Mirrors to One Another

Emotion and Value in Jane Austen and David Hume

E.M. Dadlez
Mirrors to One Another
New Directions in Aesthetics

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Emotion and Value in Jane Austen and David Hume

E.M. Dadlez
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PREFACE

It is a truth universally acknowledged that any philosopher with an appreciation of moral perspicacity must harbor some weakness for the works of Jane Austen.\(^1\) Gilbert Ryle, when asked if he still read novels, promptly responded: “Yes, all six every year,” referring to those very works.\(^2\) Many academics, although most of them are not philosophers, have commented at length on the normative content of Austen’s novels. Normative analyses of works like Austen’s are to be expected. Austen is one of the exemplars of what Robert Alter refers to as the “worldly literature of the quotidian,” the kind of writing that addresses questions about character and human interaction, inviting readers to discriminate among character types and reflect on moral dilemmas and predicaments set in a variety of naturalistic contexts.\(^3\) The central questions for those attempting an analysis of this aspect of Austen’s writing are not about her familiarity with the work of some particular philosopher, because there is insufficient evidence of such familiarity. Austen herself denied any knowledge of philosophy, though the circumstances under which she did so (declining to base one of her characters on an importunate correspondent) may incline

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us to regard the claim as disingenuous. In any case, we cannot assume that Austen read or reflected on philosophy without indulging in speculation. Of course, Peter Knox-Shaw does speculate to some purpose in the *Times Literary Supplement,* when he agrees with his reviewer Michael Caines that Austen may well have been exposed to Adam Smith’s *Theory of Moral Sentiments.* Gilbert Ryle and Alisdair MacIntyre both propose an Aristotelian influence, one which Ryle believes may derive from exposure to Shaftesbury. Less plausible candidates such as Kant and Hobbes have also been brought forward. But whether or not such speculation is permissible is beside the point of the present enterprise. Asking what philosophy Jane Austen read involves us in a question independent of inquiries about the philosophical position to which her writing commits her. We can still make perfectly reasonable assumptions about the theories and systems into which the normative (and sometimes meta-ethical) points of view taken up in Austen’s works best fit. It will be argued here that the best “fit” is with the approach to ethics and value taken by David Hume.

I should stress at the outset that no single correspondence between Hume and Austen to which I will draw attention is absolutely unique. The importance of sympathy in moral contexts is something which both Hume and Austen emphasize, but we may see the same emphasis in Adam Smith and Francis Hutcheson. Austen and Hume both see connections between morality and sentiment, but so do Aristotle, Smith, and Shaftesbury. The normative ethical stance most often endorsed in Austen’s novels is much like the utility-based virtue ethics which can most plausibly be ascribed to Hume, but the parallel to Aristotle is equally obvious. Writing this book has not lent itself to the happy practice of submitting individual chapters to journals, since most such submissions incur requests for comparative analysis that would inflate any individual offering beyond an acceptable length. In a book, at least, one may explore such questions more at one’s leisure. My point about Hume really is intended to be a point about degree of fit, and my demonstration of

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this is intended to be cumulative. It is not that Austen is more like Hume than Smith on the subject of sympathy, it is that her general normative stance, all told, is a great deal more like that which we can find in or infer from Hume’s Treatise than that which we can locate in the corpus of any other philosopher. The third chapter will address, albeit briefly, proposed alliances between Austen and Kant, Austen and Shaftesbury, and, most famously, Austen and Aristotle (discussions of Adam Smith are reserved for the chapter on sympathy). I will then begin to explore correspondences between Hume and Austen, no one of which is unique but all of which, taken together, appear to demonstrate a closer correspondence than may be found by drawing comparisons between Austen and some other philosopher. This is my first thesis.

Establishing the preceding would enable us to characterize Austen’s work as deriving in most respects from the traditions of the Enlightenment rather than those of the Victorian era, something that I very much wish to do. In fact, Peter Knox-Shaw accomplishes this in his Jane Austen and the Enlightenment, allying Austen with the skeptical tradition of the empiricists.8 I hope only to add to the evidence for that contention. Although Austen’s novels were published early in the nineteenth century, three were begun before the end of the eighteenth. And although Hume left this world a scant eight months after Austen had entered it, his way of thinking about the world and the people in it did not depart with him. I aim to show, at least, that many of Hume’s insights about human nature survive more or less intact in Austen’s work, and thereby hope to augment the grounds for maintaining Austen’s affinity for Enlightenment thought. I regard this as a kind of secondary thesis, if a derivative one.

