

How (not) to justify ethical criticism

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As the title of my paper reveals, the question that I want to discuss is a simple one: How should we justify ethical criticism of literature? To try to answer this question may, however, seem like a strange task for two very different reasons.

First of all, we must remember that ethical criticism presupposes some kind of objective morality.¹ In other words, in order to justify ethical criticism, it would be necessary to begin by presenting an elaborate philosophical theory proving – once and for all – that certain actions and values are moral, while others are immoral. This would no doubt be an interesting way to begin, but it would also be rather ambitious, and I fear that we should never get back to the original question. I will therefore simply assume that a statement like “Hitler was evil” is both meaningful and true.

Second of all, if the validity of our basic moral intuitions is taken for granted, it appears that the rest of the job has already been done. After all, ethical criticism has been defended with great vigour by distinguished scholars such as Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum. So, what could possibly be left to add twenty-five years after the publication of Booth’s seminal book *The Company We Keep*?

In fact, I do not wish to add anything. On the contrary, there’s an argument I would like to remove. The argument goes as follows: Ethical criticism is relevant, since “*stories*,” as Booth put it “(…) are our major moral teachers.” (Booth 2001:20) Booth repeated this idea so many times that one cannot help but think that he regarded it as essential to the defence of ethical criticism. Thus, I could cite dozens

¹ By “objective morality” I refer to all views which hold that an ethical judgement can be true or false and that actions can be morally right or wrong. This is not to deny the importance of specific circumstances to moral deliberation. It may generally be wrong to kill, but right under certain conditions. Consequently, we might say that Macduff was right in killing Macbeth. The statement is true *relative* to that situation – that is, it is *objectively true* once the circumstances have been specified.

of passages where he expresses this view, but I will restrain myself and only mention a few:

(...) the ethics of criticism is more obviously of universal concern than most other "ethics". The ethical effects of engaging with narratives are felt by everyone in all times and climes, not just some special group of victims or beneficiaries. (Booth 1988:38)

(...) no one who has thought about it for long can deny that we are at least partially constructed in our most fundamental moral character by the stories we have heard, or read, or viewed, or acted out in amateur theatricals: the stories we have really listened to. (Booth 2001:18-19)

(...) when we really engage with the characters we meet and the moral choices those characters face, ethical changes occur in us, for good or ill—especially when we are young. (ibid.)

Nussbaum, too, endorses the argument, saying: "Booth and I are talking about the interaction between novel and mind (...) We do not claim that this part of one's life inevitably dominates, although we do think that if the novels are ethically good it will have a good influence, other things being equal (...)" (Nussbaum 2001:68) or to take one final example, Marshall Gregory stated in an article from 2010:

(...) with the emergence of fMRI scanners and the development of cognitive science and evolutionary psychology (...) deep arguments *and* empirical evidence about how literary art makes its impact are beginning to emerge. (...) [One] of the most exciting and significant terms in neural research and cognitive science is 'brain plasticity,' (...) Brain plasticity refers to the brain's capacity to do two things, first, to continue developing until about age twenty-five, (...) and, second – *and most significant for ethical criticism* – the brain is now known to change physical structure and functioning on the basis not merely of physical input (...) but on the basis of imaginative and hypothetical input, such as that stimulated by poetry, narratives, and story telling. (My emphasis) (Gregory 2010)

It is quite easy to see the appeal of such an argument to anyone engaged in the humanities, since it lends importance to the work of the literary critic – whose work is nowadays often considered to be of little importance. The critic is immediately assigned the noble role of protecting readers – and perhaps even society at large – against the harmful effects of immoral books; his job becomes, at least in part, that of warning against the dangers involved in reading certain works. However, it is worth noticing that this air of importance comes at a price.

