Show, Don't Tell: Emotion, Acquaintance and Moral Understanding Through Fiction

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This paper substantiates a distinction, built out of Gricean resources, between two kinds of communicative act: showing and telling. Where telling that p proceeds by recruiting an addressee's capacity to recognize trustworthy informants, showing does not. Instead, showing proceeds by presenting an addressee with a consideration that provides reason to believe that p (other than the reason provided by an informant's credibility), and so recruits their capacity to respond to those reasons. With this account in place, the paper defends an account of one way in which authors can show their readers that certain moral states of affairs obtain both inside, and outside of, their fictions. It is argued, moreover, that this kind of showing gives addressees access to more than just reasons for moral belief—it also gives them access to the sorts of reasons that enable agents to increase their moral understanding. In virtue of these latter capacities, the showing identified is a way of communicating about morality that is markedly different from the sort of moral testimony that many philosophers have been increasingly interested in of late.

Introduction

It is something of a truism that authors can 'show' rather than just 'tell'.[1] Indeed, a cursory look at many manuals for budding writers reveals the primacy of 'show, don't tell'—a writing technique that is said to produce literary works that are *pro tanto* artistically better.[2] However, while talk of the contrast between showing and telling is probably familiar to most people, it is a distinction that stands in need of theoretical clarification. On the one hand, 'showing' seems to be closely connected to sensory perception. However, the access we have to literary content is not perceptual. On the

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2 The idea was arguably popularized by Lubbock (1921). For contemporary examples, see Reedsyblog (2022) and Levy (2018). For a recent criticism of the rule, see Bennett (2015).

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other, the medium of literature—language—is the medium most closely associated with telling. Indeed, in the case of literature, we tend to say that writers tell their stories.[3]

Unfortunately, there have been few attempts, within philosophy of art and aesthetics, to theoretically clarify the distinction between showing and telling.[4] To be sure, the term 'show' is often recruited in arguments about the way(s) in which literature can be a source of knowledge (e.g. Nussbaum, 1990, p. 14; Carroll, 2000, p. 354; Gaut, 2007, p. 163). However, in such arguments, showing is simply construed as a way of conveying truths–that is, tokens of the term 'show' could be replaced with 'convey', or even 'tell', with no substantive change to the arguments that are advanced. Such arguments are unconcerned, then, with the narrower use of the term that appears to be invoked when we speak of showing as a distinctive way of conveying knowledge.

In the domain of moral philosophy, on the other hand, the difference between showing and telling is sometimes recruited in arguments for the potential of literature as a distinctly powerful resource for moral education. In her argument for the potential of narrative fiction to undermine prejudicial stereotypes, for instance, Zoë Cunliffe (2019) argues that one reason why narrative fiction is particularly well-placed to do this is that it shows rather than tells. On an intuitive level, Cunliffe's comments about the power of literature seem almost certainly correct. However, Cunliffe says nothing about what, exactly, the distinction between showing and telling amounts to. Clarifying the distinction would not only strengthen arguments such as Cunliffe's but it might also illuminate how other forms of art and communication may harbor valuable educative resources.

Here, I offer such a clarification. I defend a generic account of the distinction between showing and telling that allows for the possibility that not all showing recruits an addressee's sensory perception. As such, the account can easily accommodate the idea that literature can show. Having done this, I advance an account of one particular way authors can show moral facts via fiction. In doing so, my aim is to contribute to the long-running debate over how and what we might learn from fiction (Stolnitz, 1992; Diffey, 1995; Carroll, 2000, 2002; Currie, 2006; Gaut, 2007; Green, 2010, 2019; 2022), as well as help to clarify the more specific view about fiction's educative power that is pressed by philosophers like Cunliffe.

The paper proceeds as follows. In Section 1, I sketch my account, inspired by Paul Grice, of the distinction between showing and telling. In Section 2, I focus on one particular way in which we can show moral facts. In Section 3, I explain how fiction can show moral facts in the same way. In Section 4, I respond to objections. Here, I also discuss the relationship between my own account and Mitchell Green's (2022) recent discussion of showing in fiction. In Section 5, I explain my account's explanatory pay-off in terms of

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3 Of course, we often speak of showing in contexts that do not involve vision, such as when we say that the proof shows that the premises entail the conclusion. In such cases, however, we also tend to use visual metaphors to describe the insight that showing enables; we say things like, for instance, 'I see it for myself'. It is possible, then, that when we use the term 'showing' in these contexts, as well as when we distinguish between 'showing' and 'telling' in discussions of literature, we speak only metaphorically. Yet, even so, we might still hope for a non-metaphoric account of the distinction to be forthcoming.

4 One important exception is Mitchell Green (2007; 2010; 2019; 2022). I discuss Green's views in Sections 1 and 4.

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showing's enabling agents to increase their moral understanding, as opposed to merely giving them more moral knowledge.

1. Showing and Telling

In his famous essay 'Meaning', Grice (1989) distinguished between two kinds of meaning. The first is what he called 'non-natural meaning' (henceforth $_{NN}$meaning). The second is what he called 'natural meaning' (henceforth $_{N}$meaning). While the distinction between $_{N}$meaning and $_{NN}$meaning is not equivalent to the distinction I am ultimately interested in here, Grice's attempt to delineate $_{NN}$meaning, and the subsequent discussion it spawned, harbors resources for clarifying the difference between showing and telling. It is worth spending some time, then, on the details of that attempt.

