

Imagination, ethics, and epistemic inquiry:

Why teaching literature and film in the philosophy classroom matters

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Abstract

Artificial intelligence systems are becoming more integrated in our lives by the minute. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the classroom, where we should expect that students are using AI to support their learning. Given the widespread use of AI for analysing and creating content, we need to think about how to counter the threat these emerging technologies pose to the moral and epistemic agency of our students. Drawing on my own experiences as a philosophy college professor, in this paper I argue that analysing and interpreting artistic works in the classroom will enhance students' epistemic and moral agency by promoting imaginative engagement with ethical and epistemic problems.

Key words

epistemic value, ethical learning, imagination, pragmatism

Introduction

Undoubtedly, many teachers are as troubled as I am by the encroachment of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in the lives of my students and in my classroom. I know students are using AI to support their learning, sometimes in ethically questionable ways, and there is nothing that I can do to stop it except have conversations about the threat their habitual ways of interacting with AI poses to their epistemic agency. I tell them that uncritical use of AI will harm them as knowers and critical thinkers in the long term. I also ask them to consider that learning how to use AI intelligently and thoughtfully will make them stand out in the job market. I have been fortunate that students seem open to the idea that it is important to learn how to use AI as a means to help them become better epistemic inquirers, even if in practice they continue using AI in unproductive ways.

The question of what we can do to counter the threat AI poses to the epistemic agency of students remains, however, and in what follows, I draw on the resources of

American pragmatism to argue that incorporating collective engagement with literature and film in the philosophy classroom has the potential to open up lines of inquiry that would otherwise remain unexplored, and to shed light on and deepen students' moral and epistemic commitments. In doing so, I first expand on a growing literature which, on the whole, argues that one of the chief values of literature is as an instrument for ethical training. I complicate this overall picture by reflecting on my own experiences teaching literature and film in the philosophy classroom, which I hope demonstrate that engaging literature in a pedagogical context, involving guidance from the teacher and collective discussion about how to interpret the literary work, is important for expanding the moral imagination of students.

I also add to the literature by positing that beyond serving as an instrument of moral development, engaging with literature and film in the classroom also has epistemic value. I draw parallels between imaginatively forecasting the consequences of potential courses of action over the course of moral inquiry and what I refer to as *epistemic forecasting*, which involves imaginatively engaging with philosophical problems and foreseeing how various philosophical views transform when their metaphysical assumptions are challenged. This suggests that literature isn't valuable in the philosophy classroom merely as a means to help students grapple with moral uncertainty in their own lives; rather, collective inquiry into the meaning of artistic works creates a feedback loop between theory and practice, in which students' personal experiences and collective engagements with art bolster their epistemic agency by making concrete the language with which to object, challenge, and construct their own philosophical arguments.

The moral imagination

As a philosophy professor working in the field of American Pragmatism in a predominantly analytic department, I often feel like an outlier both as a teacher and researcher, as I tend to tackle philosophical questions that can help me or my students work out something in practice. When I teach ethics in my introduction to philosophy classes, I gravitate toward thinkers who put pressure on ethical theories that either emphasise rules or principles we ought to follow, or deliberate about what course of action will maximise utility, in favour of theories that shed light on situations where traditional ethical theories fall short. Although valuable as tools for moral reasoning, deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics are deeply suspicious of human emotions and feelings, and paint a picture of moral deliberation as a cold, disembodied affair. For this reason, I draw on philosophers like Martha Nussbaum

(1986) and Bernard Williams (1985), in whose work they explore morally dilemmatic situations that force us to make impossible, tragic choices. How does one choose which child gets to live at a concentration camp, as Sophie was forced to at Auschwitz in William Styron's novel, *Sophie's Choice* (1979)? If we could foretell the future, would we, like Louise from Denis Villeneuve's film, *Arrival* (2016), withhold telling our partner that our daughter is going to die from a terminal illness, thus avoiding the possibility that our partner may not want to have the child? In this regard, novels and films serve as useful tools for cultivating the moral imagination of students, as it can help them relate to characters more empathetically. Perhaps Sophie thought it was important to save her son Jan and sacrifice her daughter Eva to preserve the family line. Maybe Louise did not want to risk not having Hannah, as she cares about and loves her daughter deeply.

