

## **Fiction as a Kind of Philosophy**

Kelly James Clark

Calvin College

### Introduction

In this paper, I defend the importance of narrative to moral philosophy, in particular to moral realism. Moral realism, for the purposes of this essay, is the claim that there are moral truths independent of human beliefs, attitudes, desires and feelings.<sup>i</sup> Contemporary philosophers typically focus on discursive arguments and exclude narrative. But narrative is considerably more powerful than argument in effecting belief-change. I shall argue that through such belief-change one can attain to moral truth.<sup>ii</sup> This account is opposed to that of fellow narrativist, Richard Rorty, who denies moral realism. Since I believe the clash between realists and anti-realists resolves into a clash of intuitions, I don't propose to offer a convincing argument in favor of moral realism. Instead, like Rorty I will draw a word-picture, which stands in stark contrast to the word-picture that he draws about stories; it is my hope that the reader will find my word-picture more compelling than Rorty's word-picture. In the final section I will offer some considerations in favor of moral realism.

### Philosophy as a kind of writing

In "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida"<sup>iii</sup> Rorty contrasts the traditional, realist way to his own anti-realist way of looking at both philosophy and morality. Traditional moral philosophy, which typically assumes moral realism, holds that moral truths are discovered not made. Rorty summarizes this traditional view as follows: "Here is a way of thinking about right and wrong: the common moral

consciousness contains certain intuitions concerning equality, fairness, human dignity and the like...<sup>iv</sup> Rorty, denying the power of human intuition to grasp moral truths, rejects traditional moral philosophy. The traditionalist views philosophy as the “vertical” discovery of trans-cultural and trans-historical, perhaps eternal, moral truths. Rortian “horizontal” philosophy “is best seen as a kind of writing.”<sup>v</sup> The kind of writing Rorty has in mind eschews the insidious desire to discover ‘the truth;’ rather it contents itself with commenting on, developing, reinvigorating and reinventing previous texts. Texts, beliefs even, relate to one another, not to something beyond socio-historically conditioned human beliefs and desires--not to something “out there”-- which gives them a truth value.<sup>vi</sup> The difference between the vertical and horizontal approaches reveals Rorty’s decided anti-realism: “...it is the difference between regarding truth, goodness, and beauty as eternal objects which we try to locate and reveal, and regarding them as artifacts whose fundamental design we often have to alter.”<sup>vii</sup> There is, for Rorty, only contingent and ironic human language, dialogue among texts, and increasingly useful metaphors; the best one can hope for is “metaphoric redescriptions”, not insight into the nature of reality. Rorty denigrates orthodox notions of truth only to subsequently reinvent truth. Truth is, Rorty claims, “a mobile army of metaphors.”<sup>viii</sup> But, for the Rortian ironist, there is nothing “beyond” the metaphors before which they must bow down.

Rorty’s reconception of truth requires the rejection of the dichotomies enshrined in orthodox conceptions of truth. In ‘Science as solidarity’, Rorty considers and rejects the modern division of knowledge into hierarchical classes: science v. humanities, objective v. subjective, fact v. value.<sup>ix</sup> The former member of each class is, according to our culture, the more valued. Although Rorty protests that he doesn’t intend to downgrade science, he does seem to relegate it to useful fiction. And his claim that he is beyond such distinctions seems little more than the claim that humanities and science

belong in the same subjective/value boat. Since there is no non-human world to which our beliefs are accountable, human agreement is the source of 'truth'. Science is "just one cultural manifestation among others."<sup>x</sup> There is no fact, everything is fiction. Rorty affirms Derrida's claim that all writing--scientific, philosophical, moral, and fictional--is not about the world but about texts.<sup>xi</sup> Texts do not represent (metaphysical, moral, objective, factual) reality, they simply comment on previous texts. Texts (including scientific texts) are, to use a quaint phrase, fancy.

If all writing is about writing, we cannot play off our beliefs, moral or otherwise, against reality. Rorty views philosophy as a dialectical process of text commenting on text. The method of philosophy, therefore, is literary criticism. Literary criticism, a la Rorty, should not be confused with the traditional view of literature as a channel of moral or religious truth. The kind of literary criticism that Rorty espouses involves nothing more than placing books within the context of other books: "In the course of doing so, we revise our opinions of both the old and the new. Simultaneously, we revise our own moral identity by revising our own final vocabulary. Literary criticism does for ironists what the search for universal moral principles is supposed to do for metaphysicians."<sup>xii</sup>