It is only a small step from the idea that some books need to come with a warning to the idea that truly unethical books ought to be banned. I am, of course, well aware that the critics I have mentioned do not support censorship, but it seems to me important to emphasize two things here: Firstly, even though *they* do not condone censorship the argument with which they most commonly justify ethical criticism, will easily support those who do. And, secondly, when they have tried to explain *why* they oppose censorship, they have tended to undermine their own defence of this sort of criticism.

Take, for instance, Marshall Gregory, who writes: “Censorship is a red-herring and has no more to do with ethical criticism in any necessary way than the precious Unities had to do with good drama.” (Gregory 2005:59) He goes on to explain:

No ethical critic supposes that censorship will even or ever work, much less that it will make people virtuous. (...) [And] no ethical critic who has really thought about the complexity of the relationship between ethics and literature has such faith in the infallibility of his or her judgment that he would even want, much less attempt to exercise, the power to coerce other people to do her literary bidding. (ibid.)

If we focus on the beginning of the quotation, we might agree with Gregory: Censorship will probably not have the desired effect of making anyone anymore virtuous – but if actively removing those books that we judge to be morally corruptive, will not influence the moral character of readers, how serious can we honestly believe the consequences of reading to be? And if censoring immoral

literature will have no effect, what are the chances that ethical criticism will? Now if we turn our attention to the second part of the quotation, we may be surprised by how little confidence Gregory seems to have in the results attained by his favourite mode of criticism. It is, no doubt, true that there are morally ambiguous works, like Céline's *Journey to the End of the Night*, where it is immensely difficult to pronounce a final verdict, but what about the writings of Marquis de Sade or Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*? Are we really not in a position to say that *these* texts are thoroughly immoral? It appears that Gregory, in order not to condone censorship, is claiming that ethical criticism will never produce any actual knowledge. But what, then, is the point of doing it?

A similar argument is made by Booth, when he offers us his reason for opposing dogmatic moralizing. He writes: "The fact is that (...) each of us can draw quite diverse values from what we call the same story, depending on our age and circumstance." (Booth 1988:69) Once again this is not a very strong argument against censorship, for as Booth himself remarks "[Some works]—say the sadomasochistic novels of the Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille—will for most people in most cultures provide a highly dubious diet." (Booth 1988:59) But what is more, if we combine these two elements – the belief that ethical criticism is best defended by reference to how readers are influenced by literature, and the observation that the same book will affect different readers differently – we are, in effect, placing ethical criticism in a state of almost complete relativity, since the moral value of any book will be relative to its specific reader. Of course, there are what we might call "no brainers"; I am, for instance, fairly certain that no one will disagree, when I say that *American Psycho* is not an appropriate bed-time story for small children. But is Sartre's *Nausea* or *The Stranger* by Albert Camus good for teenagers? The answer, I believe, depends entirely on the teenager in question: Such books could wake him up or break him down, but whether they will do one or the other, we do not know, because the answer is not to be found in the literary works.

At the end of *The Company We Keep* Booth returns to the question of "(...) the obvious relativity of every ethical offering to the ethos of the *person* to whom it is

offered (...)” (Booth 1988:489). In this connection he writes: “The fact that no narrative will be good or bad for all readers in all circumstances need not hinder us in our effort to discover what is good or bad for us in our condition *here and now*.” (ibid.) I do not cite this passage in order to repeat the points, I have just made (although I must admit that I am at a loss to say who he is referring to, when he refers to “us” or how broadly or narrowly he defines “here and now”). Instead I would like to show that how we justify ethical criticism will have normative implications for our practice as critics.

First of all, if we are primarily interested in the *effects* of reading – or to use Booth’s formulation, whether certain books will be good for us or bad – our criticism will focus, not on what any literary work *means*, but on what it *does*. And, second of all, the works that it will be relevant to deal with will be those that are most likely to influence a vast number of people: say, the novels of Stephen King or Danielle Steele, the *Twilight* books or *Fifty Shades of Grey*. It is quite a curious fact that while many critics have justified ethical criticism in this way, few have bothered to analyse such works. On the contrary they have focused almost exclusively on the so-called classics – even though the classics, to quote Caleb Thomas Winchester, are books that everybody wants to have read, but nobody wants to read.

