's example, what is being challenged is the blamer's or praiser's right to make a judgment. Moral standing partakes of the flavor of law, where only certain bodies are considered as legitimate evaluators:

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89 For a discussion of this sense of moral standing, see *Moral Status: Obligations to Persons and Other Living Things* by Mary Warren, Oxford: 1997; it also discussed in *What We Owe To Each Other*, by T.M. Scanlon, Harvard University Press: 1998. And, of course, it is much at issue in the extensive literature on animal rights and abortion.
90 (Cohen 2006), 118.

judges and juries. To accuse someone of lacking the moral standing to make a judgment is to assert that they do not stand, in respect to the thing they are judging, as a legitimate judge or jury.

It's important to note that one's moral standing has no effect upon the truth of one's blaming or praising. Someone might make an accurate criticism for which they nevertheless do not possess the moral standing. Instead, I think it is best to conceive of moral standing as part of the illocutionary force of the speech act of blaming. As Cohen puts it, "there are facts about the critic that compromise her utterance considered as, what it purports to be, a condemnation: the focus is on that intended role, or illocutionary force, of the utterance."[91] In other words, sometimes a given moral condemnation or praise is inappropriate for a certain person to express.

Some legal systems even embody the idea of moral standing in law:

[S]ome legal jurisdictions feature a principle called *estoppel*. Among other things, this principle stops a legal claim from going forward against a second party in case the plaintiff has previously treated the second party in the same manner she is now complaining about. Thus, at least some legal jurisdictions deny compensation for injuries if the accuser previously did the same thing to the accused.[92]

While the existence of a law is not a moral argument, it is often a sign pointing toward a position for which a moral argument can plausibly be made. Like moral intuitions, legal embodiments of moral ideas can serve the ethicist as heuristic pointers to a potentially defensible moral claim.

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91 Ibid., 120.
92 (Friedman 2013), 277.

In their overview of the debates around moral standing, Tognazzini and Coates suggest that there are four factors which can affect one's moral standing: hypocrisy, complicity, meddling, and moral fragility.[93]

Of these four, hypocrisy and moral fragility both seem plausibly relevant to the enjoyment of evil stories, and I will discuss them shortly; but meddling and complicity seem unlikely to be relevant.

The basic idea of meddling is this: sometimes one has no right to blame someone because the thing one proposes to blame them about is not one's business. For example, I grew up in a Baptist pastor's home, and one of the stories my father likes to tell was about a teacher at his seminary, who, when visiting parishioners of his congregation, would require them to get out their scale and weigh themselves, as if that (under the rubric of gluttony) fell within his purview as a spiritual advisor. My father's opinion was that no pastor had the standing to blame someone about something as personal and private as their weight. No pastor had the standing to blame someone for gluttony because what they ate, how they exercised, and what they weighed *was not pastor's business*. If one is meddling, one has no moral standing. This way of losing moral standing doesn't seem terribly applicable to enjoying evil stories. I suppose one might inappropriately meddle in someone's affairs because one enjoys hearing stories about their evil actions — gossiping, prying, playing the voyeur in the life of a shady acquaintance — but the enjoyment itself is not meddling, and we are considering a claim that enjoying a certain kind of story amounts to a loss of moral standing.

The basic idea of complicity is this: sometimes one has no right to blame someone if one is oneself culpably involved in the very act one is blaming them for. For example, when I was a

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[93] (Tognazzini and Coates 2016), Section 2.2.

(rather horrible) child, I often proposed escapades that got my intellectually disabled sister into trouble. We'd break something or disrupt the peace, carrying out my idea of fun, and then if we got in trouble I would blame my sister. While she may have been blameworthy for carrying out the occasional act of pre-teen vandalism, I had no moral standing to blame her, since I was complicit in the blameworthy act myself. This way of losing moral standing doesn't seem applicable to enjoying evil stories any more than meddling does. The act of auditing a story does not make one complicit in the acts portrayed in it.

Enjoyment and Moral Standing

By contrast to meddling and complicity, both hypocrisy and the perception of moral fragility do seem plausibly relevant to the enjoyment of evil stories.

Hypocrisy

The accusation of hypocrisy is an argumentative move with which we are all familiar. "Look who's talking", "that's the pot calling the kettle black" — and it even has a Latin name in the canons of informal argumentative fallacies, the *Tu Quoque* argument.[94] It would be a fallacy, if the problem an accusation of hypocrisy attempted to pick out had to do with the truth or validity of a proposition. But it doesn't — it has to do with moral standing.

But could it simply be the act of blaming someone for something one has done oneself that constitutes hypocrisy? That seems wrong, because if, for example, I used to be a thief, but I

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94 These examples of the form accusations of hypocrisy takes are, along with others, mentioned in Cohen's account of hypocrisy in (Cohen 2006).

was caught, punished, reformed, and now reject and condemn thievery, it wouldn't necessarily be hypocritical of me if I blamed someone for stealing something. It seems excessive, in other words, to restrict blaming to the historically pure on the basis of hypocrisy. Where, then, does the wrongness of hypocrisy lie? Wallace suggests the following:

> It is not necessarily objectionable to be subject to resentment or indignation about offenses committed by others when you have yourself committed similar offenses in the past. What is objectionable is to experience these forms of blame without subjecting your own attitudes and behavior to critical assessment, and bringing them into harmony with your current reactions to the attitudes and behavior of others.[95]

On this account, the wrong of hypocrisy is that one fails to adopt a reactive attitude to one's own actions like that one adopts toward the same kind of actions done by someone else. Behind the apparent wrongness of such an imbalance must lie some commitment to the consistency of reactive attitudes.

The difficulty of applying the hypocrisy objection to those who enjoy evil stories but still condemn the kind of evil they enjoy reading about lies in the fact that auditors haven't *done* the things their stories depict. Someone who enjoys heist stories is not the same as a former thief. But on Wallace's account of hypocrisy, we can see how this difference could be overcome. It can be overcome if *enjoying* an act in one context and then blaming it in another amount to an inconsistency in reactive attitudes of the same kind as blithely doing something oneself and condemning others who do it. If enjoying in one context and blaming in another aren't exactly

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95 (Wallace 2010), 326.

hypocrisy, they are the same *kind* of thing as hypocrisy, and have a similar consequence for one's moral standing.

Our question, then, becomes this: does enjoying the depiction of an evil action and condemning such actions amount to an inconsistency of reactive attitudes?

P.F. Strawson who either coined the concept or at the very least made it a central philosophical term, defined reactive attitudes as "attitudes belonging to involvement or participation with others in interpersonal human relationships", giving as examples, indignation, resentment, gratitude, and so on.[96]

What could it mean for reactive attitudes to be inconsistent with one another? It seems to me that one minimal condition for two reactive attitudes to be inconsistent is that it would be impossible to adopt them both at the same time. It would be contradictory both to resent and not to resent the same action at the same time. But inconsistency requires more, because it seems perfectly possible to consistently resent and not resent the same action at different times. For example, I might not resent your loud, boisterous greeting most of the time, but resent it when I'm hungover on Saturday morning. There doesn't seem to an inconsistency there. Likewise, I might not resent being greeted with a hug by my sister, but if a random stranger greeted me with a hug, I might resent the imposition. So we need a second minimal condition for inconsistency in reactive attitudes, and I propose the following: our reactive attitudes are inconsistent if they differ without a good reason. My hangover and my familial relation respectively are the good reasons I resent loud greetings on Saturday and don't resent a hug from my sister. But if I resent hugs from one sister and not from the other, and can't provide a good reason for the difference, then I'm guilty of something like hypocrisy. When the unrepentant thief grows indignant at

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96 (Strawson 1962), 66.

thievery, he can't provide a good reason why his thievery should be exempt from such condemnation and is therefore hypocritical in his indignation.