Rorty's unflagging anti-realism is clear. Although Rorty claims that the realism/anti-realism distinction is rooted in an outmoded view of the world, it is clear that he is anti-realist in the sense defined at the beginning of this essay; that is, Rorty clearly denies that there are moral truths independent of human beliefs, attitudes, preferences or feelings. Rorty is intent on rejecting moral realism, as defined, replacing moral intuition with fiction. He writes: "Not until Kant did philosophy destroy science and theology to make room for moral faith, and not until Schiller did it seem possible that the room cleared for morality could be occupied by art."<sup>xiii</sup> Art, according to Rorty, precludes traditional, robust moral fiction which aims to put the reader in touch with belief-

independent moral reality. Rather, fiction provides the imagination with new images and reinvigorates old images of the possibilities of the human self and human society, none of which is (morally) better or worse than any other. If science is useful fiction, fiction is useful fancy.

The goal of Rorty's narrative philosophy is self-creation, to reject anyone else's description of oneself. Rorty proposes that we see our lives as poems which each person is in process of writing.<sup>xiv</sup> One must write one's poem without the consolation of rules. There are no non-human constraints on this kind of writing. Previous texts may inspire but plagiarism is forbidden. By carefully attending to (contingent and ironic) language one gives linguistic birth to one's self. Thus Rorty's insistence on the importance of narrative becomes clear.

### Philosophy of narrative

Like Rorty, I believe that narrative is important to philosophy and that narrative can be an effective means of belief-change. And, like Rorty, I believe that philosophy can profit from employing narrative. Unlike Rorty, however, I believe that narrative can help us grasp moral truth. Before we come to that, I briefly develop a philosophy of narrative, primarily of fiction. This philosophy of fiction is not the only plausible philosophy of fiction. And, although not all fiction is moral fiction, this philosophy of (moral) fiction helps explain fundamental belief-change in the sphere of the ethical. Second I will argue that our willingness to accept or reject premisses of an argument is, in large part, a function of our sentiments. The appreciation of some arguments may require the reorientation of our passions. This may require the sympathetic hearing of a story.

Fiction poses challenges both to the attentive reader's understanding of the world and to the reader's self-understanding. The challenge often comes through the depiction

of new worlds, different perspectives or novel interpretations of reality. In good fiction the challenge often comes as a surprise which startles the reader and initiates the reader's reevaluation of self and world. Fictional narratives are transformative only when the reader integrates these insights into her self-understanding and worldview. How does (or can) literary narrative exert such power? I shall rely, in the section, on some suggestive comments by the philosopher-novelist-literary critic, C. S. Lewis.<sup>xv</sup>

The power of literature lies partly in its ability to enable us to enter into the world that it creates. Lewis writes: "...it is irrelevant whether the mood expressed in a poem was truly and historically the poet's own or one that he also had imagined. What matters is his power to make us live it."<sup>xvi</sup> The narrative power to make us live it--of getting out of the limitations of our self and understanding of the world to enter into the world of the writer. But we cannot, even the most romantic among us, enter fully into the world of another. We can no longer believe that the reader's 'temporary suspension of unbelief' is possible. Nor can the reader stand naked before the text. We are too invested in our beliefs to become transparent before the text. Nonetheless, a partial suspension of disbelief is possible, as is a partial disrobing of our historico-cultural clothing. We read about cultures distant in space or time and we imagine ourselves in that culture. It is still our self--informed by the narratives of our own time and place. But we can gain at least a partial perspective (from the inside, so to speak) of what it was like to be a cowboy in 19th century America, or a woman in 18th century China, or a warrior in 8th century b.c. Greece or an alien in 24th century Alpha Centauri.

In what does the power of the story to coax us into its world consist? There is, initially, the skilful craft of the writer to write an enticing story. But the reader, in order to enter into the fictional world, must sympathetically respond to the story. Lewis suggests the following are involved in the sympathetic hearing of a story: "Good reading, though it

is not essentially an affectional or moral or intellectual activity, has something in common with all three. In love we escape from our self into one other. In the moral sphere, every act of justice or charity involves putting ourselves in the other person's place and thus transcending our own competitive particularity. In coming to understand anything we are rejecting the facts as they are for us in favour of the facts as they are. The primary impulse of each is to maintain and aggrandise himself. The secondary impulse is to go out of the self, to correct its provincialism and heal its loneliness. In love, in virtue, in the pursuit of knowledge, and in the reception of the arts, we are doing this."<sup>xvii</sup> There are, according to Lewis, affectional, moral and intellectual elements involved in the sympathetic hearing of a story. Let us consider the moral dimension.

There is as Lewis claims a subtle and not so subtle tendency in humans to favor themselves. This selfish tendency finds expression in myriad ways: gossip, for example, and self-deception, racism, ethno-centrism, elitism and jingoism. These, and countless other lies, are involved in creating the delusion that I am infinitely valuable. We are, Thomas Hobbes claims, glory-seekers: life is a race with no other good but to be foremost.

