

# Narrative Fictions, rival realities and ethics

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**Abstract:** There are two main ways that narrative fictions have been said to contribute to ethics: by vehiculating ethical «truths» and by extending natural empathetic abilities. In the present paper, I examine both and find them wanting. I defend the view that, rather than vehiculating general ethical truths, fictions, by presenting individuals in specific social situations, acting and deciding how to act, allow readers to flesh out thick ethical concepts and lead them to less self-righteous ethical judgment.

“The chief end of history, as also of poetry, should be to teach prudence and virtue by examples, and then to display vice in such a way as to create aversion to it and to prompt man to avoid it, or serve towards that end” (Leibniz, *Theodicy*)

«It is not true that philosophy itself can answer [the question of how one should live]. (...) There are other books that bear on the question—almost all books, come to that, which are any good and which are concerned with human life at all» (Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*)

## 1. Introduction

On the face of it, fiction seems to be the worst possible candidate for vehiculating knowledge. It is, after all, not a description of reality, subject to the sanction of truth or falsity, but rather, in James Wood’s (2008, 49) apt words, the creation of a «rival reality», the word *rival* clearly indicating its distance to the world we live in. Nevertheless, I will argue that (some) narrative fictions may make contributions to knowledge, notably to ethical knowledge. More specifically, I want to say that it can do it in two different and complementary ways:

- by forming and modifying ethical opinions;
- and by being a natural experimental ground for how ethical opinions are formed and modified.

Historically, there have been two main approaches to the value of artworks and both are well-represented in contemporary aesthetics:

- *instrumentalism*, according to which artworks, notably literary artworks, have a pedagogic (ethic, political) function, and which links aesthetic value to the existence and success of that pedagogic function;
- *autonomism*, according to which art is its own end, and can only aim at promoting and enhancing the specifically aesthetic experiences that it triggers.

It is, obviously, only instrumentalism that I will pursue here, though I will have little to say about the link between the supposed «pedagogic» function of narrative fiction and its aesthetic value.

The idea that the function of narrative fiction (understood loosely as encompassing poetry, drama, film, etc.) is to vehiculate ethical truths is anything but new. It goes back to classic antiquity<sup>1</sup> and has found a nice formulation in Sir Philip Sidney’s *The Defense of Poesy*: «No learning is so good as that which

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<sup>1</sup> Model-based Aristotelian ethics may be seen as a tacit endorsement of this idea and Horace (*Poetical Art*) said that poetry must both give pleasure and instruct and the most commonly endorsed interpretation of that second task is that it should teach virtue.

teacheth and moveth to virtue and (...) none can both teach and move thereto so much as poesy» (1909-1914, 62). This view has been largely dominant in contemporary aesthetics<sup>2</sup>.

There are two main questions regarding this view of narrative fiction as a provider of ethical knowledge. The first has to do with whether it is correct (i.e., does narrative fiction really fulfill that function?); the second is, if it does, how exactly does it work?

In the present paper, I will try to answer these two questions. I will first examine the three main hypotheses that have been proposed: that narrative fiction contributes to ethical knowledge by delivering ethical truths; by improving natural empathetic abilities; by enabling people to «know themselves». I will discuss them and show them to be wanting. I will finally propose my own solution: fiction can indeed contribute to ethical knowledge by giving specific content to general principles through fleshing out thick ethical concepts; and it also contributes to ethical knowledge by suitably «weakening» general ethical principles, making them more context-dependent than absolute.

## ***2. Ways in which literary fictions could bring ethical knowledge***

Three main views on the ways in which literary fictions contribute to ethical knowledge emerge from the literature:

- literary fictions bring knowledge by vehiculating ethical truths;
- literary fictions enhance our ethical sensibilities and our knowledge of ourselves by improving our natural aptitudes for empathy.
- literary fictions allow us to know ourselves by permitting us to identify with characters in specific plights and to relate to the story on a personal basis.

Let us call the first the *pedagogic view*, the second the *empathetic view*, and the third the *therapeutic view*. Clearly, they are not exclusive of one another, but rather (at least potentially) complementary. I will discuss them in turn, before indicating how they might be combined.