Grice approaches $_{NN}$meaning via a contrast with $_{N}$meaning. Unlike $_{NN}$meaning, $_{N}$meaning is factive. This is the meaning at issue when we say things like, for instance, 'Peter's spots mean that he has measles' or, 'those clouds mean rain'. Note that Peter's spots cannot mean measles if Peter does not have measles and clouds can't mean rain if they do not foretell rain. On the other hand, $_{NN}$meaning is not factive. If, by uttering *x*, Susan $_{NN}$means that she cannot come to the party, it is possible that Susan can, in fact, come to the party.

Grice wondered whether we have an instance of $_{NN}$meaning whenever a communicator:

I. intends the receiver to believe *p*; and,
II. intends the receiver to recognize the intention in I. (Grice, 1989, p. 214)

However, this analysis was thought to be subject to counterexamples. Consider Herod's displaying to Salome the severed head of John the Baptist in order to convey to Salome that John is dead. Herod's act satisfies I and II, but, Grice says, it would be misguided to call it an instance of $_{NN}$meaning. To do so would flatten an important difference between what Herod does when he displays the severed head, and what he would have done if he had simply uttered the sentence, 'John is dead'. Only the latter, Grice thinks, is an instance of $_{NN}$meaning. Accordingly, a third condition of $_{NN}$meaning was introduced. Thus, for a speaker to $_{NN}$mean that *p*, they must:

I. intend the receiver to believe *p*; and,
II. intend the receiver to recognize the intention in I; and,
III. intend that the addressee form the belief that *p* on the basis of recognizing the complex intention specified by I and II. (Grice, 1989, pp. 218–219)

When the speaker intends an addressee to recognize the complex intention specified by I and II, and to take that intention as a reason for belief, they invite the addressee to consider the degree to which they are trustworthy and to rely on them to the extent that they are.[5] It is thus in virtue of a speaker's credibility, determined by their track record

5 Not everyone agrees that the invitation to trust that is extended by a speaker must be an invitation to consider the trustworthiness of the speaker. See Moran (2005) for a compelling alternative. Whether one prefers Moran's account or the view I sketch here, it follows that conditions I–III specify a communicative act in which the addressee is invited to make herself vulnerable to the epistemic agency of the speaker. On the view I will be presupposing here, it is this feature that is essential to telling.

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of sincerity and competence, that a speaker can provide an addressee with a reason for belief. In cases of $_{NN}$meaning, then, it is the speaker's epistemic agency that provides the addressee with a reason for belief.

Grice's ultimate project is to give an account of linguistic meaning in terms of what speakers mean. Accordingly, his analysis of $_{NN}$meaning has been subsequently discussed as an attempted analysis of 'speaker meaning'.[6] We refer to speaker meaning when we say that a *person* means something by, for instance, uttering some sentence. Understood as an analysis of speaker meaning, however, there are problems with I–III. For instance, even though Herod does not invite Salome to trust him, it seems perfectly appropriate to say that, by displaying the head to Salome, Herod means that John is dead (Green, 2007; cf. Clark, 1996). It looks, then, like condition III is not necessary for speaker meaning (see also Schiffer, 1972; Neale, 1992; Sperber and Wilson, 2015).[7] And yet, there is no doubt that I–III articulate necessary and sufficient conditions for a particular way in which people can mean things. Following Schiffer (1972, p. 42), I will assume that I–III specify the conditions of *telling*. Telling someone that *x* is *one way* a speaker may mean that *x*. It is with respect to telling, moreover, that we can make sense of there being an important difference between what Herod does when he displays the head of John the Baptist and what he would have done had he simply uttered the sentence 'John is dead'. In both cases, Herod means that John is dead. However, in each case, Herod pursues his communicative goal differently.

Here, some distinctions will help. Of the case where Herod means that John is dead by uttering the sentence 'John is dead', we can say that:

1) Herod tells Salome that John is dead.

Of the situation in which Herod presents Salome with John's head, in order to convey to her that John is dead, it is natural to say each of the following three things:[8]

2) John's severed head shows that John is dead.
3) Herod shows John's head to Salome.
4) Herod shows Salome that John is dead (by showing her the head.)

The sort of showing at issue in 2) is a familiar one. This is the sort of showing we refer to when we say, for instance, that someone's flushed cheeks show their embarrassment, or that the clock shows the time. This is also the sort of showing that Mitchell Green (2007) discusses in his attempt to articulate a fully comprehensive model of communication–a model that accommodates the sense of communication at issue when people speak to each other, as well as the more permissive sense that is invoked by biologists, when they talk about successful signalling in the non-human world. For Green, whenever some feature

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6 Henceforth, I will replace talk of $_{NN}$meaning with talk of a *person's* meaning something.

7 While some people merely attack the necessity of Grice's third condition, some philosophers—such as Wayne Davis (1992, 2002), Green (2007) and Dorit Bar-On (2013)—also reject the claim that speaker meaning must involve having intentions about other people's mental states. Fortunately, I do not need to take a stand on this issue here.

8 For assistance with the following tripartite distinction, I am grateful to Tomasz Zyglewicz.

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of the environment reliably conveys information or provides evidence, that feature shows what it conveys or provides evidence for. Importantly, then, this sort of showing does not presuppose intentions, communicators or even the presence of addressees that can recognize that something is being shown. We can therefore understand it as occurring whenever some object or state of affairs carries $_N$meaning, even if no one is present to recognize that this is the case.

According to one account of $_N$meaning, whether something carries $_N$meaning is a matter of whether it provides evidence for what is meant, where the notion of evidence at play here is, importantly, a factive one.[9] If this is right, then if something $_N$means that *p*, it provides sufficient reason to believe that *p,* where sufficient reasons are factive, and so contrasted with merely apparent or defeated reasons. This is, I think, a highly plausible interpretation of $_N$meaning. After all, it would clearly accommodate the sense that it is $_N$meaning at issue in statements such as, for instance 'the fact that five is odd means that its successor is even', and 'the fact that Ann and Tom are here means that Ann is here'. Assuming this reading of '$_N$meaning' is right, we can thus analyze the sort of general, relatively ubiquitous, showing that is at issue in 2) as follows:

> *General showing*: 'O shows that *p*' is true iff O provides sufficient reason to believe that *p*, where O is some object or state of affairs.