Here is a way of putting the matter in the first person. I favor those particulars which uniquely define and exalt me (my "competitive particularity"). Since I alone am the unique intersection of these particulars (and the narrative which embeds and, therefore, values them), I alone am supremely valuable. I enlist the myths and traditions which have shaped me into the service of self-glorification. This self-glorification prevents me from fully valuing others--indeed, my natural instinct is to devalue others due, perhaps, to their skin color, foreign or primitive culture, lack of education or religious convictions. We are infinitely creative in the systematic devaluation of the other.

But we are also social beings eager to be in relationship with people who love and are loved by us. In love, we rise above the glory-seeking self to seek human connection. In order to love another, therefore, I must be willing to set aside my self and put myself in the position of the other; I must view the world from the other's perspective given the other's particularities. Only thus can I know how to treat the other with love and justice. In love, I sympathetically assume the other's particularities.

Good reading embraces the human tensions of self-interest and the need to love. Here is a way of putting Lewis's point about the moral nature of reading literature. Our incessantly demanding and particular self stands in the way of understanding both our self and reality (which includes other selves). The sympathetic reading of a story involves the partial entering into the particularities of another time or place or even of another person. We can only do so if we have silenced or quieted the clanging self which clings to its particularities. Good reading is like a dying to the self. On a small scale, the self is set aside, as it sympathetically entertains another self. In some cases one imaginatively becomes another self.

The power to imaginatively and sympathetically enter into a story is exemplified in Nathan's confrontation with King David. In the narrative, David has seduced Bathsheba and arranged for the death of her husband. The prophet Nathan, seeing David's moral blindness, tells him a story which captures David's heart:

*There were two men in a certain town, one rich and the other poor. The rich man had a very large number of sheep and cattle, but the poor man had nothing except one little ewe lamb he had bought. He raised it, and it grew up with him and his children. It shared his food, drank from his cup and even slept in his arms. It was like a daughter to him. Now a traveler came to the rich man, but the rich man refrained from taking one of his own sheep or cattle to prepare a meal for the*

*traveler who had come to him. Instead, he took the ewe lamb that belonged to the poor man and prepared it for the one who had come to him. (2 Samuel 12:1-4)*

David sympathetically enters into the story, while remaining blissfully unaware of his own injustice. By temporarily setting aside his own particularities--rich, handsome, powerful king--David is enabled to enter into the story on the side of the poor man. In so doing, David sympathetically grasps the injustice in the story and he indignantly denounces it: "David burned with anger against the man and said to Nathan: 'As surely as the Lord lives, the man who did this deserves to die.'" Nathan counters: "Thou art the man." By entering into the story of the oppressed poor man, David is prepared for this new ending which enables his own moral transformation. Only when David's lusty and powerful self is set aside could he hear the cry of injustice. Going beyond the particularities of injustice in Nathan's story, David is brought to see Injustice (capital "I"); he brings the moral insight back into his own life, aware now of his own reproach and shame.

Like David, when the self is stilled, one can hear the voice of the other (in all of their particularities): the voice of the oppressed, the downtrodden, the lonely and the needy. Sympathy is not the only appropriate moral response to stories, one may also find oneself revulsed by the unjust, miserly, angry, hate-filled and racist. With revulsion (to wickedness) one may see, as perhaps David did, injustice as inhumanity; one may see that the oppressor is more dehumanized by injustice than the oppressed. This may occasion the reorientation of one's moral likes and dislikes which involves our passions or feelings as much as it does our intellect.<sup>xviii</sup>

When narrative gets the reader out of her own particulars and into another's, one may see the universal--for example, that rights extend to everyone regardless of color, race, creed or religion; that humans are intrinsically valuable; that injustice may have

short term benefits but in the long term destroys our humanity; or that the category 'human' extends to people of different color, social status, nationality or religion. Literature forces the good reader to experience the universally human through the particulars of the other.<sup>xix</sup> Not every reading of literature is so transformative; if this were so, literature professors would all be saints! But on those occasions of significant belief-changed, brought about by seeing things from new perspectives, we may be morally transformed.