### **2.1. Literary fiction as a provider of ethical truths**

As said above (see section 1), it is generally recognized that literary fiction vehiculates ethical truths. However, this intuition has proved surprisingly difficult to articulate explicitly. A potential approach would be to differentiate between the role of fiction in childhood and its role in adulthood. Regarding the first, and given the by now fairly widespread view (see, e.g., Hauser 2006) that human morality rests on an innate basis that is given specific contents by culture, it seems indeed fairly reasonable to suppose that this content is supplied in part by the fictions to which the child is exposed. Thus, Hinde's (2007, 20) says, «parental influences are not the result of their [the parents'] praise and admonition, but are purveyed also by their style of behaviour, and by the cultural myths and stories that they make available for their children». If this view is right, fiction would supply children with a moral cultural content to complement their innate moral sense. Be that as it may, it seems fairly insufficient to justify the claim that fiction is a provider of moral truths in general, as the consumption of fiction hardly stops with childhood.

So what do adults draw out of fiction? Can fiction really be said to provide them with ethical truths? A problem should be obvious: if fiction vehiculates ethical truths to children, these ethical truths will seem trivial to adults who, after all, have already learnt them. And, indeed, triviality hovers dangerously over the notion that fiction vehiculates truths, as illustrated by the following quotation: «In fact, under Daisy's direction, Henry has read the whole of *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*, two acknowledged masterpieces. At the cost of slowing his mental processes and many hours of his valuable time, he committed himself to the shifting intricacies of these sophisticated fairy stories. What did he grasp, after all? *That adultery is understandable but wrong, that nineteenth century women had a hard time of it, that Moscow*

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<sup>2</sup>As the number of papers published on the subject in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* shows.

and the Russian countryside and provincial France were once just so' (McEwan 2005, 66-67. My emphasis)<sup>3</sup>. However, the view that fiction can bring ethical knowledge has been defended by Carroll (2002) in a well-known paper.

## 2.2. Carroll's defence of fiction as a provider of ethical knowledge

The view that fiction can be a provider of ethical knowledge has met with three standard objections (see Carroll 2002):

- the *banality* argument: if literature vehiculates ethical knowledge, it is, more often than not, truisms that it vehiculates;
- the *no-evidence* argument: what literature transmits does not belong to the realm of knowledge;
- the *no-argument* argument: a literary text is not an argument.

Carroll (2002) notes that these philosophical reproaches seem ill-based given the widespread use of narrative fictions (e.g., thought experiments, examples, counter-examples, etc.) in philosophy. Yet, these arguments are not applied to the philosophical use of narrative fictions, but only to narrative fictions outside of philosophy (and presumably outside of science) despite the fact that, if they apply at all, they should apply all over the fictional board. Let us call Carroll's counter-argument the *unfairness argument*. Though it is valid in itself, it should be noted that it does not, as such, contradict any of the three arguments above, but merely brands them as unfair if selectively applied to literary fictions (narrative fictions outside philosophy and science) as opposed to philosophical fictions (fictions used in philosophy and science).

For the unfairness argument to work as a rebuttal of the three arguments against literary fictions above, two conditions must be met:

- literary fictions must be sufficiently similar to philosophical fictions in the relevant aspects;
- none of the arguments against literary fictions can apply to philosophical fictions.

In his paper, Carroll largely concentrates on the first condition<sup>4</sup>. Regarding the second, it seems indeed clear that none of these arguments against literary fictions applies to philosophical fictions:

- in most cases, philosophical fictions aim at destroying intuitions and honing conceptual knowledge: so when they are successful, they are clearly not subject to the banality argument;
- the second, no-evidence argument does not apply to philosophical fictions (a point made by Carroll in his paper), because philosophical fictions have no truck with empirical knowledge, but aim at conceptual knowledge. They are thus not presented as evidence, in any reasonable sense of the word<sup>5</sup>. It should be noted that if Carroll is correct here, this argument might apply all across the board, given that literary fictions are certainly not usually presented as any kind of empirical evidence, either;
- finally, it is absolutely clear that philosophical fictions are arguments in the sense that they are presented as premises towards a specific conclusion. However, as Carroll rightly notes, they are maieutic, more than deductive, leaving the reader to derive the conclusion as the end-term of his or her own thought processes<sup>6</sup>.

So the main burden of the proof of the ability of literary fictions to bring knowledge falls on the first condition: how similar are literary and philosophical fictions?

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<sup>3</sup> In McEwan's novel, Henry is a brilliant neuro-surgeon, and Daisy, his daughter, is a poetess. As one can guess from the quotation, Henry is presumably better at neuro-surgery than at novel reading.

<sup>4</sup> Indeed, his paper is almost entirely devoted to showing the similarities between literary and philosophical fictions.

<sup>5</sup> This is also *prima facie* a rebuke to the idea that fiction, because it is not a description of reality, has no truck with knowledge. Not being evidence is not, in and of itself, an obstacle.

<sup>6</sup> Again, this also seems true of most literary fiction.

