Moral fiction strives for the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Yet these are not things “that exist in the way llamas do, but values which exist when embodied and, furthermore, recognized as embodied” (133). Gardner defines these values metaphorically, elliptically, negatively. Let us look at the Good and the True in particular — the Beautiful is insufficiently developed in Gardner’s book and he seems to take for granted that we know precisely what he means by it.

To start with the Good, it “cannot be approached except by imagination because our understanding of it arises out of our experience of an infinite number of particular situations” (140). Gardner’s concern is with promoting the Good through fiction. He takes as his model the relationships between adults that we might call healthy: “Healthy relationships between adults are characterized by sympathy and trust and are supported on both sides by maturity” (136). Gardner is implying, as I read it, that healthy adult relationships need not all be the exact same — but they are structured in a certain way, and this structure’s foundation is made of trust, sympathy, and other commonsensically virtuous ideas. We do not have to be aware at all times of how the structure of a relationship
determines that relationship’s development. All that is needed is for the structure to be in place, so that the relationship might blossom. If this is Gardner’s point — that certain psychological elements must be in place as conditions for a healthy relationship — then the first thing to point out is that as an illustration this is too elaborate to be particularly enlightening. Moral fiction is fiction that puts in place (or, structures) the necessary conditions for the reader to decide, on their own, to be moral. Rather than preach, it leads by example: it shows us characters struggling to make the right choice in difficult situations; it shows us characters we should wish to emulate. It is heavily metaphorical; it stands for a multiplicity of human experiences. That is one way to begin to theorize the Good: it is normative to the extent that it presents us with ways of thinking about moral issues, ways of behaving morally — by choice. The moral content of any particular text is not as important as the very fact that the text is morally structured. We will return to the idea of a moral structure soon.

The Good “presents a goal for the human condition here in this world, a conceptual abstraction of our actual experience of moments of good in human life; it is the essential subject of all literature, even of a strict imagist poem which asserts nothing but the value of seeing, but not all literature illustrates it: badly thought out literature obscures it, and
nihilistic literature perniciously denies it” (136). It is not controversial to assume, given Gardner’s pronouncements on the Good, that whatever “nihilistic literature” is, it aligns itself with evil. The implicit opposition here between good and evil places the discussion in a quasi-religious frame. Perhaps “mystical” is more appropriate, since there is an element of wonderment at the power of art peppered throughout Gardner’s text. More precisely, there seems to be a core that is totally inassimilable in great art, something we cannot symbolize — an aspect beyond what the critic or even the artist can claim about the artwork. This mystical kernel lurking within or behind the artwork, of course, must remain an enigma. It also makes the task of making sense of Gardner more difficult.

The Good in art appears to belong to the incommunicable realm of intuitions, inferences, transcendence. It informs the most intimately subjective level of experience — “deep experience,” as Gardner calls it (162) — and also reaches far beyond it, to shape more than just my experience or yours. It pulsates, shifts, but remains essentially directed at the betterment of human life. It resonates throughout the ages wearing different masks but speaking in the same voice. “The idea of an imperishable form for the Good has always been appealing, since it keeps the Good from changing with governments and hair styles; but actually we
need not invent ghosts to keep things relatively stable” (137).

The Good is stable because the predicament in which humanity finds itself does not change at a fundamental level. This is fair enough in principle, in casual conversation. It is not good enough, however, at a theoretical level. In fact it seems chimerical. It implies something removed from the human but subtly influencing it from the outside and the inside simultaneously. We can either aim for it or reject it, but its existence, to Gardner, is beyond question so long as mankind is around to grapple with it. “The Good is existential in the sense that its existence depends upon man’s” (137) — without man there is no good, but without the Good man is maladjusted, misshapen. What this amounts to is a conception of the human as inseparable from humanity’s values. This in itself is not a unique perspective, but something seems confused in the argument. The Good is enigmatic, elusive but always present, of man but not of man — what, then, is its use, except as an empty word Gardner uses to absorb any contradictions that might surface in his reasoning?

This is not necessarily to deny that there can be goodness. But the Good, as a concept, means everything and very little at the same time. It is compromised by its vagueness. The serious use to which Gardner puts the Good is unconvincing. Yet a different but related problem
surfaces here, the problem of goodness itself — not morality as an abstract category, but the vast trove of everyday situations where a fable, a metaphor, a simple anecdote can lead people to do “the right thing,” to behave in a manner we can agree is good, conducive to the betterment of their situation.

We see Gardner trying to reconcile the impulse to goodness, the will to altruism that is sometimes evident in even the most selfish person, with the seriously complicated problem of justifying any action at all on purely philosophical grounds. In lived experience we encounter good-natured human beings doing “bad” things, and cruel individuals being “good” or in some way helpful to their community.

Gardner the writer is caught in a complex situation, and On Moral Fiction reads like a text offered by someone whose allegiance is to practical matters, to art as a good thing according to the standards of his time and culture. There is no categorical imperative. As the many quotations I have chosen demonstrate, Gardner’s view is that we are weak but beautiful, and capable of deciphering for ourselves what a situation requires. The lack of universality here, the near-total absence of fundamental moral codes, is precisely what allows for moral fiction as an art form to claim its importance. Through the carefully chosen written word — through the novel written according to its own processes, as Gardner
would have it — the reader is able to learn to understand the author’s intentions, the protagonist’s choices, the story’s outcome. Sense, or a sense of sense, an impression of meaning, is generated in moral fiction. If this is a correct reading of Gardner’s position — that is, if in the end moral fiction helps and guides us in our daily lives but does not prescribe a mode of conduct — then, if nothing else, this is an intuitive and attractive idea. It appeals to the heart instead of reason, and it feels acceptable, at least to this reader. Sadly, Gardner’s position is immediately jeopardized by the second important force at play in the universe of moral fiction: the True.