### Fiction as a kind of philosophy

Here's a way to look at the psycho-dynamics of significant belief and belief change. Evidence in matters of fundamental human concern is often difficult to decipher or ambiguous. Some pieces of evidence are deemed weightier than others. But deeming is in the eye of the beholder. We must rely on our intuitions but none of us is so metaphysically astute that we can reliably intuit the evidence in, say, an argument for the existence of God, for moral absolutism or for idealism. It is difficult to see clearly the true propositions. Is it so clear, after all, that an infinite regress of finite causes is absurd, that there are universal moral truths or that sensory appearances cannot be adequately accounted for without reference to a material world? Discussions in political theory, social policy, ethics, the meaning of life, the nature of human persons, and many other issues likewise rely on crucial premises that are not universally discoverable by rational intuition. I will very briefly present the views of John Henry Newman and William James on these matters.<sup>xx</sup>

Disagreement is interminable because there is, as John Henry Newman writes, no "common measure between mind and mind." Arguments rely on premises the acceptance of which depends on the commitments of each person. Newman observes "how little

depends upon the inferential proofs, and how much upon those pre-existing beliefs and views, in which men either already agree with each other or hopelessly differ, before they begin to dispute, and which are hidden deep in our nature, or, it may be, in our personal peculiarities.”<sup>xxi</sup> Because of these conceptual uncertainties and lack of a common measure between mind and mind, we are forced to bring all that we value to bear on our assessment of the evidence. We are forced because, at least with respect to certain philosophical issues, not to decide is to decide. So we bring our whole person to bear on the assessment of the evidence. But different persons with different values will make different judgments about the relative weightings of the various bits of evidence. Evaluating evidence is person-specific. As Newman writes: “We judge for ourselves, by our own lights, and on our own principles; and our criterion of truth is not so much the manipulation of propositions, as the intellectual and moral character of the person maintaining them, and the ultimate silent effect of his arguments or conclusions upon our minds.”<sup>xxii</sup> Newman does not deny that there are arguments, indeed very good arguments for certain philosophical positions. Rather he believes that our intellectual and moral character affect our ability to see the truth of the premises and, therefore, our ability to judge rightly. Who we are determines what we are inclined to believe. Two obvious moral obstacles to perceiving the truth aright relate to the argument of the previous section; Newman claims that our perception of the fundamental premises of an argument “is enfeebled, obstructed, perverted, but allurements of sense and the supremacy of self...”<sup>xxiii</sup> Other obstacles to perceiving true beliefs are prejudice, passion and self-interest. In certain cases of significant human beliefs, seeing the truth requires moral rectitude.

William James, like Newman, holds that philosophical arguments are expressions of temperament and reason.<sup>xxiv</sup> James claims that inquiry in the humanities and social

sciences, in everyday life, and even in science unavoidably reflects our 'willing' or 'passional' nature--our temperament, needs, concerns, fears, hopes and passions. He writes: "Pretend what we may, the whole man is at work when we form our philosophical opinions. Intellect, will, taste, and passion co-operate just as the do in practical affairs."<sup>xxv</sup> We rely, fundamentally, on the way things seem to us, not on theory-free rational intuition. Every philosopher, James claims, "has taken his stand on a sort of dumb conviction that the truth must lie in one direction rather than another."<sup>xxvi</sup> We come to philosophy with our 'dumb convictions'--pre-philosophical presuppositions about the way things seem to us. And the way things seem to us is a function of both our sentiments (temperament or tastes) and reason. Our willingness to accept or reject premisses of an argument is, therefore, affected by our sentiments.

We have been discussing the psychology of believings, but for James these descriptive claims are epistemic claims because of his affirmation of what has come to be called 'the underdetermination of theory by data.' Underdetermination holds that for any set of data, there are many hypotheses which adequately explain the data but which are mutually incompatible with one another. James writes:

There is nothing improbable in the supposition that an analysis of the world may yield a number of formulæ, all consistent with the facts. In physical science different formulæ may explain the phenomena equally well... Why may it not be so with the world? Why may there not be different points of view for surveying it, within each of which all data harmonize, and which the observer may therefore either choose between, or simply cumulate one upon another? A Beethoven string-quartet is truly, as some one has said, a scraping of horses's tails on cats' bowels, and may be exhaustively described in such terms; but the application of

this description in no way precludes the simultaneous applicability of an entirely different description.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Most of our theories of the world--philosophical, common-sensical, religious or even scientific--are underdetermined by the evidence that supports them; they are consistent with the facts but the facts are not so compelling that they logically exclude their competitors. Therefore, when two such theories are in competition no appeal to the evidence could determine the winner. In order to assess our beliefs, we must bring all that we as human beings have to bear on these matters. In such cases, James suggests the following for deciding what to believe: "Well, of two conceptions equally fit to satisfy the logical demand, that one which awakens the active impulses or satisfies the æsthetic demands better than the other, will be accounted the more rational, and will deservedly prevail."<sup>xxviii</sup> Different persons, with differing dumb convictions, will find different active impulses awakened and different æsthetic demands satisfied. So radically different beliefs are or could be rational for sincere inquirers after the truth.