This raises the question, however, of whether literature and other forms of art, *by themselves*, 'best instruct us in our human variety and contradiction' (p. 510), as Lionel Trilling in 'Art, will, and necessity' (1973) so compellingly puts it. In other words, does literature teach us how to grapple with moral luck and to better understand the tragic nature of many of the choices we have to make? An empathy-focused pedagogy (Coles 1989; English 2016; Keane 2007) is an important step in the way of answering these questions, but as we will see below, more needs to be said about the importance of understanding ourselves as social beings, of perceiving ourselves as members of a moral community—the classroom—and of appreciating the importance of collective flourishing for our sense of wellbeing. As I will argue in this section, I add to these conversations by describing the process by which students become more empathetic beings. I emphasise that we need guidance from teachers and collective dialogue in the classroom about what novels and movies mean in the context of moral growth. To this end, I turn to the work of John Dewey, who understands moral education as a social activity in which dialogue and collective inquiry about the interplay between the ideal and the social self figure prominently.

Indeed, literature is valuable for its potential to foster empathy in readers; yet, as Dewey has argued for extensively in various works, and especially in *Ethics* (1932), by itself, empathy can skew the moral landscape:¹

¹ Dewey and Tufts published the first edition of *Ethics* in 1908, with Dewey mainly authoring Part II, where he works out his views on empathy. The work was significantly revised in 1932, and it is this later edition that I mostly rely on.

For the latter does not put the happiness of self and of others, of a member of the family and the outsider, of a fellow citizen and a stranger, of nobleman and commoner, of the lord and the peasant, of the man of distinction and the obscure person, of rich and poor, upon the same footing. (Dewey 1932, p. 239)

This is because empathy disconnected from deliberation about the consequences of possible courses of actions—what Dewey refers to as dramatically rehearsing or imaginatively forecasting future outcomes in *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) and *Ethics* (1932) among other works—leave us vulnerable to acting on our feelings of empathy for those who are close to us at the expense of distant others. Although Dewey does emphasise that empathy is ‘the animating mold of moral judgement’ (1932, p. 270), it is only when supplemented by the principle of impartiality and in the words of Iris Murdoch (1970/2014), a just and loving gaze, that it can become a reliable guide to moral conduct.

This is not to deny that dramatic rehearsal poses limitations in helping us resolve moral uncertainty in the sorts of cases Nussbaum and Williams theorise: ‘[f]aced with a difficulty, some may seek a divine sign, consult astrology charts, throw dice, clutch crystals’ (Fesmire 2003, p. 72). Dewey’s reflective morality is not intended, however, to resolve all instances of moral uncertainty but rather to offer an alternative to traditional ethical theories that does not divide motive from intent, means and ends, and that emphasises taking in the complexity of the situation before forecasting potential courses of action. This is an aspect overlooked by philosophers of education who draw lessons from Dewey to argue that the value of teaching literature in the classroom lies in its potential to foster empathy for others. In the examples below, we will see that collective interpretation of literature and other forms of art play an important role in fostering the moral imagination of students by providing alternative interpretations of art works and suggesting potential courses of action that would otherwise not have occurred to students had they interacted with literature on their own. Indeed, it is only by hearing and engaging with other perspectives that we can expand our circles of concern and fully internalise the importance of being impartial and just, creatively tune ourselves to a situation’s possibilities, and come to fully appreciate a situation’s moral complexity.