On this account of inconsistent reactive attitudes, is enjoying the evil depicted in a story inconsistent with condemning the same evil perpetrated in real life? In fact, I think it's not inconsistent at all, because the difference can't pass either of the tests for inconsistent reactive attitudes.

First, enjoyment and blame are not contradictory, even at the same time. We know this because of moral phenomena like *akrasia*, where I do something I know to be wrong even while (and indeed because) I enjoy it. I can enjoy things while feeling terribly guilty about them (and, indeed, sometimes the guilt can enhance the enjoyment).

But, you might object, suppose I enjoy heist stories, and then someone tells me about the heist of a widescreen tv from a suburban living room and adds, at the end of their story, "and that's how Fred stole your tv." Discovering that I was the victim of this heist story, I might suddenly find myself not enjoying it at all, and greatly blaming the thief. Doesn't this suggest an inconsistency of reaction? In fact, no. The point is that an account of an action and the action itself are different things. When I grow angry upon hearing that this heist story was an account of the act of stealing something from me, I am angry at the action; I'm not reacting to the story at all. (Although, I may react quite angrily to you for pretending you were just telling me another heist story: again, this isn't a reaction to the story so much as to your misdirection in telling it to me that way.)

Moral Fragility

Tognazzini and Coates suggest that the fourth factor that can affect one's moral standing is the perception of the fragility of one's own morality. Perhaps everyone who has self-reflectively studied the history of holocaust has asked themselves the question: if I had been a German citizen, would I have been among the tiny minority that didn't go along with the genocidal policies of my government? Likewise, in the philosophy classes I've taught, I often see doubt about moral strength when I bring up and explain the Milgram experiment. Students wonder if they could be precipitated into sadism or malice in the right circumstances.

Tognazzini and Coates explain how this concern can amount to a loss of moral standing like this:

> For want of a better term, we might say that this is a worry about *subjunctive hypocrisy*, since it certainly has a similar flavor to the hypocrisy worry [...] The thought is something like this: "If I were as bad as him, I'd have no standing to blame him. But the difference between us is simply a matter of luck, and surely my good moral luck can't serve as the basis for my moral standing to blame. So I lack the standing to blame even though I've never done the terrible things in question."[97]

Reading evil stories does often have exactly this effect. The there-but-for-grace-go-I effect, if you will. But the problem with adducing this effect as a moral danger is that it doesn't seem to

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97 (Tognazzini and Coates 2016), section 2.2.4.

promote any kind of immorality. What's wrong with being wary of hypocrisy, even subjunctive hypocrisy?

This raises a higher-level question: is it morally undesirable to lose the moral standing to blame? That is to say, is there anything about losing this moral standing that is, in itself, wrong? This question has to be asked because in the case of meddling, complicity, and hypocrisy, the reason one has lost moral standing is that one has, oneself, done something wrong. The loss *involves* wrongdoing. But the idea that one can lose moral standing through a sense of one's moral fragility does not involve any apparent wrongdoing in the loss of moral standing. Instead, it involves a recognition of moral weakness in oneself or, at the very least, a doubt about one's praiseworthiness for having avoided blameworthy actions.

Far from a moral danger, the recognition of moral fragility (insofar as it is a correct perception) is a moral opportunity. Like Socrates, pleased when he discovered a new dimension to his ignorance, we should perhaps approve a clarification of the moral picture of our own lives. Another way to express the difference between moral fragility on the one hand and meddling, hypocrisy, and complicity on the other, is that each of the latter involves a *loss* of moral standing, while the first involves a *recognition* of moral standing.

I suspect that those who express fear of this recognition are not really expressing a moral concern at all, but a sense of discomfort at facing the idea that their own goodness might be a matter of luck (or grace, or contingency, or whatever). It would be easy to mount a moral critique of such a discomfort — does it, for example, express a condemnable pride? — but for the purposes of this dissertation, I am content to note that it doesn't seem to be a viable indicator of the moral danger of evil stories.

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Chapter Seven

Moral Opportunity

When preparing to write this book, I took a few days to read and reread a number of evil stories that I had encountered in the past or heard about but never troubled to read before. If I was going to argue that such stories were not morally dangerous, it behooved me to put that thesis to the test on my own person. I consecutively reread Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*, Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*, J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, Kierkegaard's *Diary of a Seducer*, Jonathan Littell's *The Kindly Ones*, and Nabokov's *Lolita*; and I read for the first time the Marquis de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom.* While the former books, taken as a whole, were certainly depressing, giving rise to bad dreams and gloomy thoughts, and even occasioning a certain amount of imaginative resistance (as I have described earlier in this book in relation to *A Clockwork Orange*), only Sade's truly vile story raised serious doubts for me about the project of this dissertation.

Sade's book was written in about the span of a month, a month of frenzied activity in 1785, while he was imprisoned in the Bastille. He wrote it on a long, continuous roll of paper, glued together from scraps smuggled into the prison. He was liberated from the Bastille during the French Revolution and believed he had lost his manuscript, but in fact it survived and over a hundred years later, in the 20th century, it was published for the first time. *The 120 Days of Sodom* is a relentlessly evil story, in the sense that I have defined that term: it sets itself the task of depicting *nothing but* acts of great harm committed for malicious, sadistic, and defiant

reasons. It is the story of four rich and powerful aristocrats who wish to study and practice a complete repertory of possible acts of criminal perversion. They send agents to kidnap young men and women to be used and ultimately murdered during their experiments, and they hire several old and experienced prostitutes to narrate the encyclopedia of horrors they will subsequently enact. In his opening remarks Sade instructs the reader like this:

> And now, friend-reader, you must prepare your heart and your mind for the most impure tale that has ever been told since our world began, a book the likes of which are met with neither amongst the ancients nor amongst us moderns. [98]

As far as my experience goes, his boast is not wrong. What is most disturbing about the book is not the vividness of the crimes he depicts — in fact, the oblique account of a rape in Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange* was far more viscerally disturbing to me, more vivid, than any of Sade's clinically detailed outrages — but what made the book stand out was the plodding, unrelenting, and even tedious exposition of Sade's encyclopedia of cruelty. Simone de Beauvoir, in an essay about Sade, observes of *The 120 Days of Sodom* that "the debauches which Sade describes in such great detail systematically exhaust the anatomical possibilities of the human body rather than reveal uncommon emotional complexes."[99] There is something maniacally completist about the book, and it is difficult to escape the notion that you are reading the testament of someone's mental illness. Unlike virtually every other ostensibly evil story I read for this project, there weren't any obvious moral or aesthetic ameliorations of the text's depravity in the case of *120*

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98 (de Sade 1987) 253-4.
99 Beauvoir, 38.