Carroll takes all three arguments, the banality argument, the no-evidence argument, and the no-argument argument and examines the claim that literary fictions are different from philosophical fictions on the specific point on which each argument rests.

Beginning with the triviality argument, Carroll's reply is two-pronged. On the one hand, he acknowledges the triviality of the truths vehiculated by literary fictions, but argues that this goes against "the claim that art and literature *educate* (...), not the claim that they may communicate general truths" (Carroll 2002, 4. His emphasis). The idea is that education is based on the transmission of new and unknown truths<sup>7</sup>. So, the fact that literary fictions usually only convey truisms speaks against their ability to educate, but not against their ability to convey truths. What is more, though the truths that literary fictions convey may seem trivial to moral philosophers, this does not mean that they seem so to lay people, who are not as aware of moral truths as are philosophers. Though valid in itself, this seems rather a poor defense of literary fiction, in as much as it defends its claim to truth by renouncing its claim to (philosophical) relevance. In addition, it is not clear that such truths only appear trivial to philosophers (see McEwan's quotation in section 2.1. above).

Regarding the no-evidence argument, as we saw above, Carroll gives a general argument against it, which covers both philosophical and narrative fictions, to the effect that if the aim is to forward conceptual honing, the notion of evidence, which has to do with empirical knowledge, is just not relevant. One can add that it is not clear that it is possible to propound the banality and the no-evidence argument simultaneously. If literary fictions do deliver (trivial) truths (as claimed by the banality argument), this, in and of itself, goes a long way to discount the no-evidence argument (unless *evidence* is restricted, as proposed by Carroll, to *empirical evidence*).

Assuming that Carroll is right about the notion that literary fictions enhance conceptual knowledge, this is certainly enough to defend literary fiction against the banality argument, but is it enough to defend it against the no-argument argument? It is here, I think, that Carroll's argumentation flounders: what makes philosophical fictions arguments is the fact that they aim at convincing the reader to modify his or her extant concepts in the direction intended by the writer. In other words, philosophical fictions are *intended* as arguments and consciously *designed* to reach a determinate argumentative target. Neither is the case in literary fictions and, indeed, quite a few writers (e.g. Flaubert) have explicitly repudiated this view of their work. Carroll's main justification for his claim seems to be that some literary fictions can be and have been used in ethical discussions in philosophy<sup>8</sup>. However, being used in an argument and being an argument are not exactly the same thing, and it is not clear that the potential use of literary fictions in philosophical arguments is enough to deflate the no-argument argument.

What is more, though it may be true that some literary fictions may enhance ethical knowledge at the conceptual level, Carroll fails to show that this the case in his own example of *Howard's end*. As Carroll notes, in it, Forster describes the interaction between the Schlegals (who collectively embody imagination) and the Wilcoxes (who collectively embody practicality and common sense). According to Carroll (2002, 12), «The central problematic of the novel is the appropriate coordination of the virtues of the imagination and of practicality. To pursue this question, the novel parades before us a series of characters who instantiate these virtues in varying degrees<sup>9</sup>, inviting us to compare and contrast these instantiations—to determine whether, for example, the characters possess the virtues of imagination and practicality in appropriate or defective ways— and to reflect upon which manner of connecting these traits adds up to what we would be willing to call a suitably complete and virtuous way of living.» From the discussion that follows, it turns out that Forster's novel should lead us to the conclusion that a balance between imagination and practicality is the road to virtue, a fairly Aristotelian conclusion, which does not seem exactly earth-shattering (it's well on its way to triviality), nor does it precisely amount to any conceptual honing or conceptual change. So, it seems that even the examples on which

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<sup>7</sup> Clearly, the triviality argument depends on the audience. Truths that seem trivial to a philosopher or to an adult will not seem so to a child (see above section 2.1 on the pedagogical use of fiction).

<sup>8</sup> For instance, McGinn (1997) uses *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* and *Frankenstein* as examples in his philosophical (ethic) arguments.

<sup>9</sup>The «wheel of virtue».

Carroll relies do not exactly bring him what he needs in his argumentation. And, indeed, if this was all there is to Forster's novel, one would tend to follow Henry's opinion and wonder why one should endure «the cost of slowing [one's] mental processes and many hours of [one's] valuable time» to read «sophisticated fairy stories».