Given my training as a literary critic, I am acutely aware of how our own experiences, perspectives, worldviews, and values can influence our interpretations of literature. This can be explained by our tendency as creatures to subsume otherness into

sameness. In fact, reading literature, by itself, without the guidance of teachers and the collective input of other students, can reinforce our worldviews and values, and hence, can hinder moral development. The moral disgust that students express for characters that act in what they perceive as morally unacceptable ways, for example, blocks empathy and understanding of the other, and without input from either the students or the teacher, their interpretations of the artwork is bound to be skewed by their own values and prejudices. For example, I recently taught the Gary Ross film *Pleasantville* (1998) in my introduction to philosophy class. This is a coming of age story about two siblings in high school who find themselves transported to a black and white 1950s TV show, where they are now the central characters. Predictably, the other characters lack knowledge about themselves and the world beyond Pleasantville, and what's interesting is how the two characters from the real world serve as catalysts for the growth of self-awareness and curiosity among the members of the Pleasantville community. But what's perhaps most significant is that, in the process of changing their social reality, Bud and Mary Sue Parker transform into emotionally mature and self-aware individuals.

Some students in my philosophy class, however, could not see past the 'sinful' behavior of Mary Sue, whose rebelliousness and sexual curiosity changes the patterns of behaviour of Pleasantville's high school students. My students worried about the contagious nature of 'sin' and drew the conclusion that the film's purpose was to destroy conservative values, and in doing so, they missed narrative developments in the story that challenge their interpretation and undermine their aesthetic judgement. Naturally suspicious of the professor in this political climate, input from other students in the class was invaluable. Other students chimed in and noted unacknowledged details in the story, such as Mary Sue's eventual rejection of the pursuit of first-order desires and her development for a preference to pursue projects of worth (she in fact chooses to remain in the world of Pleasantville to pursue higher education, rather than go back to her world where she would be pressured to return to her old habits). The students who originally interpreted the film through their own religious perspectives came to appreciate the film in a new way, and, realising that their own lives are messy and complicated, embraced the film for compellingly representing the pressures that they themselves face in a world that is emphatically not like the world of Pleasantville.

Another film, Ben Affleck's *Gone Baby Gone* (2007), offered my class an occasion for exploring possible courses of actions that might have been pursued by the main characters. The story centers around the kidnapping of a young girl, Amanda

McCready, from her mother, Helene, who suffers from drug and alcohol addiction. Patrick Kenzie, who is hired to investigate the kidnapping faces a difficult choice at the end of the movie: leave Amanda with her kidnappers, the police chief Jack Doyle and his wife who can provide a stable and happy home to the little girl, or return Amanda to her mother, even though she is unfit to care for her daughter. An additional pressure point is introduced into the story when Angie Gennaro, Patrick's girlfriend, is convinced that the right thing to do is leave Amanda with the chief. In the end, Patrick chooses to return Amanda to her mother, which costs him his relationship with Angie. By dramatically rehearsing possible courses of actions, students came to appreciate that Kenzie returns Amanda because he believes it is the right thing to do, even if it didn't necessarily produce the best consequences for Amanda's wellbeing. Through a series of directed group discussions they came to quite different conclusions about what they would have done in Patrick's situation. Yet even those who disagreed with Patrick's decision understood his reasons for returning the girl to her mother.

Turning to literature, an ethical parable rich with possibilities for exploring moral uncertainty is Ursula Le Guin's 'The ones who walk away from Omelas' (1973). Set in the city of Omelas, citizens have achieved perfect happiness and collective flourishing, but with one caveat: the citizens' happiness has been gained at the expense of the suffering of one child, who is kept in a small room in the basement, deprived of affection, education, and social contact. The child lives in a filthy environment, without access to a bathroom. What students find particularly disturbing is that citizens know about the suffering of the child and choose to stay in the city—except for a few who depart the city and embrace the uncertainty and instability of the world outside of the city's walls. In contrast to *Gone Baby Gone*, which puts pressure on ethical deliberation based on rules and principles, 'The ones who walk away from Omelas' poses the question to students: would you stay or walk away? The very content of the story prompts students to empathetically imagine themselves as citizens of Omelas and deliberate about possible courses of action. They do this in groups so that they can factor in other students' differing intuitions about what they would do. Many came to the conclusion that walking away was not the right thing to do, and instead argued that they would try to help the child escape, even if it meant sacrificing the collective happiness of the citizens of Omelas. Significantly, they arrived at this conclusion not merely by following their own intuitions, or by applying rules or principles without testing them in their imaginations, but by carefully considering all the options on the table.