The sense of 'show' at issue in 3) is different. This kind of showing involves an agent intentionally displaying something to an audience. To distinguish it from what I have just called 'general showing', I will call this kind of showing 'objectual showing'. We can analyze objectual showing as follows:

> *Objectual showing*: 'S shows O to A' is true iff S presents O to A, intending A to attend to O, where O is some object or state of affairs.[10]

We can thus analyze 4)—which, for clarity, I will call 'communicative showing'—in terms of general showing and objectual showing. Accordingly:

> *Communicative showing*: 'S shows A that *p*' is true iff i) S presents O to A, intending A to attend to O; ii) O provides sufficient reason to believe that *p*, and iii) A comes to possess the reason, provided by O, to believe that *p*, in virtue of i), where O is some object or state of affairs.

Because communicative showing is invoked whenever we say that *an agent* shows another person that something is the case, and because I am ultimately interested in examining the idea that authors can show readers that certain things are true, I will henceforth be primarily interested in communicative showing. (Indeed, unless I explicitly specify otherwise, when I use the term 'showing' from here on in, it will be communicative showing

9 This is a line developed by Nozick (1983) and given a modal development by Neale (n.d.).

10 Note that overtness is not built into this analysis. Accordingly, S need not make it manifest to A that he intends A to attend to O. This would seem to be (at least part of) what makes objectual showing different from 'objectual speaker meaning' in Green (2007, p. 68).

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that I have in mind.) Accordingly, it is worth spending a little time drawing out the consequences of this last analysis.

It follows from iii) that, whenever S shows A that *p*, A will either come to know or be put in a position to know that *p*. This is because when one possesses sufficient reason to believe something, one is in a position to know that thing. Now, in order to possess the reason, provided by the severed head, to believe that John is dead, Salome needs to satisfy two conditions.[11] The first condition is an epistemic one: the consideration that provides the reason (in this case, the severed head) must be in the agent's 'epistemic ken' (Lord, 2018b, pp. 67–96). That is, the agent must know that the consideration obtains, or otherwise have some form of epistemic access to that consideration (i.e. via perception) and so be able to know that it obtains. So, if Herod fails to get Salome to attend to the severed head—perhaps because he does not realize that there is a tree obstructing her vision—then he does not give Salome a reason to believe that John is dead, and so does not show her that John is dead. Meeting the epistemic condition, however, is not sufficient for reason possession. Suppose Salome sees John's head (and so meets the epistemic condition) but, for some bizarre reason, lacks the ability to infer from the fact that someone has lost their head to the conclusion that they are dead. In such a case, Salome still will not be in a position to reasonably believe that John is dead. Accordingly, in order to come to possess the epistemic reason that is provided by the object that carries $_{\mathrm{N}}$meaning, the addressee must satisfy both an epistemic condition, as well as a practical condition where, as per Errol Lord, 'in order to meet the practical condition for some reason *r* to ϕ, one must be in a position to manifest knowledge about how to use *r* to ϕ' (Lord, 2018b, p. 99).

The inclusion of iii) clarifies Green's (2022) recent extension of (what I have called) 'general showing', to the idea that people can show each other things. Agents can show, as Green puts it, by 'making a fact manifest in a way that need not be illocutionary' (2022, p. 278). The requirement of reason possession clarifies what is involved in making a fact manifest, and this enables us to properly understand instances of communicative failure. For instance, if Herod does not realize that Salome's view is obstructed, we would not want to say that he has shown her that John is dead. That is, rather than saying that Salome failed to believe what Herod showed her, we would want to say that Herod failed to show her that John is dead. On the other hand, by requiring only reason possession and not full-blown knowledge, iii) can capture cases in which we want to be able to say that an addressee was shown that *p* but, through inattention or laziness, they have failed to come to know that *p*. For example, suppose a patient goes to the doctor and presents him with a rash, convinced that it indicates something serious. The rash does indeed indicate something serious, but the doctor is feeling lazy; he looks at the rash, but his mind is elsewhere. In such a case, the doctor will, in virtue of his witnessing the rash and having the relevant know-how, come to possess reasons for believing the patient has a serious illness. The doctor possesses the relevant reasons and so is in a position to know, but he has failed to 'put it all together'. Here, it is natural to say that the patient showed the doctor that

11 There is a large literature dedicated to the question of what it takes to possess a reason (also sometimes glossed in terms of 'having' a reason, or a 'subjective reason') (see Schroeder, 2008, 2011; Whiting, 2014; Sylvan, 2015; Lord, 2018b). The account I will use comes from Lord (2018b).

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something serious is wrong with her, but that the doctor failed to follow through on the reasons she gave him.

Importantly, communicative showing can be intentional or unintentional. When it is intentional, the agent who shows will mean what she shows. Accordingly, even if Salome does not meet the just-sketched conditions on reason possession, she may still come to believe that John is dead by resorting to what Herod means. Suppose that Salome forgot to wear her glasses; she might well ask of her attendant, 'what on earth does Herod mean by putting this thing in my face?' and her attendant might reasonably respond, 'he means that John is dead'. Upon hearing this, Salome might come to believe that John is dead, by taking the fact that this is what Herod means as her reason for belief. Of course, it is not always possible to do this. This is because, when communicative showing is unintentional, we cannot say that the communicator means that *p*. For example, suppose I present my fancy new shoes to my flat mate, intending that she take a look at them and share my excitement. Here, I engage in objectual showing: I present her with my shoes, intending that she attend to them. Unbeknownst to me, however, the fact that I have bought fancy shoes means that I am going to have trouble paying my rent this month. As such, if my flat mate forms the belief that I am going to have trouble paying my rent this month, it will not be because she recognizes that this is what I mean, but because I have accidentally shown her.

