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How fiction makes us better people: an analytic account of how fiction succeeds in being morally developmental

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Abstract

That works of fiction are morally developmental is a commonly accepted claim. However, works of fiction are epistemically dubitable. As such, any account of the morally developmental nature of fiction ought to be one on which moral development is conceived of as occurring indirectly. It is the claim of this dissertation that extant accounts of the morally developmental nature of fiction fail to do so. The positive thesis of this dissertation is that moral development can be brought about through an experience of irony. This dissertation employs Jonathan Lear's account of irony on which an experience of irony can be occasioned by bringing the subject to recognise the disparity between a concept, understood as a social pretense, and the same concept understood as a human ideal. Subjective concepts, including the moral virtues, are such that exemplifying the ideal consists in being in a constant state of coming to exemplify the ideal. The virtue of mercy is explicated in full. It is shown that mercy involves firstly, paying attention to the particulars of a wrongdoing, secondly, the dissolution of negative affective responses to wrongdoing, and thirdly, a sense of moral humility. Fiction, by virtue of its narrative and mimetic nature, is capable of inducing these three states. Furthermore, by occasioning an experience of irony, fiction succeeds in drawing the reader into a state in which she is constantly striving to exemplify mercy as a human ideal. In doing so, fiction succeeds in making the reader merciful. It does so, without directly asserting any positive claims. The account is thus not susceptible to the epistemic dubitibility objection.