What these examples show is that the value of engaging with and interpreting literature and other forms of art for cultivating the moral imagination of students is fully realised when it is understood as a social activity. What it hasn't yet illustrated though is why such activities are fruitful in the context of the philosophy classroom. One could argue, in other words, that such questions can be easily addressed in the literature classroom. After all, literature teachers could in principle adopt the Deweyan pedagogical method to moral education that I am recommending philosophers adopt. Putting the problem in this way, however, assumes not only that neat distinctions can be made among disciplines, but also that values should be distributed among disciplines—a division of labour of sorts. Dewey himself argued in *Democracy and Education* (1916) that disciplines arbitrarily divide up the domain of human experience, and that believing that each discipline embodies a unique value obscures how they fit into a larger whole—how the different subjects in school are supposed to work together to support moral development and educating students for citizenship.

Nevertheless, the question must be taken seriously, as it raises a related issue that I will consider in the next section: whether reading and interpreting literature has philosophical value beyond offering alternatives to traditional normative ethical approaches. We will see that, indeed, the epistemic value of engaging with literary works lies not so much in their being sources of moral knowledge or in conveying what is often referred to as 'what it's like knowledge' (knowledge about phenomenal experience), but rather as means by which to foster what I shall refer to as *the philosophical imagination*. Following Dewey, I will foreground the important role that imagination, emotions, and feelings play in how we do philosophy, and argue that literature is valuable as a means of cultivating in students full appreciation of the coherence of other solutions to philosophical problems. Unsurprisingly, a similar imaginative activity as dramatic rehearsal plays a significant role, what I refer to as *epistemic forecasting*.

The philosophical imagination

In this section I will argue that the social activities of reading and interpreting literature have philosophical value beyond ethical learning, and theorise an epistemic-imaginative activity—the skill of epistemic forecasting—which I believe is crucial not merely for deepening our understanding of philosophical views and approaches that feel counterintuitive, but also for habituating us to engage with other philosophical perspectives charitably—by responding to them, that is, in their best light. That is not

to deny an important value of studying philosophy, as Bertrand Russell so compellingly put it at the end of *Problems of Philosophy* (1912):

Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect. (p. 244)

In fact, one upshot of the discussion to follow which I hope will become clear is that epistemic forecasting complements Russell's ideal of the philosopher as contemplating possibilities beyond what we can know and dwelling in uncertainties. One of the functions of epistemic forecasting is to guard against dogmatism and the tyranny of custom. This is because learning to imagine perspectives that we disagree with as internally coherent and rational suggests that our beliefs are fallible and that in many cases the attitude that is warranted in the face of epistemic disagreement is one of endorsement rather than acceptance.²

Given that we, as teachers, are in the business of, in the words of Harvey Siegel (1988), 'educating reason,' it will be important to theorise the role that collective interpretation of literature plays in educating our emotions and feelings. My approach thereby sheds light on one problem with yet another ideal expressed by Russell in 'The duty of the philosopher in this age' (1964): that appealing to reason is enough to motivate others to change their minds. This ideal is problematic because most human beings who are not philosophers do not deliberate about a problem using reason alone; emotions play a significant role in both reinforcing prejudice and bias and in changing perspectives. This is one reason that when I teach epistemology, I focus on how we, non-ideal agents with emotions and feelings, come to know about ourselves and the world through the work of philosophers in the pragmatist tradition (broadly construed) such as William James (1895), Charles Sanders Peirce (1887), Christopher Hookway (2000), Peter Goldie, (2004) and Patricia Greenspan (1988). I do so in the

² For an overview of the distinction between endorsing and accepting, see Fleisher (2021). See also Staffel (2023) for a discussion of what she refers to as transitional attitudes, which align with my view of epistemic forecasting as considering possible lines of inquiry.

context of discussions of short stories and films that, as we will see, give students the conceptual resources to question the overwhelming emphasis in epistemology on logic and reason in the formation of justified true beliefs about the world.