Days. Moreover the only defense of the book shared by its defenders[100] was that, in its demented exhaustiveness, it prefigured the medical work of Richard von Krafft-Ebing in documenting the psychopathology of sexual behavior.[101] While my various defenses and ameliorations of the supposed dangers of evil stories worked as well on Sade as on the other test cases I brought against myself, I found that my various gambits to assert a *positive* moral value for evil stories had a way of crumbling in the face of his resolutely evil book.

The previous four chapters in this dissertation have considered what I take to be the major philosophically plausible arguments for the moral danger of evil stories. I have tried to show that these arguments were weak or easily answerable with a small concession. To do this — to defend moral stories against accusations that they are so morally dangerous we ought to avoid them — is perhaps enough of an achievement for one dissertation. But the very intractability of Sade's book made the project of finding positive moral opportunity in auditing evil stories an irresistible challenge. So in this chapter, I will seek to leave the trenches where I have been fending off attacks upon evil stories and seize some ground in their favor.

I think there are two clear ways that evil stories can represent a moral opportunity. First, they can be the occasion for unique kinds of moral reflection; and second, auditing certain evil stories may be a duty or responsibility in some circumstances.

Moral Reflection

Evil stories can uniquely inspire certain kinds of moral reflection. But what do I mean by the term "moral reflection"? It has sometimes been used to refer to the critical examination of one's

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100 Such as George Bataille and Simone Beauvoir.
101 (Von Krafft-Ebing 2013)

own life from a moral point of view.[102] I do not use it with that specific focus, but instead to mean reflection in general, in the sense of serious thought or consideration, about morality. In the sense in which I am using the word, the whole project of ethical theory — meta, normative, and applied — is an exercise in moral reflection, but so is the less formal thinking we do about our moral beliefs, attitudes, and practices in everyday life. Thus I am using the term "moral reflection" to refer to the whole intellectual part of moral life.

The claim I want to defend is this: evil stories offer us an occasion for various kinds of moral reflection we are unlikely to pursue without them. To show what I mean by this, I will distinguish between the kinds of moral reflection that stories in general commonly occasion, and the kinds of moral reflection that evil stories are uniquely suited to occasion. But first, I have to establish something about moral reflection itself.

The argument is that since moral reflection is morally opportune, and evil stories provide the occasion for certain unique kinds of moral reflection, therefore evil stories are morally opportune. But why take it that moral reflection is morally opportune? This is by no means an obvious truth.

This question has perhaps never been more pressing than at the moment I am writing this book. Of late, several well-known moral and political philosophers have been plausibly accused of a pattern of sexually harassing vulnerable colleagues over the course of their long and distinguished careers. Moreover, studies like that by Schwitzgebel and Rust have tried and failed to find a difference in the behavior of those who have devoted their lives to formal moral reflection and those who have not prioritized it: "It remains to be shown that even a lifetime's

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102 That is the sense in which William Ransome, for example, uses it in (Ransome 2008).

worth of philosophical moral reflection has any influence upon one's real world moral behavior."[103] So if being very good at moral reflection is compatible with being a very bad person, and if, in general, systematically practicing moral reflection doesn't noticeably improve your behavior, then why claim that moral reflection is morally opportune?

I think moral reflection is opportune primarily for one big reason. We have already encountered it in my earlier discussion of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*: to be a genuinely good person, one must not simply behave rightly, but possess and reflectively endorse a settled disposition to do so. Burgess shows that it is easy and disturbing to imagine someone compelled to act rightly, even someone *internally* so compelled, whom it is difficult to call good, because his adherence to a code of conduct generally considered right is not the product of reflective endorsement but of behavioral programming. To put it more colloquially, brainwashing someone into adopting the outward mien of a good person would not make them good.

If one accepts the idea that moral goodness involves the reflective endorsement of good behavior, then one possesses a powerful reason to suppose moral reflection is opportune. Moral reflection is the only path to reflective endorsement. It is not a sufficient, but it is a necessary, aspect of being a morally good person. Its effects are invisible but decisive.

Importantly, this reason for considering moral reflection morally opportune is not refuted by empirical studies like that of Schwitzgebel and Rust, or by the anecdotal bad behavior of famous philosophers. Just because a good person reflectively endorses right behavior doesn't mean that those who devote themselves professionally to moral reflection are more likely to be good people. At best, I submit that it means that those among philosophers who are good people

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103 (Schwitzgebel and Rust 2013), 320.

are likely to have reflectively endorsed right behavior for more sophisticated and subtle reasons than good people who are not philosophers.

Stories in General and Moral Reflection

Storytelling is inextricable from the ontogeny and phylogeny of moral reflection. Everyone with whom I have discussed the matter recalls being introduced to moral reflection by being asked to make moral judgments about stories. This happens both spontaneously, when children muse and ask about the ideas about morality suggested to them by auditing a story, and, for most people, it also happens under the direction of various professional moralizers, teachers, role models, and even entertainers like the writers of children's books and the directors of children's television programs.[104] But stories aren't just the vehicle for moral reflection when we are young, nor are they restricted to inspiring naive and informal moral reflection. It's rare to encounter an essay about ethical theory, meta, normative, or applied, that is not filled with stories in the form so adored by philosophers, the thought experiment. For long periods of its history, formal ethical theory also took a narrative form, that of casuistry.[105] Moreover, in most religions — surely the most venerable institutional memory-banks for moral concepts in human history — myths, parables, and exemplary lives, or in other words narratives, are a universal medium for preserving moral insight.

The reason stories always seem to appear alongside moral reflection is that they are perfect occasions for it. Stories present us with situations, usually of conflict, in which the protagonist must make a judgment about how to act, and in which the reported outcome of their decision can

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104 (Bettelheim 2010)
105 See the fascinating monograph, (Jonsen and Toulmin 1988).

give the maker of the story an opportunity to implicitly comment upon the protagonist's

judgment. This amounts to material for moral reflection, especially as the demands of secondary

imagination lead us to simulate the point of view of the character facing the decision and then to

cope with the consequences of it. Thanks to the imaginative buffer that ordinarily cuts off stories

from perceptual input and behavioral output, a distance conducive to reflection is built into the

situations that stories present to us for consideration. Good story makers and tellers strive to

overcome — or, on some accounts, to calibrate — the distance imposed by imagination, but even

in the most immersive thriller, it remains possible to take a mental step back from the pressures

of a situation in a way that it is often impossible to do from the pressures of a real life situation.

Moreover, perhaps because of the narrative heuristic I mentioned in Chapter 2, many people have

an easier time grasping the import of ethical problems, distinctions, arguments, and judgments if

they are framed in terms of stories. In short, narratives are uniquely well-suited to provoke

moral reflection. As Cochrane puts it, they "allow [auditors] to rehearse a skill that is crucial in

understanding and formation of character: the skill to select and organize into narratives those

episodes of a life that reflect traits or values."[106] But what about *evil* stories?

Evil Stories and Moral Reflection

Evil stories are distinguished from stories in general, according to my definition, because they

portray greatly harmful actions perpetrated for sadistic, malicious, or defiant reasons, or because

they portray characters inclined to perpetrate such actions. The presence of such actions and

characters, and above all the way in which their presence often necessitates simulating the point

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106 (Cochrane 2014), 303. Cochrane says "readers," because he is talking about textual stories; but his comments could apply, I think, to all stories, and so I have substituted the word "auditors."

of view of an evil character in order to understand the story, offer an occasion for several forms of moral reflection otherwise rare. From these basic features of evil stories as a category, we can easily infer that they offer three unique prompts to moral reflection.