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that communicative showing is factive. Accordingly, if Herod shows Salome that John is dead, then it must be the case that John is dead. If Herod presents Salome with a mannequin dressed up to look like John, he cannot show her that John is dead, even if Salome thinks that this is what he has done.[12] In this kind of case, Herod presents something that provides a merely apparent reason for belief. It is, therefore, either a case of making-as-if to show or (if it were not an attempt to deceive Salome, but an innocent mistake on Herod's part) a case of merely-attempted showing.

As described, showing and telling are generic categories. By writing a mathematical proof or philosophical argument, for instance, it is possible for people to show others that certain truths obtain. Telling, moreover, can proceed without words at all, as when one colleague indicates to another that the boss is in a bad mood by way of hand gesture and eye-rolling (see also Green, 2007, p. 54). Of course, showing and telling differ in terms of the basis for belief that each provides the addressee. In telling, the addressee's basis for belief necessarily involves the credibility of the teller.[13] Telling is thus only successful when the speaker is manifestly trustworthy. Showing, however, can be successful even

12 It is not impossible to imagine a case in which the only way a mannequin could appear is at the expense of John's life. Here, the mannequin would provide sufficient reason to believe that John is dead, although whether Herod can successfully show this to Salome would depend on her capacity to recognize the connection between the mannequin and John's death. Thank you to an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

13 I say it 'involves' the speaker's credibility because it is usually thought that the basis of testimonial belief is speaker credibility in combination with the addressee's prior sense of what is probable. Thank you to Miranda Fricker for pushing me on this point.

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if the communicating agent is manifestly untrustworthy. This is because the reasons that showing enables an addressee to possess are not provided by the communicator's credibility, but by an object or state of affairs that provides sufficient reason for belief.

2. Showing Moral Facts

So far, I have said nothing about what kinds of facts can be shown. In this section, I want to home in on one particular way that *moral* facts can be shown. In doing this, I will be assuming that moral facts are objective and that moral knowledge is possible. Importantly, I will also be assuming that not all moral knowledge is theoretical and that it is not always knowledge of universals. That is, one need not engage in explicit reasoning to gain moral knowledge, and the knowledge one gains may be about particulars–knowledge that '*this* action is wrong'. This kind of moral knowledge, I take it, can be gained from encountering a situation and simply coming to see it in the right way. As I will suggest, one way we can show each other moral facts is by enabling other people to have these sorts of encounters.

Here is the sort of thing I have in mind. Suppose a friend takes you to a particularly unethical slaughterhouse intending for you to observe the way the animals are treated there. When you observe the slaughterhouse employees following the official procedures, their actions strike you as morally wrong. Suppose you come to believe that the slaughterhouse procedures are wrong, and that (let's stipulate) your belief is justified–it results in the right way from your paying careful attention to the employees' behaviour. Of such a case, we can say that your friend shows you that the procedures at the slaughterhouse are morally wrong. She has shown you a moral fact.

In the kind of case just presented, it is highly plausible that one's emotional response to what is perceived plays a role in the formation of the belief that what is perceived is morally wrong. If one adopts a representational theory of the emotions—the view according to which emotions are *about* something, and embody a 'way of seeing' what they are about (Nussbaum, 2001)—then one could say the following: when you perceive the employees' behaviour, your emotional response to what you see represents or construes those features as wrong. Now, if one also holds the view that some emotions can be a source of (defeasible) non-inferential justification for evaluative beliefs (henceforth, *epistemic sentimentalism*), then one will also want to say the following: it is your emotional response to the behaviour that you see at the slaughterhouse that justifies your belief that what you witness is wrong.[14]

Epistemic sentimentalism has gained in popularity in recent years (Zagzebski, 2003; Döring, 2007; Kauppinen, 2013; Pelser, 2014, and the account I will offer in the next section—of literature's capacity to show us moral facts—is going to be made on the assumption that some version of the view is true.[15] Arguments for epistemic sentimentalism

14 The sort of emotions that can justify beliefs about what is objectively valuable (as opposed to beliefs about one's own emotional triggers and dispositions) are those that are accompanied by a normative expectation that others share one's emotional response (see Kauppinen, 2013).

15 I will not be assuming that one cannot have moral knowledge unless one's belief is based on emotional experience, but that emotional experience it is one route to moral knowledge.

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depend on some variety of the (to my mind) compelling claim that if it appears to a subject that *p*, then S has a defeasible justification for believing that *p*.[16] Strengths of epistemic sentimentalism include its ability to explain the fact that moral beliefs gained via first-personal encounters, like the belief you gain from visiting the slaughterhouse, tend to be held with a comparatively greater level of conviction, and so be more motivating, than moral beliefs that are the product of theoretical reasoning. The view can explain this insofar as emotion is widely regarded as a paradigmatically motivating mental state.