Here it may be appropriate to go back to the idea that fiction is pedagogic for children. There is something suggestive in Hinde's quotation above (see section 2.1). If fictions fulfill their pedagogic function by delivering «truths», why should they work better than «admonitions»? Indeed, why should they be needed in addition to admonitions? More generally, why should they be needed in addition to real examples (the parents' behavior, also mentioned by Hinde) that presumably support these admonitions? Finally, fictions seem rather cumbersome means of transmitting such truths. So what makes stories, fictional narratives, more efficient than admonitions? And is this quality of fiction what, after all, also makes fictions relevant for adults?

### **2.3. The empathetic view of fiction**

Basically, the empathetic view of fiction tries to answer all of the questions above in one sweep. The main idea is that fictions present us with characters embedded in social universes where some at least of their decisions will be ethical in the sense that they will have implications for other people. By making known to the reader the reasons why the different characters act as they do (for instance, through represented speech and thought), the author makes it possible for him or her to identify with one character or another and, basically, to share in (empathize with) that character's feelings and emotions. This emotional involvement is what is specific to fiction because, and this is where fiction differs from non-fictional «examples», fiction gives us a privileged access to others' thoughts and feelings as if they were our own. And it explains why fiction plays a specific role in the continuous development of ethical knowledge.

The situations fictions present us with are fairly varied and different and may well be situations that we would have little chance to face in reality. Again, the characters with whom we empathize may be very different from ourselves, in terms of gender, culture, profession, abilities, convictions, etc. By allowing us to empathize with them, fictions lead us to the recognition that they are just as worthy of consideration as we and members of our own social groups are and change our attitudes toward them. Thus fiction will make us better empathizers and, or so the story goes, this makes us better in a moral sense, the enhancement of our empathizing abilities leading us to more charitable and altruistic behavior toward others.

Here, again, this view has also been defended (by Hutto 2008) for children. Hutto claims that fiction is the major way in which children acquire theory of mind (the ability to explain<sup>10</sup> others' behavior through the attribution of mental states to them), both because it can supply specific content to the mental states attributed and because it triggers emotional empathy. As theory of mind can reasonably be supposed to be a component of ethical abilities (see Hauser 2006), this supports the view that fiction is instrumental in the development of ethics.

### **2.4. The therapeutic view: narrative fiction as a means to «knowing thyself»**

The empathetic view of fiction has a significantly different variant: the idea that fiction, because it encourages empathy, has a therapeutic value. Interestingly, this view has been proposed from two apparently opposite sides of the fiction continuum: from the high-brow side (see Edmundson 2004) and from the low- or middle-brow side (see Farr and Harker 2008, on the Oprah Winfrey Book Club). While Edmundson both recommends a humanities education and advocates a specific model of teaching<sup>11</sup>, Winfrey encourages her audience to relate to the book under discussion on a personal and

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<sup>10</sup> One would normally say «the ability to predict and explain», but Hutto explicitly restricts theory of mind to explanation.

<sup>11</sup> Which might be described as non-distanciated: no distance (by way of «theory» for instance) between the text and the class, including the teacher; and no distance inside the class, the students being encouraged to contribute, on an equal basis, to the discussion of the text.

individual basis. Both meet, if not on their rather widely different choice of texts, on focusing text discussions on the personal relevance of the text to the reader. The outcome of this process is, however, subtly different, in that, for Edmundson, it is clearly aimed at the Socratic injunction («Know thyself»), while for Winfrey, it is the similarities between the situation the character is in and the personal lives of the (carefully chosen) guests of their show that will allow those guests to make sense of their own stories. In both cases, however, it might be argued that the main idea is that, in pinpointing how the book is relevant to him or her at an individual level, the reader will be able to «change his or her life» (or, possibly more modestly, his or her worldview).

The first thing to note is that, given both Edmundson's and Winfrey's emphasis on discussion, it is not entirely clear whether it is fiction or literature as such, rather than the discussion itself that is supposed to be the central factor. If it is the discussion, the specific contribution of the book or fiction is a moot point.

Be that as it may, the empathetic view of fiction – of which the therapeutic view is a mere variant – has met with criticism centering on the hypothetical link that empathy would establish between fiction and morality.

## 2.5. The criticism against the empathetic view

Keen (2007) has built a very strong charge against the empathetic view of fiction. Indeed, though her challenge is explicitly directed against the empathetic view, it could be construed much more generally as the view that fiction is causally inert as far as moral action is concerned. According to Keen, there is no strong or incontrovertible evidence that readers act in a more moral way than do non-readers, and this is enough to discredit the empathetic view of fiction.