Newman's and James's claims about the perspectival nature of the human believing condition create a serious problem for the human prospect of grasping the truth. Either one is properly disposed to the truth or one is not. One's temperament orients one in one direction and prevents seeing truth that may lie in another direction. Newman pointedly raises the problem: "I am what I am, or I am nothing. I cannot think, reflect, or judge about my being, without starting from the very point which I aim at concluding. My ideas are all assumptions, and I am ever moving in a circle."<sup>xxix</sup> How can we get out of this self-imposed circle of belief to see the truth? How can we rise above the passions or temperaments that seem to ineluctably determine our conclusions? This cannot be done without engaging the whole person in a way that engages both the intellect and the passions. And belief-change, at least on matters of fundamental human concern, will

involve the reorientation of our passions. As Newman writes, "...deductions have no power of persuasion. The heart is commonly reached, not through reason, but through the imagination, by means of direct impressions, by the testimony of facts and events, by history, by description. Persons influence us, voices melt us, looks subdue us, deeds inflame us."<sup>xxx</sup>

How is our heart reached through the imagination? Narrative can assist in the process of getting our hearts properly disposed. The sympathetic hearing of a story is one of the most powerful ways of orienting and re-orienting our passions and is, therefore, relevant to the practice of philosophy proper. How does narrative assist in the orienting and re-orienting of our passions?

Let me suggest, briefly, the following. Our storied lives have already determined, to a large extent, the affections that we have. We start our quest for understanding already situated within a context that fixes our passions and, therefore, orients our reason in a certain direction. We come to any question already valuing this and discounting that; we have a decided preference for this kind of explanation and an aversion to that sort of explanation. Our passions have been shaped in such a manner that we are oriented toward this sort of truth but opposed to that sort of truth (fill in your favorite rational preferences and aversions: for the rational or the empirical; for the logical or the narrative; for the material or the ideal; for theism or naturalism; for moral absolutes or relativism; for free will or determinism....).

One might think, therefore, that we are simply stuck within the circle, to use Newman's helpful metaphor, circumscribed by our desires and aversions. Are our worldviews ineluctably determined by our perspectives? Here I optimistically opine, "no." How, then, do stories reorient our passions or desires (if and when they do)? I suggest the following. Suppose we are confronted with a fictional story. Our sentiments

set the limits of our own believing circle. The story which confronts us attempts to move us into the story's circle. These circles may overlap or they may be entirely distinct. In so far as we are able to die to our self (the self which tends to keep us fixed in our own circle), we sympathetically enter into the story's circle. If we resist entering into the story's circle then either it has not effectively engaged our passions or we have not permitted our passions to be engaged by the story. On certain occasions, the story, with our (perhaps unwitting) permission, reorients or incites our passions to enable us to see truth. In moving our passions and desires, it shifts the center of our own circle toward the story's circle. And, in cases of moral fiction, it may shift our perception away from the self toward moral truth.

Rorty might agree with my philosophy of narrative and its importance for philosophy. We disagree, however, because I view narrative as a vehicle for moral and philosophical truths. That is, I hold the antiquated view that Rorty believes impossible to hold of thinking of "plays, poems, and novels as making vivid something already known, of literature as ancillary to cognition, beauty to truth."<sup>xxx</sup> In the narrative discovery of moral truth one may, contra Rorty, think that one's moral vocabulary is closer to reality than others.<sup>xxxii</sup> One may, and should, have doubts that one has fully grasped this or all moral truths and should, therefore, be open to refutation and continual transformation. But the recognition of contingency does not entail that one does not have a better grasp of moral truth than one had previously.

Rorty would reduce all philosophy to fiction--useful fiction or fancy--with no connection to Reality. In so doing, he not only denigrates philosophy, he fails to take fiction seriously. Writers of moral fiction, such as Dickens, Dante and Virgil, believed themselves to be communicating moral truth not mere fancy. Their fanciful worlds manifested their moral vision. Their fictional and fanciful writings are not typically

literally true. Dickens did not intend for sentences including ‘the artful dodger’ to refer to some actually existent artful dodger. And, even if he did, that sort of truth is irrelevant to the truth of the story. For the primary truth of the story is moral: about, among other things, inhumane working conditions, unfair wages, the breakdown of the family, human flourishing, the moral blindness of unbridled capitalism and the like. Yet Rorty would reduce these so-called truths to ephemera: words speaking to words. What begins as an upgrade for fiction (by downgrading science to fiction) is really a downgrade. Rorty simply does not take fiction seriously.