One particular variety of epistemic sentimentalism holds that emotions are (or are analogous to) a form of perception (de Sousa, 1987; Johnston, 2001; Roberts, 2003; Zagzebski, 2003; Döring, 2007; Tappolet, 2011; Pelser, 2014; Lord, 2018a).[17] Call this view *sentimental perceptualism*. Many sentimental perceptualists think that both sensory perception and emotion enable agents to get acquainted with certain sorts of property and, in doing so, justify beliefs about those properties. However, where sensory perception enables acquaintance with properties such as colour and shape, sentimental perceptualists believe that affective attitudes enable acquaintance with evaluative properties. For instance, speaking of the way we might get acquainted with the funniness of a joke, Adam Pelser notes: 'While I might desire to hear a funny joke or believe that a joke is funny without feeling amusement, until I am amused by the joke I have not yet directly experienced the funniness of the joke' (Pelser, 2014, p. 112).

Strictly speaking, the argument I will advance here—that literature can show moral facts when it arouses our emotions—depends only on the possibility of some version of epistemic sentimentalism being true, and not the truth of sentimental perceptualism in particular. After all, if emotions can justify beliefs, then one can come to possess reasons for belief by emotionally responding in the appropriate way to the scene or action with which one is presented. Accordingly, it is partly by virtue of one's emotional response to the scene at the slaughterhouse that one is shown a moral fact. However, for the sake of advancing my claims in what comes, I am also going to recruit sentimental perceptualism, and so frame emotion as a kind of perception. In my view, one of the chief benefits of this framing is that it enables us to say that we can get *acquainted*, via the emotions, with moral properties or values.[18]

To be sure, the idea that we can get acquainted with values is one that is more at home in aesthetics than moral theory. Traditionally, many aestheticians have thought that knowledge of an object's aesthetic properties must go via acquaintance with that object, where

16 As Kauppinen notes (2013, p. 26), this view has been called 'phenomenal conservatism' (Huemer, 2001, 2005) as well as 'dogmatism' (Pryor, 2000).

17 Epistemic sentimentalism can be supported by different theories of the emotion, such as the view that emotions are judgements (see Roeser, 2011), as well as tracking theories (Allman and Woodward, 2008). In my view, both theories face greater challenges than do perceptual theories. Recalcitrant emotions present a problem for judgementalism (see D'Arms and Jacobson, 2003; Roberts, 2003; Kauppinen, 2013, pp. 14–15). Tracking theories face the challenge of explaining how emotions can teach us that certain emotional responses are *merited* (see Kauppinen, 2021).

18 Henceforth, I will speak interchangeably of 'moral values', 'moral properties' and 'evaluative properties'.

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acquaintance is understood to consist in some sort of first-hand encounter with, or 'direct experience' of, the object (Mothersill, 1961; Sibley, 1965; Tormey, 1973; Wollheim, 1980; Pettit, 1983; Whiting, 2015; Nguyen, 2017). Now, although many philosophers today tend to disagree that acquaintance is necessary for aesthetic knowledge (because, say, they think one can get aesthetic knowledge by simply trusting what another person tells you), many still think that acquaintance has some important benefits (Budd, 2003; Laetz, 2008; Lord, 2016, 2018a; Ransom, 2019). Errol Lord (2018a) has recently provided a plausible account of this epistemic benefit. According to Lord, acquaintance is an experience that enables an agent to fittingly respond to the aesthetic facts. To see what this means, consider the following two cases.

Suppose my friend Susan tells me that Diego Rivera's mural *Man Controller of the Universe,* which I have never seen, is awesome, and suppose I justifiably believe her. Even though I now believe that the mural is awesome—indeed, I may even know it—it would be very strange for me to also feel awe for the mural and to sing its praises to my friends. If, on the other hand, I visited the Palacio de Bellas Artes and saw *Man Controller of the Universe* myself, my awe and praise would be fitting. Only in the latter case am I acquainted with the awesomeness of the painting, where this amounts to my having cognitive access not just to the proposition 'the mural is awesome', but to the actual awesomeness of the mural. When one has this kind of cognitive access, one's mental state represents both the property of being awesome as well as the lower-order properties that make the mural awesome in a particular way (for example, the juxtaposition of colours, the huge size of the painting, and so on). Moreover, it is by representing the lower-order properties that one's mental state also represents the awesomeness, meaning that the representation of awesomeness is 'inseparable' (Lopes, 2009) from the representation of the lower-order properties that realize it. Acquaintance thus enables one to fittingly respond to the aesthetic properties about which one comes to know, because the reasons for those responses are given by the way in which things are, say, awesome, beautiful or elegant.

Why, then, is it good to be able to speak of acquaintance, via the emotions, with moral facts? Well, consider how, once you have visited the slaughterhouse, you are in a position to respond fittingly to the wrongness of what you see there. It would be fitting, for instance, for you to desire that the slaughterhouse shut down and to want to protest its operation. It makes sense to say, moreover, that your responses are intelligible because, unlike the person who forms the same moral belief but on the basis of testimony alone, you have actually gotten acquainted with the wrongness of the procedures at the slaughterhouse. The strength of sentimental perceptualism, then, is that it enables us to say just this.

Now, it bears emphasizing that both perceptual sentimentalism and epistemic sentimentalism more generally face challenges. Chief among these challenges is the fact that where sensory perception is generally a reliable route to knowledge, most people (save the perfectly virtuous) do not enjoy a default right to trust their emotional responses (just think of the last time you misconstrued a situation because of fear or jealousy). However, from the fact that the justificatory force of emotion is sometimes—or even often—defeated, it does not follow that, in the absence of such defeaters, they cannot confer justification sufficient for knowledge. Even so, one thing that a minimally adequate epistemic sentimentalism (whether the perceptual variety or not) would seem to owe us is an account of when, exactly, the