First, evil stories offer us an occasion to think about evil itself in an unusual way. To make clear what I mean by this, I must distinguish between an antagonist, a villain, and an evil character. Most stories have an antagonist, the character who produces the most or the major obstacles for the protagonist. Many stories also have a villain, an antagonist of whom we disapprove. But relatively few stories actually portray fully evil characters in my sense, and even fewer portray them so centrally as to require simulative imagination in order to understand the story (by, for example, making the evil character the protagonist). It is this way of thinking about this kind of evil character that evil stories uniquely occasion: evil stories occasion the attempt to *understand* evil characters.

Second, evil stories reveal to what degree our emotions, attitudes, and tendencies are "in tune" with our moral principles and values.[107] In the highly concrete context of a story, we have an opportunity to compare our visceral moral judgments — their kind, quality, intensity, and confidence — to our more general and abstract commitments. Am I as repelled or outraged by X evil act or person as the moral commitments according to which I consider X evil would lead me to expect?

Third, evil stories, particularly the ones that require imaginative simulation, bring us face to face with disagreements about moral principles and values that we don't ordinarily face. Evil characters belong to a category about which there is such a consensus of disapproval and condemnation, that the simple act of trying to simulate what the point of view of such a character

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107 The language of being "in tune" or out of tune with moral values is adopted from (Currie 1995).

would be like can shockingly unsettle aspects of your own moral point of view that you simply never considered because they were never called into question.

On the basis of these unique prompts to moral reflection, I will now argue that evil stories are occasions for unique kinds of moral reflection. In each case, I will need to defend these claims in two steps: the first step will be to show how evil stories prompt the kind of moral reflection in question, and the second step will be to show that they are unique or privileged in occasioning this kind of moral reflection.

Evil Stories and Basic Dialectical Reflection

The first form of moral reflection that I will argue evil stories uniquely occasion I call "basic dialectical reflection." By the word "dialectical" here, I do not mean any of the complicated senses of "dialectic" popular in the Platonic or Post-Kantian streams of philosophy, but rather the kind of reasoning that Aristotle distinguished as belonging to arguments where the premises are uncertain opinions. Aristotle considered dialectic to be the "path to the principles of all inquiries" because before one can make properly rigorous arguments (on his account) one must have some first principles; but even about first principles there is disagreement.[108] So dialectic is the method of reasoning whereby one resolves disagreements about first principles. The same is true in the domain of ethics. Most of our ethical reasoning proceeds from a certain ostensive agreement about — at the very least — what count as paradigmatic cases of good and bad behavior. Mostly we disagree about what it means for actions and people to be good or bad, why they are good or bad, and about whether certain complicated practical edge cases are good or bad; but things like,

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108 (Aristotle 2014), *Topis*, 101b1.

"it's bad to murder someone in cold blood for one's own amusement" are not generally in dispute. We treat such paradigm cases as first principles.

One of the unique functions of evil stories is to bring us face to face with characters who disagree with our paradigm cases of what counts as good or bad behavior. The attempt to understand an evil character is, essentially, the attempt to see why doing something we consider paradigmatically bad — causing great harm for sadistic, malicious, or defiant reasons — seems good to them. We don't regularly encounter people who disagree on these points, though they do exist. And therefore we don't regularly consider or reason about our support for these consensus paradigms. Perhaps that is because their status as paradigmatic moral intuitions, or as overlapping consensuses, is so obvious that it would be a ludicrous waste of time to scrutinize them so closely. But I suspect our avoidance of the issue is not so simple. Moran raises the following question when he is considering Hume's famous comments about imaginative resistance:

> This raises the question of why, if this man is so confident and secure in his opinions, he is yet so hypersensitive about imagining the truth of *different* opinions, so that he fears he cannot imagine in this way without the threat of perverting that very judgment of his of which he is so confident.[109]

I suspect that fear of "imagining the truth of *different* opinions" is pervasive. Anecdotally, when I was teaching introduction to philosophy classes at Boston College, I would sometimes play the game of asking a student who had confidently asserted a moral platitude, "why?" a few times,

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109 (Moran 1994), 99.

easily prodding them to the limit of their reflective experience. This is not to criticize the reflective experience of my students: I am also unlikely to consider reasoning in support of moral judgments I take to be truisms. But I find myself doing so when I read an evil story.

This is basic dialectical reflection: reflection on why we accept the paradigm cases of moral judgment that often function as first principles in ethical argument.

Evil Stories and Hermeneutic Reflection

Simone Beauvoir, attempting to enunciate why she found Sade valuable, stated that "the supreme value of his testimony lies in its ability to disturb us."[110] But what is so valuable about being disturbed? Hamilton offers the following suggestion:

> Because a work of art can, in presenting a moral point of view which disturbs us as being reprehensible in some way, lead us to explore the meaning for us of our moral beliefs, there is a lot to be said for the idea that a work of art can be valuable *because* it expresses or articulates such a moral point of view.[111]

But what does he mean by "the meaning for us of our moral beliefs"? Hamilton explains himself like this:

> [A]s Nietzsche pointed out, belief, in moral matters at least, is a foreground phenomenon: to say one believes something is not to settle anything, but to open up space in which one

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110 Beauvoir, 64.
111 (Hamilton 2003), 51.

might try to understand why one has this belief, what it does for one, what it inhibits one from doing, thinking, or feeling, how it contributes to one's sense of well-being, whether it exists as a form of self-inflicted punishment or reward — in short, what its *meaning* is for one.[112]

This Nietzsche-inspired list of what is meant by the meaning for one of a belief includes a lot of things, and I would hesitate if it required me to sign up for Nietzsche's error theory of morality. But I don't think we need to endorse Nietzsche's error theory to see the valuable point that Hamilton is making in Nietzsche's name.

A belief of any kind has many relations in my life beyond being the conclusion of certain arguments. How a belief makes me feel, what I think it allows me to do, how I *use* it to justify my behavior, whether I congratulate or deplore it, etc., are all part of its meaning. My belief that I am a member of *homo sapiens* is one I hold for many good reasons, but the *meaning* of that belief, in Hamilton's sense, also has to do with how I relate to other animals, what I think I am owed as a human, how I think I ought to behave, how I feel about myself, whether happy or sad to be the kind of thing I am, and so on.

This, I think, is the second kind of moral reflection uniquely occasioned by evil stories. They occasion it for the same reason they occasion basic dialectical reflection: when we encounter a character who differs from us about our fundamental moral beliefs, we are cast back upon ourselves, not only to justify why we believe the thing we believe, but to ask what it means that we believe the thing we believe. What does it change about us overall to believe X instead of not-X? Evil stories provide this occasion uniquely because outside, perhaps, the ethics class or

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112 Ibid., 50.

the pot-fueled dorm-room bull session, we are unlikely to face sincere expressions of profound moral disagreement about paradigmatic moral judgments.