This is not to suggest that having good reasons to properly support our beliefs is not important—far from it. However, by ignoring the affective dimensions of epistemic deliberation in the philosophy classroom, analytic epistemologists fail to grapple with the way that emotions and feelings skew the epistemic landscape, thus missing an opportunity for giving students the tools to reflect on how they themselves engage in inquiry. Part of the issue here is that education has become a medium for transmitting disciplinary facts disconnected from the practical realities of students (see Chakravartty 2023 for a similar point in the domain of science education). Even if Russell is right that the primary job of the professional philosopher is to pose arguments that advance philosophical understanding, we must not confuse the activity of professional philosophy with the activity of teaching philosophy, which is in my mind where theory hooks up with practice. Another issue is that fields in philosophy have become increasingly specialised and siloed from other lines of inquiry. Thus, epistemology of emotions, which offers mainstream philosophers the resources for thinking about how non-ideal agents inquire about the world, develops in isolation from normative epistemology and vice versa. Fortunately, the classroom offers an opportunity for unifying different fields of inquiry around the problem of how to educate students about the importance of becoming attuned to their feelings of comfort and discomfort in the face of epistemic uncertainty.

My prior training as a literary critic has equipped me with a set of skills that support my commitment to exploring the relevance of theory to the lives of students in the philosophy classroom. The incorporation of literary analysis in my scholarly work has proven to be a fruitful strategy for understanding phenomena that would be difficult to theorise from a purely logical perspective, such as the affective barriers that prevent epistemic agents from feeling confident about themselves as knowers, with the effect of excluding their perspectives from knowledge-making practices (Hernandez 2023). In my ongoing work, literature continues to emerge as an important resource for resisting oppressive epistemic landscapes, which is part of the reason why so much of my philosophical pedagogical method centers around discussion of (1) the involvement of emotions in inquiry about ourselves and the world; and (2) the importance of developing affective intelligence so that emotions and feelings can more reliably serve as guides in inquiry.

As an example, the story by Joy Williams, 'Shepherd' (2015), offers a fruitful gateway for better understanding the involvement of emotions and feelings in inquiry. The story is about a character referred to as 'the girl', whose German shepherd died after he tore up the screen of the porch, escaped the house, and accidentally fell over a cliff and drowned one evening when she was out with her fiancé, Chester. Over the course of the story it emerges that the girl increasingly left the dog alone at home as her fiancé did not want to interact with her companion animal. As it often happens with grief, the main character engages in inquiry about what happened and whether there is anything she could have done to prevent her beloved dog's death. The story ends with the girl realising that her fiancé shares part of the blame. Moreover, memories of how he treats the girl as well as a dialogue that unfolds during the climactic scene of the story sheds light on the nature of their relationship, which was one sided and, on the part of her fiancé, not based on genuine care for her. The story not only raises questions about whether caring about someone as a person entails caring about the things they care about—in this case, it is unclear that the fiancé cared about the girl as a person insofar as he did not care about the shepherd—but it also sheds light on the toxic gender dynamics that exerted pressure on the girl to prioritise her fiancé's preferences over the wellbeing of her dog.³ It is suggested that this epiphany gave her the resolve to leave her fiancé's house, even though to what end remains uncertain. Does the girl commit suicide? Does she go back to her house with renewed hope of a new life?

Significantly, much of what is going on inside the character's mind remains obscure, especially at the end when we are given mostly descriptions of behaviour that indicate the girl might be angry, anxious, and frustrated. Nevertheless, the story has proven to be a productive site for allowing students to explore the involvement of emotions in inquiry; for example, how guilt can transform into anger to protect the epistemic agent from the discomfort of having to confront her blameworthiness; or how epistemic anxiety can transform into apt anger directed at the fiancé for demanding that she has to choose between her relationship with him and taking care of her dog. These moments serve as windows into the moral development of the girl—moments that simultaneously mirror the way emotions and feelings reinforce polarised political discourse. The story has also proven to be productive in the philosophy classroom for it allows students to explore other possible courses of action through dialogue and

³ My analysis here is built on Helm (2010), who first proposed the concept of caring for someone as a person as a distinct mode of caring from caring about someone as an instrument and as an end.

collective inquiry. Rather than merely focusing on what happens at the end of the story, students also discuss among each other whether the girl could have done anything differently—such as breaking up with her fiancé before it was too late. In this way, the story opens up alternative lines of inquiry. This suggests a parallel between literary analysis and epistemic forecasting, the latter to which I turn to next by means of another example.