Austen herself believed fictions could prove a source of insights about human nature, calling a novel a “work in which... the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties,” is to be observed (NA 38). It is assumed here that novels can and do make ethical, meta-ethical, aesthetic, and even epistemic endorsements, many of them centered on human character and the manner in which it may be assessed. These assumptions are compatible with Hume’s own contentions about fiction in the essay “Of the Standard of Taste.”9 Hume criticizes works in which “vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of... disapprobation,” maintaining that

Preface

one cannot enter into such a writer’s sentiments or “bear an affection to characters which we plainly discover to be blameable” (ST 246). People ought not to “pervert the sentiments of” their own hearts “in complaisance to any writer whatsoever” (ST 247). In the Treatise, Hume tells us that “A generous and noble character affords a satisfaction even in the survey; and when presented to us, tho’ only in a poem or fable, never fails to charm and delight us.”

So fictions engage their audience on a moral level. They have moral content and present moral perspectives which can be entered into or resisted. Most heavy-handedly, fictions present endorsements by means of the pronouncements of an omniscient narrator, but this is a literary crudity in which Austen herself seldom indulged. Works may be taken to endorse a course of action or a way of thinking or a mode of evaluation when they make it clear that – in the world of the work – this course or method is right (or correct or appropriate or preferable to the alternatives). As we know, this can be made entirely apparent even in the course of a novel when nothing of the sort is explicitly mentioned. Likewise, no reader must be directly informed that Fanny Dashwood of Sense and Sensibility is contemptible. One has but to read one of Austen’s more ruthless passages about Fanny’s rationalizations to understand that this is the case and, more to the point, to feel the contempt.

Austen’s works taken as a whole, as do most works of fiction, endorse particular perspectives on the rightness and wrongness of various courses of action in various contexts. They sometimes endorse modes of reasoning and methods for the evaluation of character. They put forward a distinctive view of human nature, and particularly of human foibles. These perspectives may be thought to converge more closely with one philosopher’s normative and meta-ethical stance than they do with another’s. As I have indicated, I hope to establish that they converge with views concerning human nature and morality put forward by David Hume in Books II and III of his Treatise of Human Nature.

Why should such a convergence be philosophically interesting? There is, after all, an enormous difference between novels and philosophical treatises. Treatises may enlighten the reader about the rationale which underlies a policy or course of action. Novels, on the other hand, can lead that reader to imagine a situation in which she would adopt such a stance or course herself. Fiction can supply a moral point of vantage, not by telling people what it is, but by showing them how to have it. Austen’s

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novels don’t just provide examples that illustrate Hume’s points. They can sometimes function as thought experiments which offer a demonstration of Hume’s normative assumptions in regard to ethics (and sometimes epistemology or aesthetics), as well as the ways in which he encouraged us to think about such things. To investigate the aforementioned convergence may be to explore the way in which Austen’s works enable readers to see the world through the lens of a Humean perspective. This is my third thesis.

I believe that Austen’s novels encourage us to respond in a distinctively Humean way to hypothetical situations by rehearsing our responsive dispositions. All novels, of course, enable us to adopt an attitude reminiscent of what Hume calls a general point of view (free of personal bias and prejudice based on degree of proximity), and all encourage us to consider the effects of character traits on the narrow circle of their possessor. That is, literature in general is suited to the exercise of moral as well as emotional responsiveness, as Hume describes such responsiveness. My claim is that Austen’s literature is better suited to the enterprise than most, because of its intimate focus on character traits and their hypothetical and actual effects and because of the significance of utility in the assessment of those traits. More importantly, there are passages in Austen that read very much like thought experiments which establish some of Hume’s assumptions and hypotheses, experiments that sometimes go even further by expanding the arena of these assumptions’ application or following out their implications. That is, Austen and Hume can serve as complements to one another. So Austen can help us to understand and to expand upon Hume. That represents a part of my third thesis, already discussed above. Next, Hume, by making salient for us insights in Austen which are often given short shrift, can help us to understand and to expand upon Austen. That represents a fourth thesis, emphasizing the advantages of adopting a Humean perspective in reading Austen. The question of how literature in general, and Austen’s literature in particular, can act as a thought experiment will be addressed in the first chapter, with an eye to establishing the groundwork for specific examples and analyses that appear in each succeeding chapter. The second chapter will pick up a thread of this discussion and pursue some questions about the effects of literary form on such an enterprise.