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justificatory force of our emotions is defeated. In my view, a successful account here would need to say (at least) something along the following lines. First, it must not be the case that one is under the influence of evidence-resistant prejudice, or that one is engaging in motivated reasoning. Accordingly, your emotion will not justify your belief if you go to the slaughterhouse desiring to confirm your prejudicial belief that all slaughterhouse employees are morally deplorable. Second, it must be the case that one empathizes with the feelings and reactive attitudes of those that are immediately affected by the action or situation that is the target of the emotion. So, one's emotion can only justify a moral belief about the slaughterhouse practices if one is empathetic to the feelings of both the animals and the employees. Together, these conditions specify what David Hume (1751) called 'the common point of view'–the view from which one's moral emotions can be a source of moral knowledge.[19]

As sketched, the sort of epistemic and perceptual sentimentalism I have in mind remains schematic, and much more remains to be said to fill in the details. While going beyond this and defending a fully fleshed-out account of the view would take me well beyond the scope of this paper, my hope is that the central claims at issue are sufficiently plausible to be worth taking seriously. Assuming, then, that a more worked-out version of the view can be successfully made out, I am now ready to explain one way in which authors of fiction can show moral facts: by enabling something like the experience one might have when they are taken to the slaughterhouse.

3. Showing Moral Facts in, and Through, Fiction

In my view, it is the capacity for us to respond, emotionally, to things that are merely imagined that enables authors to show moral facts that obtain within their fictions—whether intentionally or not.[20] More specifically, it is by responding emotionally to what authors tell us is true in their stories—henceforth, 'fictionally true' (Lewis, 1983; Currie, 1990)—that we can get imaginatively acquainted with evaluative properties that also obtain in the fiction. This acquaintance gives us reason to believe that certain particular moral propositions—such as 'what Character X did was unfair'—are fictionally true. It also gives us reason to believe that if what we are told is fictionally true were actually true, then certain evaluative properties would obtain in the actual world too.[21]

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19 See also Kauppinen (2013).

20 Recall that communicative showing need not be intentional.

21 Note that what I will describe here can also be true of non-fiction. Think, for instance, of the way long-form journalism might emotionally engage us, even if we do not think the author is being faithful to what actually happened. However, as I indicated in the introduction, I am focusing on fiction for the sake of contributing to the debate over fiction's epistemic value. As I understand that debate, it can be framed in terms of two different, but equally important questions: 1) How is it that works of fiction might teach us something about the real world, *despite* not being about characters/events that really existed/occurred? and 2) How is it that a work, *in virtue of* being about characters/events that are fictional, can teach us something about the real world? Accordingly, although I am not primarily concerned with answering the second question, I see myself as making a positive contribution to the debate in virtue of answering the first one.

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Here is a very simple example. In Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life* (2015), Jude is the victim of extreme cruelty. However, Yanagihara does not tell her readers that this is the case. That is, she does not intend for her readers to believe it on the basis of their recognizing her intention that they do so. Instead, she tells her readers about the details of Jude's childhood. By imagining these details in the way that Yanagihara describes them, our emotions are engaged such that we see for ourselves the cruelty to which Jude was submitted. In other words, it is the way Yanagihara's description of Jude's childhood engages us emotionally, and *not* her authorial credibility, that gives us reason to believe that, in the fiction, Jude was the victim of a particularly extreme variety of cruelty. A result of the foregoing is that, by *telling* their readers what is fictionally true—by inviting readers to trust their authorial credibility when it comes to the explicit content of their story—authors are capable of *showing* readers that circumstances in the fiction instantiate certain normative properties. Now, this exemplifies the kind of thing we have in mind when we discuss showing as an artistic merit of literature. We tend to think that a work that does not 'make it all explicit' but, instead, engages us emotionally is *pro tanto* artistically better.[22] However, when authors show what is morally the case in their fictions, they also show readers certain things—namely, moral counterfactuals—that are *actually* true. Our response to Jude's childhood is the means by which we gain reasons to believe that certain kinds of actions, in particular kinds of circumstance, instantiate certain values. Thus, when authors show us that certain values obtain in their fictions, they also show us what would be the case, evaluatively, if certain other conditions obtained in the actual world. Authors can, therefore, show readers that if things in the actual world were in relevant respects similar to the way they are in the fictional world, then certain other things would also be evaluatively the case too (see also McCormick, 1988).

Of course, most people that read *A Little Life* will already believe that child trafficking is wrong, even if they have never contemplated the particular wrongness of the way Jude is treated (cf. Stolnitz, 1992). Accordingly, it is not strictly necessary to engage, emotionally, to recognize that the way Jude is treated is wrong.[23] In the final section, I will explain why getting emotionally engaged in the way I have sketched in this section is epistemically and ethically valuable, even when one *already* knows that the type of action or circumstance that the fiction depicts instantiates a particular moral status. Note, however, that it is not necessary, for one to become acquainted, in fiction, with the way in which a particular action or circumstance instantiates a moral value, that one already knows that this sort of action or circumstance instantiates that value (cf. Lamarque and Olsen, 1994, pp. 289–321).[24] This is an idea supported by David Lewis's (1983, p. 278) claim that, if it is possible for a beggar to be dignified (something Lewis claimed to be unsure about), then a story would be able to prove it.

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22 Unintentional showing may be one way to describe cases that elicit imaginative resistance (see Gendler, 2000). On this description, imaginative resistance arises when an author tells her readers that *p*, but shows that ~*p*.

23 Thank you to a reviewer for pushing me on this point.

24 For a nice example of an example of how an emotional experience can lead one to believe *p*, where one had previously believed ~*p*, see Pelser (2014, p. 118).