I would like to illustrate the absurdity of worrying too much about the effects of literature, by turning to a novel that has received general praise for its ability to help people; namely *The Alchemist* by Paulo Coelho. By now *The Alchemist* has sold more than 65.000.000 copies around the world, and according to The Times (I quote from the cover of my English copy), Coelho’s books: “(...) have had a life-enhancing impact on millions of people.” At first glance this story is fairly innocent: The Andalusian shepherd Santiago sleeps in an abandoned church at night and has a recurring dream about a child, who tells him that he should travel to the pyramids in Egypt in order to find a hidden treasure. A short while hereafter, he meets an old man, who convinces him that he should, indeed, go on this journey, for it is his destiny. When Santiago asks, what it means to follow one’s destiny, the old man answers:

Everyone, when they are young, knows what their destiny is. At that point in their lives, everything is clear and everything is possible.

They are not afraid to dream, and to yearn for everything they would like to see happen to them in their lives. But as time passes, a mysterious force begins to convince them that it will be impossible for them to realize their destiny. (...) To realize one's destiny is a person's only real obligation. (...) And, when you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it." (Coelho 2012:20-21)

Santiago commences his journey and when he arrives at Sahara, he joins a caravan going to Egypt. Here he befriends an Englishman, who studies alchemy. The Englishman is heading for the oasis Al-Fayoum, where he wants to meet a wise alchemist, and Santiago, too, stays in Al-Fayoum, where he meets the beautiful Arab woman Fatima, with whom he falls in love, and who falls in love with him. But the wise alchemist wants to take Santiago to the desert and find the treasure. This is Santiago's destiny, and if he does not follow his dream, he shall never be truly happy. As the alchemist says: "You must understand that love never keeps a man from pursuing his destiny. If he abandons that pursuit, it's because it wasn't true love ... the love that speaks the Language of the World." (ibid. 115) When Santiago finally reaches the pyramids he finds no treasure, but is instead ambushed by robbers. Fortunately, they quickly discover that he owns nothing, and they start a conversation. Santiago tells them why he has travelled to the pyramids, and one robber replies that dreaming is pointless: He himself has dreamt of a treasure, buried under an abandoned church in Spain. Immediately Santiago realizes that it is the very church in which he had his original dream. He therefore travels to Spain and, at his starting point, he finds the treasure. At last he can go back to Al-Fayoum and marry Fatima.²

It is here that we, in following the traditional way of justifying ethical criticism, should ask: How does this story affect the reader? Of course, once again, the answer will depend on the individual in question, but it is not unthinkable that

² As some might notice, Coelho has borrowed the plot from a story found in *One Thousand and One Nights*. The "philosophy," however, is entirely his own.

for the majority of readers it could be a source of hope. It might give them the push they need to pursue their dreams and make a better life for themselves; it may even inspire some to fight their way out of poverty, just like Santiago goes from being a poor shepherd to being a rich man. All of these consequences are possible, but are they in any way relevant to the moral value of the novel?

The answer, I believe, is no. No external consequences will alter the fact that *The Alchemist* is morally reprehensible. To see this, we merely have to ask: What is it that Santiago learns – and that we, as readers, are asked to learn – in the course of this story? At the beginning of the novel the old man says so directly: To follow one's destiny is one's only duty. No other duties count. But what, then, is the mysterious force that tries to convince us that it will be impossible to realize our destiny? Whatever the precise answer may be, this mysterious force will often manifest itself in the ethical obligations that we, as human beings, feel towards one another. A young man might fall in love, get married and have children. One day, years later, he realizes that he never dreamt of being a husband or a father. In his early youth he really wanted to be a movie star in Hollywood, and now the desire to pursue his dream resurfaces. Yet he is torn. He knows that it would be selfish of him to ask his wife to uproot her entire life, only so that he can become famous. What should he do? If we ask the implied author of *The Alchemist*, the answer is simple: He only has one duty, and that is, you will remember, to follow his destiny. Thus, he is free from any obligations regarding his wife and children. Their well-being is utterly irrelevant, and if the wife should not wish to move, he can leave all of them with a clear conscience. In that case, their love for him is not real – since real love, as the alchemist says, can never hinder a man from following his destiny.