It is important to note that Austen’s works are among those that have, as Hume puts it, “survived all the caprices of mode and fashion” (ST 233). Indeed the spate of film adaptations of Austen’s novels (although I will have some harsh things to say about a few of them) has continued in a way that has exceeded the critics’ expectations, and is considered to be
a consequence rather than the cause of Austen’s popularity. With assessments such as these in the contemporary critical literature, it seems fair to maintain that Austen’s novels have stood the test of time, and have stood it rather better than a lot of other works.

Works of art often have, in respect to tests of time, a longer shelf life than other products of human intellectual endeavor. No alteration in government, religion, or language can obscure the glory of a Homer, says Hume. On the other hand, theologies, philosophical theories, and the hypotheses of science are often overturned or superseded. Indeed, “nothing has been experienced more liable to the revolutions of chance and fashion than . . . decisions of science” (ST 242) while “Terence and Virgil maintain an universal, undisputed empire over the minds of men” (ST 243). Hume makes these points in order to show that finding a criterion or standard of taste is not as difficult as it might seem at first glance – or even as difficult as it might be to find a standard for evaluation in other apparently more objective contexts. I make them again in order to stress that Hume himself saw a kind of resistance to inessentials, a kind of universal accessibility in art, and especially in literature, that could be counted on to engage the faculties, including the rational faculties, irrespective of cultural context. This is reminiscent of the Aristotelian claim that poetry deals with the universal while history deals with the particular. And this in turn is relevant to the present project because it provides us with an independent Humean argument for the continuing relevance of many of Hume’s insights.

I remember a Hume conference during the course of which a young epistemologist was holding forth on Hume’s account of knowledge, working well within the conceptual schemes employed by Alston and Goldman and Lehrer and other contemporary epistemologists. A Hume scholar of my acquaintance rose up like an avenging angel during the question-and-answer period and pointed out that those concepts would not even have been recognized by Hume, that Hume’s use of “idea” does not correspond to our contemporary understanding of “belief,” that Hume’s epistemology cannot – at least not without dozens of caveats and amendments – fit into the relevant conceptual schemes. I have elsewhere heard not dissimilar things said of Hume’s philosophy of mind – that it fails, or proves inapplicable within a more advanced philosophical framework,
or is no longer relevant to our inquiries and interests. Some of Hume’s philosophy, then, is thought by at least some philosophers to have met the very fate of speculative opinion that Hume outlines: “other theories and systems have supplied . . . [its] place, which again gave place to their successors” (ST 242).

My point, of course, is that if a novelist’s work has proved more or less impervious to changes and innovations of various kinds and speaks almost as readily to a contemporary audience as it does to people of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, then a few circumspect claims of universality do not seem out of place. Consider that the focal interest of the works in question involves their ethical perspicacity and that those very insights and modes of ethical reasoning are closely aligned, if I can make my case, with those of David Hume. It may be held, given the preceding, that Austen’s novels can provide us both with thought experiments and with outright illustrations that support or demonstrate particular points which Hume himself made about morality or moral reasoning, about aesthetic or epistemic norms. If so, and this would be my fifth and final thesis, then we can claim for Hume’s ethics, and for some of his philosophy of mind and epistemology and aesthetics as well, a similar universality and breadth of accessibility. That is, much of Hume’s philosophy (in particular the part that he believed was most important) retains both immediacy and relevance.