It is important here to emphasize that there are three claims that could be the targets of Keen's fire:

1. Literature triggers empathy.
2. Empathy leads to moral decision.
3. Moral decision leads to moral action.

Basically, Keen accepts claim 1, based on Hogan's (2003) work on narrative universals, in which he conclusively shows that the sharing of emotions is a major cross-cultural component of narrative fiction. What Keen seems mostly concerned with is claim 2, that empathy leads to moral decision, while she accepts claim 3. Indeed, she partly grounds her criticism of claim 2 on the non-superiority of readers over non-readers as far as moral action is concerned. Additionally, her second criticism of claim 2 –or rather her explanation of why claim 2 does not hold– is to the effect that the empathy promoted by fiction is not of the right kind: it is «cheap» in the sense that it is non-costly and, as such, does not lead to moral decision. Finally, it is non-costly because it concerns fictional characters. So it is not necessarily empathy as such that is morally inert, but the specific kind of empathy promoted by fiction.

Though Keen does not discuss the make-believe theory of fiction (see Walton 1993), or its pretence variant (see Curie and Ravenscroft 2003, Currie 2005, 2008), it is tempting to see her distrust of fictional empathy as somehow linked to the idea that the emotions involved are somewhat less authentic or less worthy than they would be in non-fictional empathy.

The first objection one can make against Keen's argumentation is the fairly obvious one that the fact that readers have not been proved to be more moral than non-readers does not show that they are not. An absence of proof is not the proof of an absence. Though it should make people more cautious in their claims, it is not in itself enough to contradict the empathetic view of fiction. Another, potentially more devastating criticism of Keen's work is to the effect that, in looking at moral *action*, rather than, for instance, moral convictions, she may be mistaken. This is, of course, because she accepts claim 3 and claim 3 is dubious for at least two reasons. First of all, akrasia shows that moral decision does not always lead to moral action. Second, moral action may well depend more on the situation an individual

finds him- or herself in, than on his or her previous moral decisions<sup>12</sup> (see Ross and Nisbett 1991/2011, Zimbardo 2008). Thus, moral action may not be a good guide to the moral relevance of fiction, which may be more easily assessed by considering moral judgment.

So Keen's attack does not reach its target: it does not show the empathetic view of fiction to be false. But there is nevertheless something disturbingly simple in the empathetic view of fiction with its simple causal claim between fiction and empathy, between empathy and moral decision, and between moral decision and moral action. Even if the last and decidedly fragile link is discarded, it is not clear that *moral decision* is the right place for the articulation of fiction and moral knowledge, just as it is doubtful that «ethical truths» would be. A new, and maybe radically different, outlook should be proposed.

### ***3. The link between fiction and moral knowledge***

As we have seen, regarding the link between fiction and moral knowledge, two candidates have been proposed: ethical truths and moral decisions. It is not entirely clear what either are, though one may think of ethical truths as general principles (e.g., «Adultery is wrong») and of moral decisions as linked to action (e.g., «If I see a beggar, I will give him/her some money»). Both of these points of articulation between fiction and moral knowledge seem based on the idea that fiction delivers general messages (e.g., «Adultery is wrong», «One should give money to beggars»). Apart from the fact that so-called moral decisions do not seem to have a decisive edge on so-called moral truths as far as triviality is concerned, the very generality of these «messages» clashes with what is, after all, one of the hallmarks of narrative fiction, i.e. the fact that it is concerned with telling specific stories, involving specific individuals in specific situations. Indeed, this is what makes Henry's view of *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary* so comically inane: it makes no sense to reduce both to their common denominator of adultery and suicide, because this is not the right way to use fiction.

Let us take for granted that fiction is indeed concerned with the specific and that this makes it a poor medium for the generation of general principles. What does this characteristic of fiction make it good at? In the rest of this paper, I will argue that fiction, far from vehiculating general principles, does two rather different, but complementary things:

- it gives specific contents to general principles by fleshing out thick ethical concepts<sup>13</sup>;
- sometimes, it shows that a general principle should be relaxed.

Though these two contributions of fiction to ethical knowledge can be separated, it should be clear that any fiction may in fact do both at the same time, because fiction is a good means of representing ethical dilemmas.

#### **3.1. Ethical conflict**

Most discussions around fiction and its links to ethics are centered around general «messages» as noted above. As indicated above, this may in fact be a basically erroneous way of looking at the question, because fiction is, if anything, hooked on particulars: specific characters, situations, etc. However, given that fiction represents individuals thinking and acting, more often than not deciding on a specific course of action, in social settings, it is well placed to make tangible, not so much ethical general principles, but the fact that, in a given situation, several contradictory ethical principles may apply, leading to ethical conflict. Incidentally, this is also where ethics is tangible in everyday life: not in the fact that any situation will mandate the application of a single absolute ethical principle (despite Kant's (in)famous lying example), but in the fact that, fairly often, we find ourselves in situations where incompatible ethical principles might apply and we have to decide which one to act on. Fiction is ripe with such situations: should Anna Karenina continue to live what is in effect of life of lie with her unloved

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<sup>12</sup> This, indeed, is why the venerable notion of *character* (in the psychological sense) has been partly discredited in recent times (for an interesting discussion, see Goldie 2003-2004, chapter 3).