By now it should be clear that I do not tell this story because I fear that Paulo Coelho's readers will turn into irresponsible spouses or parents. Judging by the number of positive reviews the book has received, few people notice how selfish and cynical its central message actually is. The reason for this is obvious: In general people read quite superficially. There is, in my opinion, nothing wrong with this, but if the main concern of ethical criticism is what the effects might be of reading certain books, this fact should be taken into account. Whatever the work, in the

final analysis, is revealed to mean, is of little importance. And so, we will probably have to praise *The Alchemist*, even though, morally speaking, it is abominable.

No doubt, there are people who do not care very much about the *meaning* of literature, and yet they do care immensely about its *effects*. These are the sort of people who object to a literary work, not because they believe it to advocate immorality, but because they fear that specific passages could affect readers negatively – whether the passages be too violent or too pornographic or, perhaps, too occult. Such people might well concede that ethical criticism should not focus on the meaning of texts, and that ethical critics should not waste their time on high-brow literature that hardly anyone reads. Instead, they would argue, we should focus our attention on bestsellers and try to discern whether their influence will be good or bad. At this point we must ask: Do we have any evidence that literature changes the moral outlook or the moral conduct of people to any significant degree?

Earlier I quoted Gregory for writing that empirical evidence was beginning to emerge, proving, finally, that literature does in fact influence our sense of right and wrong. I do not know what evidence he is referring to, but according to Suzanne Keen, author of *Empathy and the novel*, such evidence does not exist. This she concludes after having examined statistical research and experiments involving fMRI scanners that have been conducted so as to test the extent to which people's moral outlook is affected by what they read. Keen, furthermore, points out that: "(...) the impact of novel reading, even were it to be positively established, might well be statistically insignificant. Many more people read fiction sixty years ago than today." (Keen 2007:26) It is certainly true that we are influenced by narratives, but we should not forget that we are exposed to narratives from morning till night, whether we open our newspaper or turn on the radio or the television. In today's society literature plays a modest role, so if the relevance of ethical criticism depends on literature's ability to influence people, it is likely we would have to conclude that ethical criticism is not very relevant. In short, if we want to justify ethical criticism, we will have to do it in a different manner.

Now I have spent a good amount of time criticizing Booth, something I am never quite comfortable with, since my admiration for his work far exceeds my annoyance with his habit of worrying about the consequences of reading. I was therefore enormously pleased when, after a more careful reading of some of his articles, and especially after having finished his much-neglected book *Critical Understanding*, I found that he does indeed provide us with a much more subtle defence of ethical criticism. Perhaps I should also mention the other reason why I was so pleased; namely that this other defence came very close to the one I myself gave when I wrote my thesis. There I argued that ethical criticism is relevant for the simple reason that almost all literature considers moral questions and adhere to values, portrays certain things as worthy of our attention and others as worthless, certain actions and convictions as morally right while others as wrong. I hope you will not frown upon my self-indulgence when, for a brief moment, I will quote from my thesis:

Every text implies an appeal to be read. As soon as the text is written it implies an author, addressing a possible reader and asking for his attention. Furthermore, the author has a purpose, and the nature of the purpose will be expressed, more or less clearly, by the text. It may be as in Coelho's *The Alchemist*, as in Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* and as in Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra* to preach some kind of "truth" – or, as in George Orwell's *1984* and in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*, it may be polemical. In such cases the works do not just contain an appeal to be read; they also ask us to listen to the thoughts and views that are presented. Opponents of ethical criticism would now say that we should not criticize these views, but merely take note of them. But is this not, in fact, to disparage the appeal which the literary work itself implies? The premise that we can consider ourselves to be responsible readers – that is, readers who take the text seriously – seems to be that we accommodate this appeal, which means that we formulate our criticism as a response. This is precisely what ethical criticism does. To respect the author (the actual author as well as the one implied) involves considering the message of the work as deserving of an evaluation, even if the evaluation, in the final analysis, turns out not to be positive. (My translation) (Gøttcke 2014:51)