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How could a story prove such a thing? Certainly, it does not follow, from the fact that something is true in a story, that it is actually possible. Moreover, although it is true that authors of fiction can transmit moral knowledge by telling readers things that they are supposed to believe of the actual world (as when, for instance, Tolstoy opens *Anna Karenina* (Tolstoy, 1970) by telling readers that 'Happy families are all alike'), the provision of testimony is hardly proof of the truth of what is told–we can, after all, tell each other things that are false. However, if we know that there exists a dignified beggar in a fiction—not because the author tells us that this is fictionally true but because they show us that it is—then it follows that a beggar can be dignified. That is, if an author tells us details about a fictional person who is a beggar—details about their actions and history, perhaps, as well as their intentions and hopes—such that a feeling of respect would be aroused in us, then we may come to see, for ourselves, that if someone were like the depicted beggar, then they would be dignified.[25] Provided, then, that our emotions are reliable, it follows that the fiction would have proved to us that a beggar can be dignified.

If all this is right, then the following observation can easily be explained. Sometimes when we speak of authors as capable of showing, rather than merely telling, we talk as though authors can show readers fictional truths (e.g. Lubbock, 1921). We are especially inclined to speak this way when we are interested in describing what makes a literary work *artistically* good. However, at other times (particularly when we speak about literary fiction as harboring a distinct *educative* potential), we talk about writers showing their readers things that are actually true (e.g. Cunliffe, 2019). If what I have said in this section is right, then we can see that the very same thing is at issue in both these ways of talking. After all, when authors show readers that certain moral facts obtain in their fictions, they also show readers that certain moral counterfactuals are actually true.

4. Some Worries About Emotion

My argument so far has depended on the claim that we can have emotional responses to fictional characters and events, and that such responses can be rational. Insofar as these claims have been challenged (i.e. Radford, 1975; Levinson, 1997; Walton, 1978, 1990; 1997), one might wonder whether my argument is on shaky ground. While the literature on our emotional responses to fictional characters is vast, it is worth saying something, briefly, about why these challenges are not as serious as they were once considered to be and so do not pose a serious problem for my view.[26]

25 What I have in mind here is what Stephan Darwall (1977) calls 'appraisal respect', as opposed to the 'recognition respect' we owe all people. Appraisal respect is the kind of respect that consists in positive appraisal or esteem–feelings had for people who are especially deserving of our admiration and high regard.

26 For a recent argument for the view that the debate over the 'genuineness' of emotional responses to fiction is misguided, see Friend (2022). Friend explains the way emotions differ in degrees and across multiple dimensions. Accordingly, 'there is no dimension along which a dichotomy between "fictional" and "ordinary" emotions can be sustained' (Friend, 2022, p. 262). One might maintain that questions about whether an emotion is a 'genuine' one can still get a grip. But, as Friend notes, which dimension is relevant to questions of sameness or difference in kind will depend upon other commitments regarding the nature of emotions.

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One version of the challenge to our emotional engagement with fiction, traceable to an early paper by Colin Radford (1975), relies on the claim that belief in the (past, present or probable) existence of the object of one's emotion is causally necessary for one to have an emotion directed at it. To support this, Radford (1975, p. 68) asks us to observe that if someone tells us a harrowing story about, say, his sister, we will cease to be upset if we discover that the speaker made the whole thing up. However, as many have recognized, this hardly shows that belief is causally necessary for emotion (see Gaut, 2007; Stecker, 2011; Matravers, 2014; Teroni, 2019; Friend, 2022). As per Berys Gaut, it only supports the weaker and uncontroversial claim that 'if an emotion is grounded on a belief, removal of that belief tends to remove the emotion grounded on it'(Gaut, 2007, p. 211).

Derek Matravers (2014, pp. 104–105) considers whether Radford could be construed as making a conceptual claim, rather than a causal one. That is, perhaps the idea is that a belief in the existence of the object is necessary if an emotion-like state is to count as a genuine emotion. However, among philosophers of emotion today, it is widely agreed that emotions are associated with a wide range of so-called 'cognitive bases' (Deonna and Teroni, 2012)–psychological states upon which emotions are based, and from which they inherit their intentional objects (see also Greenspan, 1988; Neill, 1993; Roberts, 2003; Teroni, 2019). Possible cognitive bases include perception, memory, belief and imagination. In light of this, the conceptual version of Radford's claim seems untenable.

Another version of the challenge, traceable to Kendall Walton (1978), rests on the claim that at least certain emotions that are felt for oneself—such as fear, pride and grief—require a belief in the possibility of one's interacting with the object of one's emotion. In order to be afraid, the view goes, one must believe that one is threatened by the object one fears. To therefore explain the emotions that we feel when confronting monsters and ghosts in horror movies and scary novels, Walton says that although we are not *actually* threatened when we watch horror movies (nor do we falsely believe that we are), we imagine that we are. In other words, we believe that it is true, in the fiction, that we are threatened. When we form this belief, we experience what Walton calls quasi-fear. The experience of quasi-fear is phenomenologically identical to the experience of being literally afraid. Quasi-fear, however, is experienced in an imaginary context, like the other emotions we feel in games of make-believe.

Importantly, if Walton is right here, it does not follow that all the emotions we feel towards fictions are quasi-emotions. This is because, contra to what Walton (1990, 1997) goes on to suggest, not all emotions presuppose a belief in the possibility of one's interacting with the emotion's object; we feel emotions when we engage with non-fictional narratives even when we know that there is no possibility of interacting with the objects of those emotions (because, say, their objects are long dead). Accordingly, while Walton's account of quasi-emotions might be plausible with respect to some emotions—such as fear, pride or grief—it does not follow that all emotions experienced in response to fiction are quasi-emotions.[27]

27 To deny that one must believe in the possibility of interacting with the object of one's emotion is not to deny that emotions are necessarily motivational. See Friend (2016), who argues that, although emotions have a motivational dimension, their impact on action is frequently 'quarantined' to certain domains (and not just when they are had in response to fiction.) See also Gaut (2007, pp. 212–213).