<sup>13</sup> And this comes back, of course, to Carroll's (2002) suggestion, though I will articulate the view that fiction can help us flesh out our ethical concepts slightly differently.

husband or should she commit adultery with Vronsky, whom she loves? Should she leave Karenina and go to Vronsky when it means abandoning her young son? Should la Sanseverina have sex with the disgusting and despotic Ranuce-Ernest IV, Prince of Parma, to save her beloved nephew's, FabricedelDongo, life? Should Pip be grateful to the criminal Magwitch and help him escape a second time? Should Hamlet kill his uncle to revenge his father's death? and so on and so forth...

There seems to be no end to the cases of moral conflict depicted in fiction and I will try to defend the idea that it is there, rather than in trivial general messages, that fiction may be relevant to philosophy, and more specifically to ethics.

### 3.2. Thick concepts and «world-guidedness»

In *Ethics and the limits of philosophy*, Bernard Williams remarks that when we try to find our ethical way in the social world, it will be a determinate social world and that, there, thin or abstract concepts (such as «right» or «wrong») are no help. They do not provide us with what Williams calls *world-guidedness*, directions on how to act in specific social situations. This kind of guidance can only be provided by «thick» concepts (such as «courageous», «cowardly», «loyal», «disloyal», etc.)<sup>14</sup>. This is where fiction comes into play on my view. It helps give content to those thick concepts, first in fairly uncontroversial ways in strongly culturally constrained fictions, such as fairy tales and myths and this makes them relevant to ethical development in childhood. More interestingly, less culturally constrained fictions, for instance novels, help flesh out thick concepts by showing that, in some cases, a given thick concept, «courageous» for instance, may in fact be given two highly different interpretations and that the choice is not so much on which interpretation is the «right» one, but on how one will choose, on an individual basis, how to act in a given situation. This, obviously, is where ethical conflict comes in.

The fleshing-out of the thick concepts in fictions that basically follow culturally endorsed ethical precepts does not seem in need of much explanation. Readers are encouraged to identify with a «good» character and to distance themselves emotionally from «bad» character(s). The good character exemplifies through his/her actions and decisions a given thick concept, such as «courage», «abnegation», «loyalty», etc. The reader is thereby apprised of what it is to be courageous, to show abnegation, etc. in his/her culture.

The interesting question lies more in fictions that present their readers with cases of moral conflicts regarding ethical concepts. Should Anna decide to lie to Karenina by living with him as his loving wife, when she does not love him<sup>15</sup> or should she lie to him over her unfaithfulness with Vronsky? Are both acts equally lies? Is one of those lies more acceptable than the other and why?

One interesting point is that such conflicts over thick concepts and their application are clearly an occasion in which the very fact that the thick concept appears more problematic and ambiguous than it would intuitively be considered to be also leads to the reconsideration of general ethical principles using thin concepts. For instance, to stay with the example of *Anna Karenina*, there are two general principles that can apply: «Adultery is wrong» and «Lying is wrong». Clearly, Anna's society thought that the first one was more important than and should be given precedence over the second<sup>16</sup>. But it is not clear that this preference would be ethically correct and indeed, it might be argued that what is wrong with adultery is not so much the sex as the deception involved. And if this is so, then the two principles do indeed conflict: both living faithfully but without love and unfaithfully with Karenina

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<sup>14</sup> Williams uses the distinction between thin and thick concepts in a discussion of whether there can be a notion of objective knowledge in ethics on a par with the notion of objective knowledge in sciences (see Williams 1985/2011, chapter 8, «Knowledge, Science, Convergence»). His conclusion is that any objective knowledge in ethics would use thin concepts that have no part in world-guidedness. By contrast, thick concepts, which are central to world-guidedness, cannot be in any way part of objective knowledge in that sense. This is the basis for Williams' cultural relativism regarding thick ethical concepts. Here I will only be concerned with the idea that thick concepts provide world-guidedness, while thin concepts do not.

<sup>15</sup>Which is clearly the course of action her society would enjoin her to follow.