As is evident from the preceding, establishing the second and fifth theses depends on my ability to establish the other three. That is, if it can be established that there is a close correspondence between the various norms endorsed by Hume and Austen, that Austen’s novels can elicit from us distinctively Humean responses, insights and methods of evaluation, and that Hume can help us better to take advantage of what is there in Austen, then I will have shown something both about the contemporary relevance of those insights and about Austen’s affinity for the worldview of the Enlightenment.
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Chapter 11 (“Hume and Austen on Pride”) first appeared in from “David Hume and Jane Austen on Pride: Ethics in the Enlightenment,”
ABBREVIATIONS

Austen


Titles will be abbreviated as is standard:

E  *Emma* (vol. 4)
MP  *Mansfield Park* (vol. 3)
MW  *Minor Works* (including *Lady Susan, The Watsons, Sanditon*; vol. 6)
NA  *Northanger Abbey* (vol. 5)
P  *Persuasion* (vol. 5)
PP  *Pride and Prejudice* (vol. 2)
SS  *Sense and Sensibility* (vol. 1)

Hume

The following abbreviations are used:

How Literature Can Be a Thought Experiment: Alternatives to and Elaborations of Original Accounts

Much has been written about the relationship between literature and moral philosophy and about how literature contributes to our moral education. I have claimed at the outset of this book that literature can make such contributions not just by providing striking illustrations of particular moral insights (although it certainly does that) but sometimes by leading us to have such insights, insights that reflective thinking alone is unlikely to produce. This is not the first occasion on which I have made such claims in print. More importantly, I am by no means the first philosopher to do so, which makes me beholden to those whose endeavors and observations precede my own, or whose work has paralleled my personal efforts. I will begin by addressing the work of the most prominent of these investigators, and eventually branch out to discuss the observations of others who are, I am afraid, too numerous to be done justice to in a single chapter. Divergences between the former and my own project will be employed as a template to guide the direction of the discussion.

Martha Nussbaum claims that literature, or at least the best literature, can evoke from us the fineness of perception requisite for moral judgment. She maintains that literature contributes to moral knowledge in two ways. First, it offers paradigms of conduct. Next, and perhaps more important, it draws us into a form of imaginative engagement and awareness that is vital for the deployment of what Nussbaum regards as a characteristically Aristotelian ethical perspective in all its complexity and responsiveness to human experience, a kind of awareness that is less accessible from the standpoint of “excessively simplistic and reductive approaches to human experience . . . that can be found in some parts of philosophy.”¹ Nussbaum

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emphasizes that “it is seeing a complex concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling”\(^2\) that makes some kinds of fiction an adjunct to ethical judgment. Vital to the exploration of such a moral stance are “(1) an insistence on the plurality and non-commensurability of a well lived life; (2) an insistence on the importance of contextual complexity and particularized judgment in good deliberation; (3) an insistence on the cognitive role of the emotions; (4) an insistence on human vulnerability and the vulnerability of the good.”\(^3\) In the preceding claims and explorations Nussbaum has come much closer than most philosophers to the provision of a satisfying and convincing account of what can happen at the intersection of ethics and aesthetics and of how it is that one can do ethics by perusing or creating literature. The claims which I will make throughout this book owe a great deal to some of the ground that Nussbaum has already broken, but depart from her assumptions in three ways.

First, while I absolutely agree that the ethical significance of literature crucially involves its eliciting of emotion, I do not believe that emotions are value judgments, as Nussbaum has maintained,\(^4\) nor am I convinced that such an account of emotion is compatible with an emphasis on the role of emotion in our moral engagement with fiction. Second, I am more inclined to regard literature as a thought experiment which articulates hypothetical cases, elicits moral responses, and allows readers to test moral intuitions, to see whether different circumstances do or would make a fundamental difference in moral judgments or outcomes. This is not something that I see as being fundamentally at odds with Nussbaum’s project, but it does involve a considerable difference in focus: on clarity rather than the kind of complexity and obscurity that make Nussbaum “see literary works as guides to what is mysterious and messy and dark in our experience.”\(^5\) I am inclined to see the tack I am taking, though perhaps Nussbaum would think it a mistake to do so, as another chapter of the same project she pursues, whose different concerns stem at least in part from the fairly radical difference we see in the style, tone, and axiological

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\(^3\) Nussbaum, “Exactly and Responsibly,” 348.


predilections of Jane Austen and Henry James. And my third departure emerges from this, for I want to claim that the kind of Jamesian role that Nussbaum finds for fiction in moral discourse does not exhaust or, indeed, begin to exhaust the potentialities of fiction as an adjunct to practical reason. As is evident, the latter two departures are in the nature of friendly amendments rather than disagreements, and the first need not constitute an objection to Nussbaum’s more general position on emotion and cognition, since she has been known to stress what she refers to as “the cognitive role of the imagination” in the context of her observations about literature and ethics. It is to a discussion of that issue that I will first turn.