#### Reasons for preferring my story to Rorty’s story

In good Rortian fashion, two stories of moral philosophy have been placed beside one another. So far no arguments, conclusive or otherwise, have been offered in favor of either story. Let me conclude by offering four reasons for preferring my story to Rorty’s.

1. *Innocent until proven guilty*. Here’s my view: our moral intuitions are occasionally transformed by the power of narrative (fictional and otherwise) such that, in some cases, we grasp moral truth. Here’s my claim: These moral intuitions have some presumption to truth unless one has adequate reason to believe otherwise.<sup>xxxiii</sup> This “innocent until proven guilty” principle has prominent defenders in the field of epistemology. Knowledge, if it is possible at all, begins with trust not with doubt. If we cannot trust that our hearing, sight, etc., we have nothing upon which to reason to build up our view of the world. We are so constructed that we believe what others tell us or that the future will resemble the past. The presumption of guilt in epistemology invariably leads to skepticism. Parity suggests that we should extend the presumption of innocence to our moral beliefs as well. If we don’t, moral skepticism seems inevitable. Since Rorty has not argued in favor of his view he has not offered a case, let alone a compelling case,

against taking our moral intuitions as true; he hasn't provided any compelling reason to believe otherwise.<sup>xxxiv</sup> Indeed, Rorty eschews argument (and the philosophical tradition which enshrines argument) in favor of showing *how things look if* you make or reject certain assumptions.<sup>xxxv</sup> But, absent argument, one is under no compulsion to accept his assumptions and, therefore, under no compulsion to look at things the way he looks at things. Here I speak with understatement: one should expect compelling reasons before giving up one's fundamental beliefs about truth, reality and morality.

2. *The anti-realist Euthyphro problem.* If moral values are created and then imposed on the world by one's choice (individually or communally), then an anti-realist Euthyphro problem arises. Socrates, in Plato's *Euthyphro*, discusses divine command theories of ethics. Divine command theories locate the source of goodness in the will of God. This view creates a dilemma:

(i) Something is good because God wills it.

or

(ii) God wills it because it is good.

If (i) is true--that is, if something is good simply because God wills it--the problem of arbitrariness arises. According to (i), God could have willed anything--say, torturing babies for fun or eating human flesh for dessert--and it would have been good. In order to bestow goodness on an action, state of affairs, character trait or property, all that is required is that God wills it. "Goodness," if (i) is true, is arbitrary. And if (ii) is true, then it seems that God is superfluous. According to (ii), God discovers what is good and simply endorses it by his willing. But (ii) suggests that the moral standard is independent of God and God must accede to it. If (ii) is true, then God is not necessary as the standard of goodness.

A version of the Euthyphro problem arises for the Rortian anti-realist. This is not surprising since the individual as self- and world-creator assumes a god-like role in Rorty's moral theory.<sup>xxxvi</sup> The anti-realist Euthyphro problem is analogous to the dilemma in the classical Euthyphro problem:

(iii) Something is good because a god-like person wills it.

or

(iv) A god-like person wills it because it is good.

If (iii) is true, the arbitrariness problem rears its ugly head. If a god-like person were to will any  $x$ ,  $x$  would be good. This is not a merely counterfactual problem for persons. On various occasions humans have willed that torturing children, eating human flesh, enslaving blacks, killing Jews, etc., etc. are good. Indeed entire communities have reached a consensus on these matters. The arbitrariness problem is exacerbated by the relevant disanalogies between God and god-like persons. God, should God exist, is love, essentially other-regarding, just, holy, etc. God's character would constrain the kinds of things that God would will. But there are no such characterological constraints on the willings of human persons. Humans are often self-centered, self-regarding, unjust, competitive, etc. The lack of essential and essentially good character traits make the Euthyphro problem considerably more vicious in the case of god-like persons.

In order to avoid the arbitrariness problem, the anti-realist might embrace (iv). The anti-realist can accept (iv), however, only by ceasing to be an anti-realist. (iv) entails that there is a standard of goodness independent of human willing. (iv) is simply a restatement of moral realism, the claim that there are moral truths independent of human beliefs. Clearly for humans (and perhaps for God) the dilemma raised by the Euthyphro problem should warn of any anti-realist attempt to locate goodness in the will.