<sup>16</sup> Indeed, Anna is ostracized, in the end, not because she is unfaithful to her husband, but because she makes her adultery uncontroversial public knowledge by leaving him for Vronsky.

involve deception. Why should the first be better than the second? Note that «better» here is a thin concept, but that the conflict comes from the fact that the thick concept «lie» (or «deception») can be applied more widely than was initially thought.

Thus, fiction leads us to reconsider general ethical principles. No one would presumably derive, from reading *Anna Karenina*, the notion that adultery is a nice and commendable activity, but the novel might nevertheless lead us to less harsh judgments of adulterers<sup>17</sup>. That this is so raises a question however: recently, the notion of *imaginative resistance* (derived from a remark of Hume in his essay *On the standard of taste*) has been given some prominence in discussions of fiction (see Stock 2005, Stokes 2006, Walton 1994 among others). Basically, imaginative resistance lies in an asymmetry between two kinds of propositions in fiction:

- *descriptive* propositions, that describe what happens, to whom, where and when;
- *evaluative* propositions, mostly moral or ethical.

This asymmetry comes from the fact that, though we seem to have an infinite tolerance toward descriptive propositions, being ready to imagine their contents to be true in the fiction, no matter how weird they may be, we are much more cautious regarding evaluative propositions. Indeed, we do not, according to the proponents of imaginative resistance, accept as true in the fiction any evaluative proposition that comes into contradiction with our own ethical principles<sup>18</sup>.

If one takes imaginative resistance seriously, it would seem that my suggestion meets with a problem: if we are so set on our ethical positions that we are not even ready to accept contradictory propositions as *true in a fiction*, how can fiction ever modify those ethical convictions?

### 3.3. Bypassing imaginative resistance

In the same essay (*On the standard of taste*) in which Hume made the remark from which the notion of imaginative resistance emerged, he also notes (in another part of the text) that ethical principles may differ from one place or time to the next<sup>19</sup>. There seems to be a tension between the notion of imaginative resistance and the versatility of ethical beliefs: ethical beliefs seem to be both strong and unchangeable and fragile and transitory. Given that there is not much doubt that ethical beliefs do change (indeed, the sexual liberation in Western countries is an obvious example of such change), this leaves us with the possibility that imaginative resistance may have been somewhat overstated. A *prima facie* support for this view is the difficulty to find any examples of imaginative resistance in narrative fictions (this is presumably why the examples given are always invented examples). Perhaps the only convincing case of a passage in fiction giving rise to imaginative resistance is to be found in Canto IV of the *Odyssey*, in which Helen, restored to Menelas, is praised during a banquet for having left her husband and children to follow Paris, thus triggering the murderous war on Troy. The praise is given on the ground that her actions were willed by the Gods, and that she was doing the right thing in following the Gods' will<sup>20</sup>. This reasoning is obviously unacceptable to the contemporary reader who will presumably see Helen as an irresponsible hedonist, rather than as a pious woman worthy of admiration for her religious compliance.

Now, the paucity of examples of imaginative resistance could be accounted for in two opposite ways:

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<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the suppression in divorce laws of most Western countries of penalties against the «guilty» party shows that this is a domain where the general ethical principle is not thought anymore to have the absolute force that would be necessary to justify its implementation in the legal system.

<sup>18</sup> The example most commonly given is the infanticide of little girls. It is claimed that we would refuse to accept as true in the fiction a proposition such as «It is right to kill little girls», if it is not modified by a preface or postface, such as «On planet Z», or «thought Griselda», etc. The effect of such prefaces or postfaces is, of course, to transform the evaluative proposition into a descriptive proposition, making it imaginatively innocuous.

<sup>19</sup> This, by the way, is also what motivates Williams' ethical relativism.

<sup>20</sup> This example is borrowed from Dreyfus and Kelly 2001, chapter 3, who do not however discuss it relative to imaginative resistance.

- as a *reinforcement* of the notion: it is because imaginative resistance is strong that competent writers do not ask their readers to imagine as true in the fiction evaluative propositions that contradict their ethical beliefs;
- as an *indictment* of the notion: it is because the supposed asymmetry between descriptive and evaluative propositions in fiction does not in fact exist that we do not find examples of imaginative resistance; readers are as ready to imagine as true in the fiction evaluative propositions as they are to imagine as true in the fiction descriptive propositions.