One of my favorite pieces of literature to teach is Raymond Carver's 'The Cathedral' (1981), a short story about a married woman who, over the course of many years, has maintained a platonic and emotionally rewarding friendship with a blind man. The story focuses on a visit of the blind man, when he finally meets the woman's husband after many years of corresponding with her about him. The story is mostly told from the perspective of Bub, the woman's husband, who is mostly struggling with how to deal with his jealous feelings about the relationship between Robert, the blind man, and his wife. The story comes to a climax when Robert asks Bub to describe a cathedral. Bub proceeds by citing various objective facts about cathedrals, but struggles to describe to Robert what a cathedral looks like. Robert asks Bub to put his hand over his to draw together a cathedral with his eyes closed. The story ends with Bub refusing to open his eyes and thus refusing to perceive how Robert might himself picture a cathedral in his mind's eye.

I almost always pair up this story with Thomas Nagel's essay 'What is it like to be a bat?' (1973), not merely to give students the vocabulary with which to explore the last scene of "The Cathedral," but also to reflect on what aspects of Nagel's argument the scene supports or challenges. Is language the only medium we use to communicate subjective facts? Are other minds so opaque that we couldn't know anything about another's subjective experiences? Does qualitative knowledge come in degrees? By collectively exploring the details of the story, different answers to the question of whether it is possible to know what it's like to be a bat suggest themselves—answers that may not have occurred to a student who is reading and engaging with Carver's story or with Nagel's essay on their own. Literary analysis as a collective activity serves as a ground for imaginatively testing alternative lines of arguments to central philosophical questions—which is preferable to the frequently discussed thought experiments that remove epistemic agents from the messiness of everyday life and hence make it difficult for non-experts to engage in philosophical inquiry.

Epistemic forecasting is a cognitive activity that, much like literary analysis, involves trying out different philosophical arguments with a view to understanding them as

internally coherent. The more skilled one becomes at epistemic forecasting, the more adept one will be at uncovering implicit metaphysical assumptions and detecting different ways that a central philosophical concept is employed and used in a particular line of inquiry. Epistemic forecasting is also a crucial skill in that it allows one to relate different domains of inquiry through meta-philosophical reflection about divergent and shared assumptions employed in philosophical debates—in other words, it allows us to construct from a particular argument a philosophical perspective whose coherence can be explored on a meta reflective level. Can some of the assumptions embedded in meta-ethics about the cognitive-concrete divide be challenged if one takes on board a conceptualisation of emotions as having both factive and evaluative dimensions? (on this point, see Greenspan 1988). Can debates in epistemology benefit from examining how we arrive at knowledge in the context of scientific practice? Will a different understanding of how agents are motivated to make ethical decisions change the nature of the debates in practical ethics? Such lines of inquiry are opened up when we approach philosophical inquiry like we approach literature in the classroom.

Conclusion

Discussions about the role that literary analysis might play in the philosophy classroom have mostly focused on moral development and, especially, on how reading and interpreting literature in the classroom can expand our moral imagination. To my knowledge, how such expansion is accomplished has remained undertheorised, and the role that collective inquiry plays has remained underexplored. This paper has attempted to fill this gap by calling attention to the following: (1) the importance of instruction and collective deliberation about the meaning of texts to ensure not only that students take into account all the textual evidence and form interpretations and judgements that reflect charitable understandings of the works under consideration, but also that they listen to other students' perspectives and approaches to the artistic work that challenge their own assumptions and prejudices; and (2) the importance of reading literature philosophically for developing the skill of epistemic forecasting—a skill that, as I have argued, will enable students to become more adept at identifying underlying frameworks and examining the metaphysical assumptions about mind and world that shape how philosophers pursue answers to various philosophical questions. More than that, however, epistemic forecasting will have the effect of more fully realising Russell's ideal and freeing our students from the shackles of dogmatism and prejudice.

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