3. *Theism and anti-realism.* Theists, and perhaps other sorts of religious believers, have good reason to reject Rorty's decidedly anti-theistic worldview. Although Rorty eschews metaphysics and denounces the pretensions of science to the truth, he seems clearly to base his philosophical views on a naturalistic metaphysics allied with an evolutionary understanding of development. His "de-divination of the world" grounds his moral theorizing. His *how things look if* approach when allied with his naturalism lead him to ask "*how things might look if we did not have religion built into the fabric of our moral life.*"<sup>xxxvii</sup> When Rorty says, with Nietzsche, that God is dead he denies that we have a higher purpose or a created nature that need to be discovered as part of the moral project of acting in accord with that purpose or fulfilling our nature. Rorty's moral project begins with rejecting a Creator and becomes one of self-creation. Rorty's moral philosophy follows upon his metaphysical commitment that we are simply creatures of time and chance.<sup>xxxviii</sup> Viewing human beings as created not in their own image but in the image of God has implications for one's moral views. If one is a creature, not creator, then one is likely subject to creaturely norms related somehow to the Creator.<sup>xxxix</sup>

4. *Demoralization.* And, finally, Rorty's moral theory, if accepted would prove demoralizing. That is, if it were accepted, people would lose some of their motivation to be moral, thus reducing the *demand* of morality. Morality is often demanding, asking us to forego selfishness for the interest of others. Given the clamor of desires, morality must speak sufficiently loudly for us to hear and heed its call. Morality must be able to move us, at least occasionally, from selfish desire-satisfaction to altruism; it needs the motivational force to move us from self to other. But the denial of objective morality, with the requisite implication of subjectivity or relativity, reduce's morality's motivational force. William James, one of Rorty's inspirations, sounds the warning:

The subjectivist in morals, when his moral feelings are at war with the facts about him, is always free to seek harmony by toning down the sensitiveness of the feelings. Being mere data, neither good nor evil in themselves, he may pervert them or lull them to sleep by any means at his command. Truckling, compromise, time-serving, capitulations of conscience, are conventionally opprobrious names for what, if successfully carried out, would be on his principles by far the easiest and most praiseworthy mode of bringing out that harmony between inner and outer relations which is all that he means by the good.<sup>x1</sup>

Rorty suggests that the way to eliminate suffering is to sympathetically expand the definition of humanity to include fellow-sufferers, for example, blacks, Jews or women. But why do that? According to Rorty, in making judgments about humanity, there is no fact of the matter concerning human nature to recognize, it is simply our choice: “...personhood” is “...a matter of decision rather than knowledge, an acceptance of another human being into fellowship rather than a recognition of a common essence” (Rorty PMN 38). Why not keep one’s circle of humanity closed, thereby achieving an exaltation of self? Indeed, if one is tempted to view the other sympathetically as fellow-sufferer, why not simply tone down one’s sympathies? If one were to choose not to include blacks, Jews or women in the category of human being, one would not have a false belief, according to Rorty, because there is nothing to be wrong about. One has not failed to grasp some moral truth or some metaphysical essence of humans. Rorty concedes the seriousness of the problem:

This means that when the secret police come, when the torturers violate the innocent, there is nothing to be said to them of the form “There is something within you which you are betraying. Though you embody the practices of

totalitarian society which will endure forever, there is something beyond those practices which condemns you.” This thought is hard to live with...<sup>xli</sup>

From Rorty’s ethnocentric perspective it seems to him that the fascist has done something wrong. But from a different ethnocentric perspective, the Nazi might be judged right. If the game is perspective versus perspective, everyone’s a winner! The problem is that, if Rorty’s philosophy is correct, there is no moral or metaphysical reality which stands over human history according to which certain actions are (objectively) right and others wrong. Ideal observer theories in ethics attempt to preserve the neutrality and universality of the moral point of view. If there is no such moral point of view, humans will be tempted to make moral judgements which show a decided preference for their self. Indeed, Rorty’s insistence on virtually limitless<sup>xlii</sup> self-creation would reduce the moral demand and, thereby, reduce morality to self-interest.

## Conclusion

A philosophy of literary narrative makes clear why fiction, and other narratives (autobiographical, anecdotal, sacred, filmic, musical, etc.) have the power to redirect our lives. They can put us in a position where, by setting aside the clamoring self, we can see the other and, through the other, understand the universal which can reorient our passions. If our passions are reoriented, we may find ourselves in a position to understand and grasp moral truths to which we were formerly blind. Our new moral intuitions have a presumption to truth unless we have adequate reason to cease believing them. Rorty has simply not provided adequate reason, because he has not provided reasons at all, for people to cease believing their moral intuitions. The anti-realist Euthyphro problem, especially when it concerns human willing, creates an untenable dilemma. In addition, a theist ought not accept Rorty’s naturalistic assumptions and should refuse to accept what

follows from such assumptions. And finally, if accepted, Rorty's moral theory would prove demoralizing.