In “Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance” Nussbaum contends that emotions are forms of judgment, explicitly arguing against accounts that would make relevant beliefs and perceptions mere constituents of the emotion (among other constituents which were not beliefs), or necessary or sufficient conditions for the emotion. Thus, as seems clear from the preceding restrictions, judgments, as Nussbaum uses the term, are beliefs, or at least embody beliefs. Emotions “embody not simply ways of seeing an object, but beliefs – often very complex – about the object.” It is this outright identification of emotion with belief, however complex and incisive that belief happens to be, that is at the root of my difficulty. For it is not clear that such an account of emotion sits at all comfortably with intentional objects that are not believed to exist but are merely imagined. Nussbaum repeatedly emphasizes the particularity, the fine-tunedness, of the reader’s attention. The proposition entertained by the reader in the course of an emotional response to a fiction could not, given this emphasis, involve some universal of which the fictional event represented a particular instance. Rather, the thought of the reader would have to be about a particular fictional event or entity. This means that, as Noel Carroll would put it, the relevant proposition would be entertained unasserted – entertained in imagination rather than believed.

There are ways, of course, to make a belief-based account of emotion compatible with a story about an emotional response to fiction: by

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7 Nussbaum, “Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance,” 278.
8 Nussbaum, “Emotions as Judgments of Value and Importance,” 276 – this, despite a footnoted caveat to the effect that in some human and all animal emotions “the presence of a certain kind of seeing as . . . is sufficient for emotion” (fn. 5, p. 276).
How Literature Can Be a Thought Experiment

resorting to the aforementioned universals. Such an approach would be quite at odds with Nussbaum’s insistence on particularity of focus, though it would provide us, as philosophers like Bijoy Boruah have pointed out, with a candidate belief that is not at odds with one’s belief that one is dealing with a fiction. Consider someone’s emotional response of disapprobation upon contemplating some fictional depiction of injustice – Sir Thomas Bertram’s attempt to bully Fanny Price into accepting Henry Crawford’s proposal, say. This need not be tied to some specific thought about the very particular injustice which is done to Fanny: the purposeful aim that is taken at her vulnerabilities, the false charges of ingratitude, the sincere horror that is expressed at the idea of female autonomy. These things are, after all, merely entertained in imagination and are not believed real. Instead, the belief in question could be the belief that to be treated as the character is treated constitutes an injustice, that to induce unjustified guilt and self-loathing in others in order to get them to do something which they do not want to do can be a serious moral wrong. This would be a belief about a type or kind of action rather than about particular people and their treatment of one another, for the latter are things that one is well aware are fictional. However, this solution to the problem is unavailable to Nussbaum, for it does not accord with the kind of focused specificity of response that she believes the right kind of reading can involve, a reading in the course of which no paraphrase or summary can hope to capture what is morally valuable about a given literary passage.

As will become evident, I am quite convinced that fictions very often give rise to just such universal beliefs as I have described and that these are extremely important in any assessment of the impact of literature on our moral lives, for beliefs about situation types or about kinds of people apply equally well to the fiction and to the world, a topic to which I return later. It is worth noting at this juncture, however, that such beliefs really cannot explain all of our emotional reactions to literature, some of which are clearly directed toward quite specific individuals and events, just as Nussbaum’s stress on particularity leads us to believe they are. The latter must be addressed in any account that hopes to explain moral and emotional reactions to the fictional. Luckily, nothing suggests that we have to choose between the two approaches, for they are not mutually exclusive. My position is that literature elicits both kinds of responses and that no account of the moral impact of fiction can be complete without

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addressing each. But that does little to solve the problem which presently confronts us.