This is not the place to get into a long discussion of these two interpretations of the data regarding imaginative resistance, so I will limit myself to proposing a variant of the first interpretation. I accept that imaginative resistance exists, but my view is not that competent writers avoid triggering it in their readers. Rather, competent writers, even when their agenda is to vehiculate a general ethical principle (whether it is new and thus potentially subject to imaginative resistance or well-established), will not blandly state it<sup>21</sup>. The way fiction usually works may often be to *prima facie* endorse a generally recognized ethical principle (e.g. «Adultery is wrong»), but to present the character who is flouting it as still worthy of respect and compassion, rather than as merely and plainly guilty.

Here it is interesting to go back to the two novels that Henry read on Daisy's advice, i.e., *Anna Karenina* and *Madame Bovary*. The two novels, despite their surface resemblance, are highly different in the way they portray their main characters: while Emma Bovary is a nice-looking but intellectually and morally mediocre woman, who has not much compunction in deceiving her husband, Anna Karenina is presented as a lovely, intelligent and virtuous woman, devoted to her child. Emma is ready for adultery from the start, but Anna is in fact a highly unlikely candidate for it. It is the circumstances in which she finds herself, rather than any personal weakness, that makes her an adulteress: she is married to the esteemable but boring and not very good-looking Karenina, who is more interested in his job as a civil servant than in his family, and who loves his wife but takes her for granted. Anna has affection rather than love for him at the start of the novel and there is no indication that she ever had any stronger feeling. By contrast, Emma, her head filled with the romances she read while a pupil at the convent school, deceived herself into believing that she was in love with the amiable, but silly Charles Bovary. Anna falls in love with Vronsky, who may not be entirely worthy of her love, but who is certainly more lovable than the boorish Rodolphe or the weak Leon (Emma's two successive lovers). At least he does not refuse to go away with her (indeed he presses her to do so), while Rodolphe and Leon are quite satisfied with a bourgeois adultery (Rodolphe cruelly rejects Emma's proposed elopement) of which the hapless cuckold himself is blissfully unaware. Anna faces the consequences of her act and her suicide is not due to them but to her conviction that Vronsky is falling out of love with her. Emma's suicide, on the other hand, is quite clearly a successful attempt to escape the social opprobrium not only of being an adulteress, but of going bankrupt.

Both novels might fairly be said to vehiculate, indeed to reinforce, the ethical principle according to which adultery is wrong. Both heroines die horrible deaths and both suffer. It is hardly a picture to encourage women to commit adultery. And, indeed, when Flaubert was tried in 1857 on the grounds of having written an immoral novel, his advocate, Maître Sénard, defended him as having had «a preeminently moral and religious thought that can be translated by the following words: the incitation to virtue through the horror of vice»<sup>22</sup>. While it is doubtful that Flaubert had any moral intention in writing the novel (he explicitly rejected the notion that this is a goal of literature in his letters), there is no doubt that reading *Madame Bovary* is anything but an incitation to adultery, and, indeed, Flaubert was discharged. Things are quite different with *Anna Karenina*, however. Though it is much more likely that Tolstoï had a moral agenda, and though he presumably did not endorse adultery, the moral judgment that the reader casts upon Anna is hardly a condemnation.

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<sup>21</sup> Remember that imaginative resistance is supposed to concern evaluative propositions expressing ethical principles.

<sup>22</sup> The entire French version of Maître Sénard's speech can be found at: <http://jb.guinot.pagesperso-orange.fr/pages/plaidoirie1.html>.

And this, I want to claim, is exactly how fiction works to inform our ethical thought, make our thick ethical concepts more sophisticated and our ethical judgments less self-righteous: by using our empathy for characters to pass over our ethical principles and finally make us see that living the good life may not be quite as simple as we initially thought.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Thus, both the pedagogic and the empathetic views of fiction are right, but each tells only part of the story. Not only does fiction help children learn the moral principles endorsed in their cultures, it still vehiculate such «truths» to adults. However, this is not, in and of itself, what makes it a good pedagogic tool for the development of ethics in childhood. Neither is it why we read fiction at any age. What is crucial for fiction is its ability to trigger empathy and selective identification. This is what makes it enjoyable and it is also what makes it the best pedagogical tool for leading children to internalize the ethical principles of their societies: they identify with (and hopefully emulate) the «good» characters and learn the thick ethical concepts that provide world-guidedness in their cultures.

But, further than that, empathy also explains how fiction can lead adults beyond absolute ethical principles that may too simple to provide world-guidedness to more complex and subtle thick ethical concepts and to a more enlightened and less self-righteous application of these ethical principles. While fiction may still *prima facie* endorse those principles, by triggering empathy with the characters who flout them, it leads the reader to a more balanced view of why even «good» people may act «wrongly» in some situations. And the way fiction works, through empathy as well as through the transmission of ethical principles, is of relevance to ethics.

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