Evil Stories and Affective Reflection

The final distinct type of moral reflection uniquely occasioned by evil stories I am choosing to call "affective reflection." If basic dialectical reflection is an outward-looking kind of reflection engaged with the question of first principles, and hermeneutic reflection is a mixture of outward-looking and inward-looking reflection, in which you determine why you endorse the beliefs you have, then affective reflection is self-reflection, completely inward-looking. Gregory Currie talks about affective reflection as "tuning" yourself. He asks us to imagine an addict who values abstaining from drugs but does not desire to abstain: he desires to desire to abstain. And he might use simulative imagining to help him achieve that desire, "tuning" himself to his values.[113]

But what does it mean to be in or out of tune with moral principles? The metaphor is an evocative one, bringing to mind the act of twisting the tuning key on a guitar, for example, and attempting to match it to the pitch of another instrument that is already pitched correctly. Literally, to tune a musical instrument is to adjust the rate of sound-producing vibrations to a pre-established range. And I think the best way of explaining what this metaphor seems to be getting at in terms of moral life, is the idea of matching our affective responses to situations calling for moral judgment to the implications of our moral principles for those situations. A person is in tune, morally speaking, if they desire and have positive reactions to the kind of behavior their moral principles would prescribe, and if they find themselves averse to and have negative reactions to the kind of behaviour the moral principles would proscribe.

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113 (Currie 1995), 254.

When we read an evil story, we are faced with a peculiarly intense test of how morally in tune we are with our relevant moral principles. We are given a concrete and absorbing structure — narrative — that directs our attention to a moral choice, and requires us to simulate the point of view of the kind of character who makes what we take to be the wrong decision. And this process stirs up an affective response in a way that a mere discussion about principles, even when garnished by some perfunctory thought experiments, can't hope to compete with. Evil stories are the moral equivalent of a tuning fork.

But why claim that evil stories are uniquely well-suited to occasion this kind of moral self-reflection? Wouldn't any old story focused on a moral choice — i.e., nearly every story — provide the same occasion for affective reflection? My reason is, once again, to refer to the rare contradictions of settled views that we uniquely experience in evil stories. The tuning metaphor helps to explain this too. I've been a piano accompanist, played the flute in an orchestra, played guitar in a band, and sung with choirs: in each case, tuning (or warming up, in the case of the choir) was an act occasioned by dissonance. When my folk rock band came to practice and all our instruments were in tune, it didn't occur to us to tune up. When the high school director tapped his baton and received a jangling belch of dissonance in response, he set us to work tuning again. Tuning is a response to being out of tune. Reading an evil story is like playing along with someone whose instrument is sharply out of tune. Their dissonance raises the issue of tuning, and you have to think of your own instrument too, because it will either be in tune with the standard — the tuning fork, the piano, etc. — or it will be in tune with the dissonant instrument. Whereas, if one is simply playing along with someone and both of you are *slightly* out of tune in the same way, it is difficult to notice the problem, unless you have perfect pitch.

Evil stories work like sharply dissonant instruments, waking us up to the question of the appropriateness of our affections in a way less garish, less remarkable immorality fails to do.

A Case Study: *The 120 Days of Sodom*

As I explained in the introduction of this chapter, the Marquis de Sade's *The 120 Days of Sodom* was a particularly intractable story when it came time to test my claims for the positive moral opportunity offered by auditing evil stories. Therefore, in the interests of philosophical probity, I ought to discuss how my claims here stand up to my *bête noire*.

First I must confess that the book provoked not one bit of what I have called basic dialectical reflection. The distress it made me feel and the evil it portrayed never made me wonder about the rational basis for my basic opposition to cruelty, sexual assault, and murder. Is this a refutation of the plausibility of that moral opportunity? Or is there something about *The 120 Days*, besides its portrayal of evil, that caused it to fail to occasion basic dialectical reflection? The latter, I think.

The broad definition of evil that I have adopted for this book includes three varieties, which heretofore I haven't really distinguished. Recall that I am using "evil" to refer to greatly harmful acts done for malicious, sadistic, or defiant reasons. A certain subset of evil stories emphasizes defiant evil. Ironically — given the etymology of the word "sadistic" — the primary evil that *The 120 Days of Sodom* confronts us with is defiant rather than sadistic or malicious. The introduction to the book, especially Sade's claim to have written "the most impure tale that has ever been told since our world began," as well as its overriding features of monotony and exhaustiveness, make it more an intellectual exercise in defiance — a systematic exploration of the ways of violating certain mores — than in sadistic titillation or ill-will. *The 120 Days* belongs

to a small genre that includes flamboyant books like *Maldoror*, self-consciously evil books whose entire affective reason for being is the frisson of defiance. *Maldoror* begins like this:

> May it please Heaven that the reader, emboldened and become of a sudden momentarily ferocious like what he is reading, may trace in safety his pathway through the desolate morass of these gloomy and poisonous pages. For unless he is able to bring to his reading a rigorous logic and a spiritual tension equal at least to his distrust, the deadly emanations of this book will imbibe his soul as sugar absorbs water.[114]

A book like this — or Sade's — takes its aesthetic appeal from the act of defiance. It wants to *seem* dangerous. And this is why, I believe, it fails to provoke basic dialectical reflection. The authors of such books do not *want* us to consider the evil they describe anything but evil, and instead they wear it on their sleeves *as evil*. This is quite different from nearly every other evil story I have considered in this dissertation. The average evil story portrays a character acting more or less rationally, which usually means they appear to consider their deeds good or at least justified, even if they seem to us evil. The portrayal of that kind of character is far more likely to provoke basic dialectical reflection than a self-consciously defiant narrator can. So I don't think *The 120 Days of Sodom*'s failure to be morally opportune in that particular way jeopardizes my claims about how evil stories can be morally opportune.

   Happily for my argument, I can report that although the book did not occasion basic dialectical reflection, it did occasion both hermeneutic and affective reflection. It provoked both of these things because of the comparison I couldn't help but make between the nature of my

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114 (de Lautréamont 1965), 1.

distress in reading it and the distress I felt in reading other books from my list. Books like *Lolita* and *A Clockwork Orange* were far more horrifying and provoked greater imaginative resistance than Sade's machinelike enumeration of obscenities. But at the same time what Sade described was much, much worse, objectively speaking: *A Clockwork Orange* depicts a single act of sexual violence, *120 Days* depicts countless acts of sexual violence. The difference provoked me to reflect on the roots of my imaginative resistance to *A Clockwork Orange*. Why had that depiction made me put the book down and take a break, while I could plow straight through *120 Days*? Clearly my repulsion did not follow directly from my moral conviction that non-consensual sexual violence is wrong, because my repulsion didn't vary in proportion to the degree that a story violated my principle. These thoughts involved both what I have called affective and hermeneutic reflection: they involved affective reflection because I began to wonder how well-tuned I was to my conscious principle when only a particular and unexpected depiction of it could provoke imagination resistance, while a encyclopedic and expected depiction of it left me affectively unmoved. The thoughts also involved me in hermeneutic reflection because the difference in my affective reaction made me wonder what role my principle played in my own life: did I endorse it primarily because of the good and universal reasons I have for it, or was I simply disturbed by it when presented by it viscerally, and what did this say about me?

Even a book as resolutely and irredeemably evil as *The 120 Days of Sodom* can serve as the occasion for moral reflection; and therefore, I consider it probable that most evil stories can be morally opportune in this way.