The practice of philosophy proper involves the passions. Thus narrative is essential to philosophy properly so-called. We need to be rightly disposed to see and grasp the truth of certain propositions. Narrative is essential to philosophy because its power lies in the reorientation of passions even toward the Truth.

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<sup>i</sup>This entails that some moral beliefs are true and some are false. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord defines realism as follows: "...realism involves embracing just two theses: (1) the claims in question, when literally construed, are literally true or false (cognitivism), and (2) some are literally true." In Geoffrey Sayre-McCord, "The Many Moral Realisms" in *Essays on Moral Realism*, ed. Geoffrey Sayre-McCord (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 3.

<sup>ii</sup>A narrative understanding of reality is often opposed 'the Greek', rational understanding of reality. See, for example, Mark Edmundson, *Literature Against Philosophy, Plato to Derrida* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). This is a misconception: some of the greatest philosophers in the West. Plato, Augustine, Boethius, Descartes and Kierkegaard, for example, rely heavily on narrative.

<sup>iii</sup>Richard Rorty, "Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida," in his *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), 90-109.

<sup>iv</sup>Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 90.

<sup>v</sup>Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 92.

<sup>vi</sup>See Richard Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity* (New York: Cambridge university press, 1989), esp. xiii-xv.

<sup>vii</sup>Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 92.

<sup>viii</sup>Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 7-9.

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<sup>ix</sup>Richard Rorty, "Science as solidarity," in his *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth* (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 35-45.

<sup>x</sup>Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 67.

<sup>xi</sup>Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 95.

<sup>xii</sup>Rorty *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 79-80. A final vocabulary are the words that one uses to justify one's beliefs, actions and existence. The ironist (1) has deep doubts about the adequacy of her own final vocabulary because of her sympathetic awareness of the final vocabularies others, (2) believes that arguments are not adequate to ground her own final vocabulary (and undermine the final vocabulary of others) and (3) does not believe that her final vocabulary is closer to the truth than others (Rorty *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 73).

<sup>xiii</sup>Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 67.

<sup>xiv</sup>Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 35.

<sup>xv</sup>Unless noted, the citations are from C. S. Lewis, *An Experiment In Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961).

<sup>xvi</sup>Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 139.

<sup>xvii</sup>Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism*, 138.

<sup>xviii</sup>We must concede the ignoble potential of narrative. We might, for example, be sympathetic to the racist or rapist and be revulsed by the righteous or humble. Or we often find ourselves sympathetically entering into the life of the murderer in films.

<sup>xix</sup>One might, through narrative, move from particulars to particulars.

<sup>xx</sup>For an excellent discussion of these issues and thinkers, see William Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

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<sup>xxi</sup>John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame, Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press, 1979), 82 and 221-2.

<sup>xxii</sup>Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 240.

<sup>xxiii</sup>Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 247.

<sup>xxiv</sup>James puts reason and sentiments in a dichotomous relationship. I don't think it is a simple matter of "either-or." There is a sentimental (evaluative?) side of reason and a rational side of sentiments.

<sup>xxv</sup>William James, "The Sentiment of Rationality," in *The Will to Believe and other essays in popular philosophy* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956), 92.

<sup>xxvi</sup>James, *The Will to Believe*, 93.

<sup>xxvii</sup>James, *The Will to Believe*, 76.

<sup>xxviii</sup>James, *The Will to Believe*, 76.

<sup>xxix</sup>Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 272.

<sup>xxx</sup>Newman, *Grammar of Assent*, 89.

<sup>xxxi</sup>Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 79.

<sup>xxxii</sup>Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 73.

<sup>xxxiii</sup>I don't have the space to defend this here, but it has been amply defended by Alvin Plantinga, philosophical heir to Thomas Reid, G. E. Moore; see Alvin Plantinga, *Warrant and Proper Function* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>xxxiv</sup>In so far as Rorty does make a case, it is based, I believe, on unfounded inferences and false dichotomies.

<sup>xxxv</sup>Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 44.

<sup>xxxvi</sup>Rorty, *Contingency, irony and solidarity*, 18-22.

<sup>xxxvii</sup>Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, 98; his emphasis.

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<sup>xxxviii</sup>Rorty's belief that we are creatures of time and chance is perhaps not metaphysical. His claim that we are *merely* creatures of time and chance is. For the latter entails that humans have no essence, that humans were not created, that there is no pre-existent human *telos*, etc.

<sup>xxxix</sup>I take no position here on how the theist might conceive of such creaturely norms.

<sup>xl</sup>James, *The Will to Believe*, 105.

<sup>xli</sup>Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, xlii.

<sup>xliii</sup>One is limited only by harm to others. But 'others' is perspectively determined and may or may not include blacks, slaves, Jews, women, animals, etc.