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The Heart of What Matters: The Role for Literature in Moral
Philosophy (review)

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(Review)

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***The Heart of What Matters: The Role for Literature in Moral Philosophy.* By Anthony Cunningham. Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press. 2001. x, 296 pp. Cloth, \$60.00; paper, \$24.95.**

This study offers a lucid critique of the tendency of moral philosophy—at least the Kantian variety—to dismiss the constitutive role emotions and intimate relationships play in our moral lives. Extending this critique, Anthony Cunningham explores how literature can provide a valuable corrective to the philosophical penchant for theoretical absolutes. After an opening section that details how Kantian ethics severely limit any positive role for the emotions, Cunningham treats works of fiction as occasions for elaborating on this central theme. Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of the Day* is enlisted to make the anti-Stoic argument that passions can facilitate moral perception and growth; Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is used to argue that moral excellence does not consist of Kant's rational freedom from vulnerability and conflict but that tragic conflicts and vulnerabilities are often an inevitable result of "what is best and most beautiful about us"—our emotional commitments to others (180); and finally, Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Seraph on the Suwanee* are read as testaments to both the positive and destructive potential of romantic love.

Despite its strengths, Cunningham's study has significant limitations. First, his titular reference to "the role for literature in moral philosophy" is misleading. Cunningham does not pretend to a comprehensive consideration of the ethical force of literature: he does not engage influential scholarship such as Wayne Booth's work on the ethics of fiction or Kenneth Burke's analyses of literature as "equipment for living." Even Martha Nussbaum, to whom Cunningham seems most indebted, receives only the briefest nod. Cunningham's avowedly Aristotelian approach stresses that "[t]he right kind of novel—one with detailed character portraits of particular people embroiled in complex, meaningful situations—can help us refine our moral vision by giving us a studied opportunity to practice seeing and appreciating diverse ethical loves" (84–85). This ability to enlist readers' emotions and expand their moral perceptions is indeed one of literature's benefits, yet it represents only one type of literature and reading. What about the ethical power of satire, for instance, or the experiences readers undergo with texts whose literariness lies in subverting readerly and generic expectations? Cunningham does not acknowledge how such considerations impact even his proscribed focus on "realistic" fiction. Despite professions to the contrary, he treats novels too much as if they were interchangeable with nonfiction accounts, valuable for the verisimilitude with which they represent the complexity of our moral lives. Literature can offer such complexity, yet if it provides us with nothing that we couldn't glean from other "thick" descriptions of people's moral lives (sociological studies or journalism, for example), then Cunningham's argument appears less a case for literature than for any account that resists reductive theorizing.

Cunningham deflects anticipated criticisms of his arguably “naïve” approach to literature with a defiant “So what?” (90), asserting that “[t]his is an exercise in moral philosophy and not something else” (91)—an odd disclaimer, considering that he elsewhere aspires to a “marriage of literature and philosophy” (87). Unfortunately, sensitivity to the formal complexities of literary texts does matter for Cunningham’s project. This is evident in his discussion of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, where his reading of the novel as a celebration of true love minimizes the troubling aspects of Janie and Tea Cake’s relationship—an oversight that is in part a failure to see how Hurston is playing off novelistic conventions, joining the long list of women writers who have subverted the happy romantic ending.

Second, if *literature* is a circumscribed term in the book, so ultimately is *moral philosophy*, which is represented by Kantian ethics—a choice Cunningham justifies on the practical grounds of scope and the status of Kantian thought as “the most prominent ethical theory” (4). While this choice makes for a dramatic contrast between rationalistic philosophy and sympathetically empiricist literature, the opposition is also misleading. Other schools of moral philosophy—utilitarian, pragmatist, poststructuralist, or feminist—would address many of the shortcomings Cunningham finds in Kantian ethics. A study that considered the relation between literature and moral philosophy more broadly would better fulfill the promise of Cunningham’s title.

These shortcomings, however, should not obscure the book’s merits, which emerge when Cunningham departs from literature and sticks to moral philosophy. Arguing in admirably jargon-free prose and deploying examples from everyday life more effectively than from literature, Cunningham offers a cogent defense of the role emotions play in our ethical commitments.

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