Role-centered Responsibility to Audit

A second form of moral opportunity attends evil stories, besides the fact that they occasion several kinds of unique moral reflection. Early in this dissertation I touched on what I take to be the best account of response moralism, which I called role-centered response moralism. The discussion can be extended beyond what a role-centered moral theory might prohibit in terms of auditing stories to discuss what it might recommend or require. Can we derive a *responsibility to audit* evil stories from an account of morally important roles? Or, to put it another way, is auditing an evil story ever a part of what it means to acquit oneself well in a morally determinative role? I think the answer is yes.

(Perhaps it is wrong to refer to the responsibility to audit as an *opportunity*. It seems odd to refer to something that one might not enjoy and have to do as an opportunity. Nonetheless, in the special sense of moral opportunity that I defined at the beginning of this dissertation, a responsibility to audit would be opportune. For something to be morally opportune, as I defined it, means that it involves us in morality, including, among other things, providing us with an opportunity to do what is right. A phenomenon which entails a duty of us does indeed lead us to do what is right if we act on the duty, and to that degree is "morally opportune." At the same time, however, to the degree that such a duty is unpleasant, it is a kind of *role-necessitated misfortune*, and to the degree that it simultaneously presents the moral danger that evil stories in general present, it is an *unfortunate risk*. It can be both of these things while simultaneously being a moral opportunity in my special sense.)

But first, to approach the question, we should begin with stories in general. How can it ever be a responsibility to audit any kind of story at all? As I explained when broaching the topic in chapter 3, morally significant roles can involve audition in two possible ways: auditing can be a necessary sub-function within a role, as when, for example, to be a good father involves listening to your children; or auditing can be a primary function of a morally significant role. The question, then, becomes whether the *evilness* of a story alters its place in a morally significant role. If not, then it seems that one could consistently argue, on the basis of role-centered moral theory, for a responsibility or duty to audit evil stories.

Audition as a Sub-function

Some paradigmatically morally important roles could plausibly require one to audit evil stories. One of the features I have posited as a requirement for considering a role "morally important" is that it be directed toward the well-being of another. This is a feature of paradigmatically morally important roles — such as the role of being a parent — and while I don't think it is right to exclude a person's relationship to their self from moral consideration or their relationship to non-human beings, as if it weren't possible to treat yourself badly or to be a morally compromised pet-owner, for example, nonetheless this condition captures something about the core set of roles that the vast majority of people can agree are morally determinative.[115] The condition also has implications for the set of roles it picks out that are useful for my argument.

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115 Role-centered moral theory is capable, I think, of talking about things like the ethics of animal-human relations or the ethics of self-relation, but to do so it might have to relax some of the strictures on what counts as a morally important role. Insofar as these strictures are meant — in my view — to secure for a role-centered moral theory the clarity and general agreement that allows it to do things like bridge the is-ought gap, this means that role-centering might not be quite so effective in every domain of ethics.

All roles directed toward the well-being of another person require one to figure out what that well-being would consist in. This will most often include — but is not exhausted by — determining what the person themselves considers to be their well-being. While it is certainly wrong to assume that what a person wants is necessarily what is best for them, it is also wrong to determine what is best for them *without reference* to what they want. It is wrong for two reasons.

First, what a person considers to be their own well-being is *part* of their well-being, or lack thereof, and therefore it is crucial knowledge for anyone whose roles are directed to their well-being. Consider a person whose well-being consists, among other things, in not wandering onto the highway in front of their house. Can their well-being truly be said to have been secured if they are physically restrained from doing this but desire with all their heart to do it? Part of the well-being of a person capable of making adult decisions for themselves is that they want what is best for themselves. This crucial subjective or volitional element of well-being makes it necessary for anyone whose morally important roles are directed toward the well-being of another person to take proper cognizance of that person's conception of their own well-being, and to do what they can to help them to conceive truly of well-being. Good counselors and therapists, for example, do not simply observe their patients' problems and then prescribe them solutions, but invite them to talk about themselves at length. Without cognizance of what a person thinks about themselves any assessment of their well-being is incomplete. Moreover, for many people, the major threat to their own well-being *derives* from how they think about themselves: they want dangerous, futile, or wrong things; they persistently imagine themselves as characters in stories which tend to distress or mislead them; the very contents of their

consciousness is what brings them pain and dissatisfaction. It is positively crucial in such cases for those who bear roles directed to such peoples' well-being to understand their views.

Second, it can be wrong to determine another person's well-being without reference to their opinions for a moral reason. To ignore the self-understanding of an adult in their right mind when attempting to secure their well-being is generally understood to be highhanded and disrespectful. It evinces an attitude toward that person that treats them as a thing to be managed rather than a person whose subjectivity matters. Of course in some cases — for someone who is not in their right mind — respect might not entail continuous attention to their own conception of well-being. We do not attend to the baby's desire to crawl onto the highway, to the hallucinatory person's belief that they can fly, to the addict's conviction that another hit or one more drink will make them happy. But in most cases, to ignore how those to whom our morally significant roles pertain would conceive of their well-being would be disrespectful and highhanded.

Foremost among the many ways of understanding each other that humans possess is telling stories about ourselves. There is a reason family-members sitting around the dinner-table delight to tell one another what happened during their day, a reason friends can't wait to share big news with their friends, a reason maligned politicians often write the story of their own lives. We have already encountered this reason in our general discussions of narrative: narrative helps us to simulate a point of view; we tell narratives to others to encourage them to simulate our own points of view. We use narratives as a tool to make ourselves understood.

It follows from this important function of stories in interpersonal communication, and from the importance of interpersonal communication in acquitting oneself well in one's morally important roles, that one will often find oneself in a position where it is clearly permitted and

even imperative, to audit a story. To put it in precise and concise language: role-bearers are obliged to audit the self-communicating stories of the persons to whose well-being their role is directed, insofar as respect and a complete assessment of their well-being demands it.

What if that story is an evil story?

Sometimes it will be. Evil people have bearers of morally important roles in their lives too — mothers and fathers, teachers and counselors, friends and representatives. They are embedded in the same social fabric as the rest of us, and therefore they are surrounded by people whose morally determinative roles include being directed toward the well-being of an evil person. Doing bad things does not disqualify someone as the object of our love and care, and therefore if a responsibility to audit is a sub-function of many morally determinative roles, it stands to reason that auditing what I have called evil stories is sometimes a responsibility.

There is at least one major proviso to add here: while it may be one's duty to audit the evil story of someone to whom one's morally important role pertains, that duty only extends to the limit of its necessity for the role. Evil stories can be a cruel person's way of hurting someone who has a morally important role in their life. A classic form of child's retribution upon a parent, for example, is to tell them stories that horrify them.[116] The duty to audit those for whom one is responsible extends exactly as far as it is necessary to respect them and understand their well-being — this does not include a duty to subject oneself to torture, to have one's "nose rubbed" in an evil story. In fact, the affective consequences of having one's nose rubbed in an evil story in that way might have bad consequences for one's ability to fulfill one's morally important role. The important thing to note here is that one's duty to audit, insofar as it is derived from a morally

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116 A discussion of the morality of story-*telling* — such as I hope someday to write as a follow-up to this dissertation — would no doubt have something to say about such cruel stories.

important role, extends exactly as far as such auditing is necessary to fill that role adequately, and no further.