You may imagine my delight when, at the end of *Critical Understanding*, I encountered similar passages, like Booth's suggestion that we: "(...) view texts and

their interpretations as a kind of conversation or dialogue between a text and a reader (...)” (Booth 1979:237) and his point that: “We all share an inescapable sense that texts’ demands differ, that notions of what kind of questioning is essential or proper or appropriate will shift from text to text.” (Booth 1979:241) Or take his justification of ethical criticism:

No reader of any experience and integrity will always stop at the text’s self-proclaimed boundaries. I will no more accede to all the demands of *Mein Kampf* or *Justine* than to the demands of the con man’s text when it insistently rules out the question “Are you lying?” (...) We are thus led to two marks of the good reader or critic: reconstruction of what the text demands and recognition of the point at which violation of its demands will prove necessary (...) (Booth 1979:242)

It is remarkable how thoroughly this understanding of criticism, as a conversation between reader and text, is overshadowed in *The Company We Keep* by Booth’s focus on how we are influenced by stories. I am aware that this idea could be implied by the metaphor invoked by the title of his book; books are friends, and friends are, no doubt, people with whom we converse. However, time and time again Booth undermines this metaphor by use of another: You are what you eat, meaning of course, you are what you read. This metaphor of dietetics is apparent whenever Booth criticizes literary friends for being “unhealthy,” as when he calls the writings of Marquis de Sade and Georges Bataille a highly dubious diet.³ If we abandon this idea and stop thinking about the critic’s job as similar to that of the dietitian, we will have distanced ourselves completely from the censors of the world.

As I said before: All texts imply an appeal to be read, but not all texts ask to be taken seriously. Some authors obviously pursue more modest goals like entertaining the reader by telling funny anecdotes, like the ones found in Giovanni

³ This way of thinking is common among ethical critics. As Marshall Gregory writes: “For nutritionists, “we are what we eat” is a thumbnail way of saying that our regular diet is an important factor in our overall health. For ethical critics, a similar assumption is that readers’ regular imaginative diet—the consistent consumption of fictional images—is an important constituent of moral and ethical health (or ill health).” (Gregory 2005:57)

Boccaccio's *The Decameron*. For this reason, I believe that Booth is quite right in saying that text's demands differ and that the notion of what kind of questioning will be essential will shift from text to text. In *The Decameron*, for example, we hear the story of a woman, who deceives her husband, literally behind his back, and the implied Boccaccio surely wants us to take delight in the wit of the woman and laugh at the naivety of the husband. I am fairly certain that most of us would find this hard to do, if Boccaccio actually insisted that the story be taken seriously – if, in other words, we were asked to believe that people ought to cheat each other for their own benefit whenever possible. But preaching is not Boccaccio's business; his business is merely to entertain. As the narrative frame makes clear he knows that the world is full of sorrow and despair. He has written *The Decameron* as a refuge from the harsh realities of life, and we should enjoy it as such. Thus, only a stubborn puritan would be offended by these stories.

This leads me to the principle with which I wish to conclude my paper: The more weight the implied author puts on the values expressed by his work, the more relevant ethical criticism will be. A book may be full of Holocaust jokes, without it being morally significant, as long as it is made clear that they are meant only as jokes. However, as soon as the author demands that we laugh on the premise that Holocaust itself was funny, ethical criticism becomes relevant. To decide when an author, as we say, crosses the line, will often be harder to do in practice than in theory. But, at least, we are in a position to justify doing it.

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