Neither beliefs about situation types nor far more specific beliefs about what is fictionally the case will have the right kinds of intentional objects, if what we are searching for is a cognition that corresponds to an emotional response to fiction as Nussbaum has described it. If we delight in Elizabeth Bennett’s defiance of Lady Catherine or empathetically share her regret over having made critically over-hasty judgments, then our delight and regret are about something we have imagined, not something that we believe has occurred. Setting aside the important question of the way in which what we imagine is guided by how it is that an author has put things, something that I believe Nussbaum is perfectly right about, but which will overcomplicate the present discussion, we need to consider the intentional object of a belief about what is fictionally the case. We do believe, after all, that Elizabeth Bennett is a fictional character, and that her courage and her feelings are likewise the products of an author’s pen. We believe that it is fictional that Elizabeth Bennett has a witty and acerbic father, that she is brave, that she regrets having made certain judgments about Darcy and his motives. That is, we may believe any number of things about what is fictionally the case, but a fictional character remains a theoretical entity of literary criticism, and as such it can have neither virtues nor sensitivities nor, indeed, non-metaphorical parents. And the belief that it is fictional that Elizabeth Bennett is brave is rather about the fictionality of a state of affairs than about something that would elicit our admiration. I suppose that a belief about the fictionality of something could elicit our admiration in circumstances where the fictionality itself is admirable: “You made that up? What an imagination you have!” But this is certainly not the kind of case under consideration. If admiration of Elizabeth Bennett on account of her courage, or disapproval of Sir Thomas Bertram on account of his maddening and narrow-minded certainty that he has a right to make everyone’s decisions for them, involve cognitions (thinking that is liable to rational assessment), as I agree with Nussbaum that they do, then these are thoughts entertained in imagination rather than beliefs. I am therefore happy to concede that there is a cognitive aspect of emotional reactions to fictional entities and events, but must insist that the candidate cognition is a thought entertained in imagination. This does not rule out the possibility that emotions with

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connections to beliefs can be aroused by literature, as has been indicated above. However, the latter have broader intentional objects – they would not be responses to specific fictional characters and incidents.

My second departure from Nussbaum’s approach, though I hope to have shown that the initial difference is not a vast one, is in regard to my contention that literature serves some of the same functions that thought experiments do in ethics, though often with considerably more effectiveness. I describe this as a departure not because I think Nussbaum’s account is in some way incompatible with it, but because the Jamesian concern with subtleties and mysterious or obscure distinctions seems rather different from the stark simplicity of the (often maligned) intuition pump, the kind of thought experiment with which fiction is most frequently associated. The term, I am told, originates with Daniel Dennett, in whose capable hands I leave the explanation:

If you look at the history of philosophy, you see that all the great and influential stuff has been technically full of holes but utterly memorable and vivid. They are what I call “intuition pumps” – lovely thought experiments. Like Plato’s cave, and Descartes’s evil demon, and Hobbes’ vision of the state of nature and the social contract, and even Kant’s idea of the categorical imperative. I don’t know of any philosopher who thinks any one of those is a logically sound argument for anything. But they’re wonderful imagination grabbers, jungle gyms for the imagination. They structure the way you think about a problem. These are the real legacy of the history of philosophy. A lot of philosophers have forgotten that, but I like to make intuition pumps.

I like to think I’m drifting back to what philosophy used to be, which has been forgotten in many quarters in philosophy during the last thirty or forty years, when philosophy has become a sometimes ridiculously technical and dry, logic-chopping subject for a lot of people – applied logic, applied mathematics. There’s always a place for that, but it’s nowhere near as big a place as a lot of people think.

I coined the term “intuition pump,” and its first use was derogatory. I applied it to John Searle’s “Chinese room,” which I said was not a proper argument but just an intuition pump. I went on to say that intuition pumps are fine if they’re used correctly, but they can also be misused. They’re not arguments, they’re stories. Instead of having a conclusion, they pump an intuition. They get you to say “Aha! Oh, I get it!”

If fiction is to be regarded as a thought experiment, then it will most often be so regarded with Dennett’s intuition pump firmly in mind.