Audition as a Primary function

Some roles, as I argued back in chapter 3, include audition as one of their primary functions. Those roles certainly include the class of roles I referred to as social pattern maintenance experts, those people whose duty is to maintain latency (in Talcott Parsons's terms) or, more colloquially, to keep institutional memory alive: educators, historians, clergyman, poet laureates, and so on. While almost none of these individual roles would qualify as morally determinative, because their exact functioning varies wildly over time and between cultures, still I would argue that the larger or more abstract role they instantiate does fulfill the requirements of a morally determinative role. As I pointed out previously, we look askance at societies or institutions whose patterns of belief, value, and practice aren't maintained and transmitted through *some* instantiation of the pattern maintenance expert: to have no memory of the past is a dystopian situation.

This is a tricky observation from which to derive an obligation to audit evil stories: tricky, because it's difficult to pinpoint the blame (and therefore the obligation) individually in a society that rejects proper pattern maintenance. But perhaps things will become clearer with a concrete example. I would argue that the official denial by the Turkish government and mainstream Turkish society that the Armenian genocide took place is an example of a culpable failure of social pattern maintenance. There are atrocities — evil actions — the memory of which we ought to transmit, for all kinds of reasons. I am suggesting, therefore, that an obligation falls on those

people primarily responsible for the transmission of such memories to both audit and retell evil stories.

I'll leave that argument in this sketchy state, merely gesturing toward it, because I think it requires a sociological sophistication I don't possess and, at the very least, a clearer sense of how the institutional memory of evil stories is transmitted or repressed. The raging debate about whether we should respond to the memory of the holocaust with representation or silence also touches on this argument; but, again, I don't consider myself expert enough in the details of the debate to weight in very firmly, and I only mention it for the sake of completeness.[117]

Of course, social pattern maintenance experts are not the only people who possess roles with the primary function of audition. This function also belongs to various officials, doctors, psychiatrists, defense lawyers, and counselors, functionaries for whom the proper commission of their duties inevitably involves gaining a clear sense of their patient's or client's story. Doctors and psychiatrists take case histories and encourage their patients to formulate their problems in narrative form; defense lawyers interview and depose the people they represent, to get a clear picture of what they have or have not done, and how to defend them in court; and so on.[118] Upon people with such jobs falls the not at all unlikely duty to audit evil stories in the everyday course of events.

As with social pattern maintainers, however, I am on somewhat shaky ground attempting to adduce a moral argument for a duty to audit from these accounts of certain professions. Do the legal defender and the doctor constitute morally determinative roles, or are my accounts of them highly culturally relative? Again I feel as if I am gesturing toward a *possible* moral argument for

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117 For an overview of the debate about representing the holocaust, see (Rose 1996; Emcke 2013).
118 The neurologist and writer Oliver Sacks often presented eloquent arguments to the effect that doctors ought to become narratively involved with their patients, listening to and telling their stories. See, for example, (Sacks 2015).

such a duty on the basis of role-centered moral theory, but that in order to make the argument effectively, because of the strictures on what constitutes a morally determinative role, I would have to know more about some empirical domain, in this case perhaps cultural anthropology.

A Possible Objection: Equivocation

Friendly critics of this dissertation have occasionally raised it as an objection to my argument about a responsibility to audit evil stories that I am using "evil stories" equivocally. Most chapters in this book begin with an example of an evil story taken from literature; thus I gave the impression that I was mostly concerned with the evil stories as art. In the second half of this chapter, I have discussed a responsibility to audit mostly under the rubric of the stories we tell each other about our own lives. I have argued that from the perspective of a role-centered moral theory, many of us probably have a responsibility to audit evil stories when the people we serve or care for need to tell us about evil things they have done. The equivocation, if there is one, lies in the fact that I am defending the audition of evil *art-stories*, and prescribing the audition of evil *interpersonal* stories, and I am treating those two argumentative moves as part of a seamless project.

As I tried to make clear in the first chapter of this book, my topic here is the evil story in general. In all its forms. From all possible sources. My thesis is that the audition of evil stories is not so morally dangerous that it ought to be avoided by most neurotypical people in ordinary circumstances, and that some audition of evil stories may be a moral obligation for some people. It is true that the subset of evil stories we may be morally obligated to audit is more restrictive than the set of evil stories we are permitted to audit. This is not so much equivocation as an

admission that my arguments for what I have called the "moral opportunity" of evil stories are

less widely applicable than my defense of evil stories against claims that they are too morally

dangerous to audit.

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Chapter Eight

The Knowledge of Evil

Aristophanes' comedy, *The Frogs*, behind the usual facade of fart jokes, slapstick, and puns, hides a profound dispute about the nature and function of literature. It is one of the earliest extant discussions we possess about the relationship between art and morality from the standpoint of the artists. In *The Frogs*, the god Dionysus is upset by the mediocrity of living Athenian playwrights, and so he travels to the underworld with the intention of bringing back with him either Aeschylus or Euripides. To decide which of them gets to come back to the land of the living, Dionysus stages a debate between them, in which they comically curse each other out and, in the process, discuss some of the deepest questions of aesthetics. Aeschylus, reviling Euripides, observes:

> [T]he poet shouldn't side
>
> with what is evil and display it on the stage like a demonstration.
>
> Children may have teachers but adults have the poet
>
> and the poet ought to keep things on a higher plane.[119]

By this point in this dissertation, Aeschylus' accusation should sound familiar. He implies that the teller of evil stories is a teacher of immorality. I have done my best to show why I find that position indefensible. I hope I have given some good reasons to suppose it is *not* notably

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119 (Aristophanes 2005), 587.

dangerous to audit evil stories. And I have even ventured to suggest that evil stories, precisely because of what makes them evil stories, can be good and useful to audit. Like Odysseus, I believe that, if properly secured to the mast, there is much to be gained by sailing close to the Sirens and listening to their song. But one argument in favor of evil stories I haven't yet considered is the one most commonly offered by the makers and tellers of such stories, the one I often received in person when asking my artist and writer friends what they thought about evil stories. Let's call it the poet's defense. The poet's defense, succinctly put, is that evil stories are valuable because in some sense they are true. Euripides' account — which, though it comes prior to Aeschylus accusation, is an answer to it — is a beautiful distillation of this claim, which also suggests how it could be turned into a moral argument. Euripides rejects the idea that the poet ought to keep things on a higher plane. Instead, he takes pride in just *how* low — and therefore realistic — is the plane of his art:

> I taught [...] how to expect the worst and face reality in the round—
>
> [...] by re-creating the workaday world we know
>
> and things that are part of our living,
>
> things I couldn't sham without being shown up as a fraud
>
> because they're common knowledge.[120]

Euripides justifies his murderous, promiscuous, low, and common characters because they are authentic representations of "the workaday world we know," and encountering them in his art will teach us to "face reality in the round." It is only appropriate to conclude my analysis of the

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120 Ibid., 582.

moral value of evil stories by considering the poet's defense, and seeing whether it holds up to philosophical scrutiny in the case of evil stories. Do evil stories offer us valuable access to some special kind of truth?