13 http://www.edge.org/documents/ThirdCulture/r-Ch.10.html
I will try to show that Nussbaum’s Jamesian approach, however subtle and amenable to our apprehension of the obscure and the ambiguous, nonetheless encourages a clear and disambiguating alliance between literary works and certain kinds of ethical arguments. I will also attempt to establish that considering literary works outright as thought experiments requires one to take into account various kinds of subtleties and ambiguities in content and to consider as well the impact of literary form on how it is one takes that content. That is, I believe that Nussbaum’s approach, in some respects at least, does treat literature as a thought experiment, and that different literary styles and concerns give rise to quite distinct forms of thought experiment. But, as some readers will doubtless note, I use the term “thought experiment” rather broadly.

First, in arguing against Posner’s criticism of her work, Nussbaum makes it clear that the moral import of many works hinges on neither complexity nor obscurity. Dickens’ novels, for instance, are said to “take us into the lives of those who are different in circumstance from ourselves and enable us to understand how similar hopes and fears are differently realized in different social circumstances.”

This is clearly much the same process that we employ when we empathize with actual people. We form beliefs about their distinct situations and then proceed to imagine what it would be like to experience them. Although Nussbaum maintains that empathy in itself isn’t always sufficient for compassion, it seems clear that both fiction and empathy lead us to inhabit the worlds of others in imagination, just as they both encourage the adoption of alien perspectives. This is surely not insignificant when we choose to regard literature with an eye to its impact on our ethical lives. Neither need this aspect of our encounters with fiction be hindered by complexities and obscurity. In the case of the Dickens example, at least, much of the ethical impact of the work centers on dispelling illusions and clarifying facts.

My own contention about Hume and Austen isn’t simply that Austen provides us with illustrations of Hume’s ethical stance, though it will be necessary to establish a range of such similarities at the outset. I would like to establish further, beyond these initial parallels, that Austen’s novels may be regarded as thought experiments that demonstrate (at least in the loose sense employed by devotees of the intuition pump) something about the kind of moral reasoning that Hume advocates, that engage us in that rational/emotional process as part and parcel of our imaginative participation in the work.

Consider the simplest kinds of thought experiments, especially thought experiments in ethics, and how they work. Many of these are intended to test the effectiveness or applicability of moral principles (often by providing counterexamples) in a way that depends almost entirely on our immediate reactions to particular cases. Utilitarians present us with examples in which a rigid adherence to moral rules – the rule of promise-keeping, say – prevents an agent from saving a life. Deontologists, on the other hand, muster an arsenal of cases in which insignificant increases in utility are obtainable only at the expense of someone’s life or someone’s rights, attempting to show that utilitarians would be required by their ethical system to take lives and trample rights without compunction. Such examples cannot assume the truth of the presenter’s ethical stance without begging the question. They clearly do not assume the truth of the principle they are intended to criticize. The point of such thought experiments must be to confront the audience with a case to which they react as wrong, in order to demonstrate the inadequacy of the principle under consideration. Since this reaction should properly depend neither on the principle under review nor on that preferred by the presenter of the example, it seems clear that what is essential to the entire process is the emotional reaction of the auditor. That is, thought experiments, and the manner in which ethicists deploy them, suggest in themselves that emotion can play a serious role in ethics, something that Hume maintains from the outset when he claims that the source of morality is to be found in sentiment, and that our emotional reactions of approbation and disapprobation provide the key to identifying virtue and vice.

Some may maintain that if Austen were conducting thought experiments, she would have joined Hume as a teller of moral principles, assuming with Roy Sorensen that literary works cannot be regarded as thought experiments because their authors didn’t create them with this purpose in mind.15 But philosophers like Noel Carroll, Eileen John, Martha Nussbaum, and others suggest, as we have seen, that fiction can cause us to examine what concepts mean and can lead readers to apply them to characters and events on the basis of their actual conceptual commitments, ascribing to fiction the kind of clarificatory function typically associated with thought experiments. The same mechanism is thought to govern our reactions to fiction and to the world, leading these philosophers, just as Hume has done, to stress the connection between ethical salience and emotional response.

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