In a brilliant long essay on Plato's aesthetic moralism, Iris Murdoch wrote a wonderfully suggestive aside about this very topic:

Arguably [...] good literature is uniquely able to clarify evil [...] To see misery and evil justly is one of the heights of aesthetic endeavour and one which is surely sometimes reached. [...] Shakespeare makes not only splendour but beauty out of the malevolence of Iago and the intolerable death of Cordelia, as Homer does out of the miseries of a pointless war and the stylish ruthlessness of Achilles. Art can rarely, but with authority, show how we learn from pain, swept by the violence of divine grace toward an unwilling wisdom, as described in the first chorus of the *Agamemnon* [where Aeschylus wrote "all wisdom comes through suffering"].[121]

What could it mean that good literature is "uniquely able to clarify evil"? Elsewhere in the same essay, Murdoch points out that in philosophy evil has always been a sticking point of ethics. Many of the otherwise most impressive accounts of morality seem to offer weak accounts of how and why people do evil things. She suggests this is because an accurate account of evil requires an account of (in Platonic terms) the whole person, of their affective and bodily nature as well as their mind.

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121 (Murdoch 1977), 457-8.

I would suggest there is a simpler way to make the same point, without getting involved in the complications of philosophical anthropology. Perhaps stories give us a richer picture of evil than any system of ethics because they prompt us to understand evil points of view through simulation rather than theory. The narrative heuristic of simulation, like all other heuristics, is a way to grasp something we don't possess the resources or techniques to understand in a more analytical way. I would never suggest that storytelling can replace the normative, meta-ethical, or practical work of ethical theory, but it may be an important adjunct way of conceptualizing moral life. To see what I mean, consider the case of Jonathan Littell, author of the novel *The Kindly Ones*.

The Kindly Ones is a huge brick of a book, immensely popular, winner of major French literary awards, which tells the story of an imaginary high-ranking SS officer, Maximilian Aue, from the first person point of view. It is an uncomfortable 1000-page sojourn in the highly cultured, philosophically profound, and morally reprehensible — indeed evil — mind of a Nazi. Predictably, it was and is highly controversial. Why did Littell write it? In an interview, he explained one of his motivations like this:

> The issue of the perpetrator is the main issue the historians of the Shoah have been exploring for the last 15 years. The only remaining question is the motivation of the killers. Having read the works of the great researchers, it seems to me that they have hit a brick wall. This is very clear with Christopher Browning. He has created a list of potential motivations and has no way of arbitrating between them. Some prioritize anti-Semitism, others ideology. But in the end, they don't know. The reason is simple. The

historian works from documents, and so from the words of the perpetrators, which are themselves an aporia. And where can one go from there?[122]

Well, one could go into the realm of fictional narrative, constructing a plausible account of the motivations of one of the perpetrators of the holocaust. Of course such a story — and in particular an imaginary one — would not provide any kind of documentary evidence about the mind of the perpetrators of the holocaust. What it might do is to provide us with a way to test, abductively, various accounts of such a mind, by letting us try them on through imaginative simulation. The "truth," then, of such a narrative account would be the truth of possibility, a truth about how a person might become evil. Let me unpack this series of claims.

How can imagining something reveal anything, even about possibility? After all, just because I can imagine it, conceptualize it, understand it, doesn't mean a thing is possible. If avid readers of science fiction and fantasy like me know anything, it's that there is a gap between vivid imagination and actual possibility. But there is perhaps one significant exception, directly applicable to the question of evil stories. *Psychological* possibility might be indicated by what is imaginable. This is because so much of imagination is actual simulation of the feelings, thoughts, and willing portrayed in a story.

We need to be careful with this claim, however, because it doesn't go both ways: not everything that is psychologically possible is previously imaginable, even at the behest of, say, a great writer. For years I have been interested in accounts of the inner lives of people who are very old, extremely sick, or hypersensitive to mortality; but in 2015, I was briefly misdiagnosed with a heart condition that convinced me for a few weeks that I was myself imminently to die,

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122 (Littel, 2006.)

and I can report that nothing in my extensive consumption of stories about people who believed themselves to be dying approximated the actual state of psychological morbidity.

The claim I am proposing, instead, is that any mental state you can imaginatively simulate is possible, not that any possible mental state can be imaginatively simulated. My claim holds up because, basically, it's tautological. To imaginatively simulate a mental state, as we saw in chapter 2, is to produce it without normal perceptual inputs or behavioral outputs. And obviously if you can produce a mental state, it is possible.

But the possible mental states disclosed by simulative imagination might tell us nothing about the world, but only about what mental states are possible for those listening to stories. Even if I can produce a novel — to me — mental state as I simulate the point of view of an evil character, thereby demonstrating to myself that such a mental state is possible, what guarantee do I have that this possibility reveals anything about other evil persons and their mental states? The revelation is negligible. I have discovered, only, that *I* can feel or perceive or will in a certain way.

Perhaps that's enough. If *The Kindly Ones* can reveal nothing but the possibility in me of certain mental states consistent with being a Nazi, that is already far from a negligible revelation. It's an awful and chastening discovery. With Aristophanes' Euripides, I can genuinely affirm that it teaches me "to expect the worst [of myself] and face reality in the round."

One of the oldest and certainly the most pervasive metaphors for art is the mirror. Aesthetic theories of *mimesis* expound upon the way art mirrors the world. But in the case of evil stories, the mirror lenses of story work not just like a microscope or telescope or periscope, extending and enhancing our vision of the world, but like the most mundane and frightening of

mirrors, the mirror on the wall that shows us to ourselves. If Odysseus, tied to the mast, learned

nothing else from the siren's song, he learned something about himself. Perhaps that is enough.

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Chapter Nine

Conclusion

In this book, I have attempted to give some reasons why we might imitate Odysseus tied to the mast. When urged to stop up our ears with beeswax against the siren-song of evil stories, I have argued that we can counter the best reasons for such abstention with satisfactory rebuttals: the most defensible form of response moralism — role-centered response moralism — not only fails to condemn the auditing of evil stories, but might entail an occasional duty to audit them; while some virtuous people find their imaginations resistant to evil stories, it is inadvisable to assume that unresistance signifies vice, or that virtue requires resistance; understanding an evil person through their story does not lead inexorably to justifying or excusing them, and where it leads to forgiving them, that may be a moral opportunity rather than a moral danger; and, finally, the enjoyment which might attend auditing an evil story does not undercut one's moral standing to condemn evil actions. These are, so to speak, my retorts to Circe and all such cautioners against siren songs. I have also speculated that there are positive reasons to listen to the sirens: listening might provide not just illicit pleasure, but moral opportunities to think more deeply about our own moral commitments, to understand the evil persons about whom evil stories are told, and to look into a mirror that reveals our own potential to be evil.

But I have been consciously very narrow in the *type* of siren song I have considered. What I have called evil stories present one very specific danger by encouraging us to simulate evil points of view. What about other potentially morally dangerous kinds of stories? What about, for

example, the problem of so-called poetic justice? Is there danger in auditing stories where immoral acts are met with happy outcomes and moral acts with unhappy outcomes? And what about sentimental or didactic stories, whose saccharine or off-putting demonstrations in favor of morality can have the paradoxical effect of making us desire to be immoral? The subtitle of this book should be taken very seriously: it is a *study in* the ethics of audition, not a complete or systematic account of the ethics of audition.

Nonetheless, I have tried to bring some order or systematization to the major ethical objections to auditing evil stories, as I have found them in the philosophical literature, attempting to sketch an answer to each; and I have tried to render Odysseus at least a plausible exemplar.

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