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Moreover (and more importantly), Walton (1997, p. 38) states that quasi-emotions are still genuine emotions. The only difference between fear and quasi-fear, for instance, is that the latter is an emotion experienced in the make-believe world of the fiction. Quasi-emotion is not irrational either. We experience quasi-fear in response to the realization that, in the world of the fiction, we (or the character with whom we are empathizing) are being stalked by a dangerous monster.[28] This is a perfectly apt response to what is true in the fiction. Accordingly, quasi-emotions can still provide reasons for belief about what is fictionally true. We can thus say that, when we experience quasi-fear of the fictional monster, we are getting acquainted with a feature of the fictional world–namely, the terrifying nature of the monster. This acquaintance can enable us to know that such a monster would be terrifying, if it actually existed.

It is our different positions vis-à-vis the role, and objects, of our emotional engagement with fiction that would seem to distinguish my account of moral showing via fiction from the view recently set out by Green. As I have already indicated, Green's (2022) conception of showing—as a matter of 'making a fact manifest' without recourse to an illocutionary act—is consistent with the generic account that I offered in Section 1. However, Green's discussion of the particular way fictions can show moral facts suggests that there are some subtle, but important, differences between our two views.

On Green's view, literature can show readers real-world moral truths (as well as non-moral truths) by prompting and scaffolding 'suppositional reasoning', where suppositional reasoning draws out the consequences of what one already knows (cf. Elgin, 2014, 2017). When we read *A Brave New World* (Huxley, 1932), for instance, we are invited to suppose that a society is organized along the lines dictated by hedonic utilitarianism (see Green, 2010, pp. 360–362). Once we suppose this, we consider what would follow. Insofar as it seems highly plausible that, in such a world, there would be little freedom of thought, the development of Huxley's plot strikes us as plausible (there is, indeed, little freedom of thought in the world Huxley depicts). The sense that Huxley's thought experiment is getting things right thus motivates us to continue to engage in the process of suppositional reasoning. As we continue, we eventually arrive at the conclusion that hedonic utilitarianism is not the correct moral theory, because we recognize that a world like Huxley's is unacceptable.

On Green's view, when fictions prompt and scaffold suppositional reasoning, they function as a kind of argument. I am willing to concede that the process of suppositional reasoning, of the sort exemplified by Huxley's *Brave New World*, can be represented as a kind of argument. However, one should be careful here, as the language of 'argument' also risks licensing some misconceptions. Certainly, we do not accept Huxley's conclusion, if we do, because we have been provided with a valid deductive argument. Moreover, if we are to reason, with Huxley, from the premise that says 'a life like that depicted in the novel would lack freedom of thought' to the intermediate conclusion, 'a world like this would be unacceptable', it is surely in part because of the way features of Huxley's world

28 This seems similar to what Gaut (2007, p. 154) calls 'affective imagination'.

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engage us affectively. Yet, while Green (2010, p. 360) notes that 'the reader is justifiably expected to recoil with horror' at the world Huxley depicts, his own account of suppositional reasoning accords no essential epistemic role to the reader's emotional response to what she is invited to suppose–at the very least, the epistemic function of emotion is not explicitly discussed. On my view, however, it is by recoiling with horror that we become convinced that the world Huxley has depicted is unacceptable and that, therefore, a similarly organized world would be unacceptable too. It is by foregrounding the role of the emotions, moreover, that my view can allow that not everything we might come to know as a result of the process of suppositional reasoning must be a consequence of other things we already know. This is because fictions have the potential to engage us, emotionally, in radically new ways: fictions can bring us to see circumstances and actions in ways we might never have done so before.

Green's view, which accords the emotions a limited role in the capacity of fiction to show us moral truths, is consistent with the idea that emotions cannot be a source of epistemic reasons about objective moral values.[29] I have already outlined reasons to countenance the view that emotions can justify evaluative beliefs and so enable us to know about objective moral values. However, Green's view is also consistent with the view that we cannot feel real emotions for fictional characters. If we reject that view, as I think we should, then we can allow that literature can convey moral knowledge that is not necessarily entailed by what we already believe.

Of course, one might still worry about our capacity to distinguish between cases in which our affective attitudes are reliable indicators of value, and those in which they are not. This is an important concern. However, it does not raise any devastating problems for my argument. My purpose here is not to argue that it is impossible for fiction to generate false impressions of acquaintance and, correspondingly, illusory impressions that one has been shown that something is fictionally true or that some moral counterfactual obtains. Unfortunately, in literature, as in life, we must attend carefully to what we are presented with, do what we can to ensure that we are not engaging in prejudicial or motivated reasoning, and try our best to empathize with the perspectives of all those that are implicated.

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29 The emotions play a more important role in two other modes of showing that Green identifies in literature, both of which may deliver knowledge that is morally relevant, even if not knowledge of moral facts. The first mode of showing teaches readers what an experience is like, by having readers share part of a character's emotional experience. For instance, Green says that, when we respond with fear to Alice Sebold's description, in *The Lovely Bones* (Sebold, 2002), of a character's being violently attacked, we might come to know that such an experience is terrifying. If we trust the description of the character's experience, then we can come to know what that experience must actually be like, emotionally (see Green, 2010, pp. 362–364). The other mode of showing teaches readers about their own commitments and dispositions, in virtue of the way their emotions are engaged or what they are made to expect. So, for instance, a reader might find themselves preferring a humble character over a polished and sophisticated one, and thereby come to realize something about their own preferences (Green, 2022, p. 284). In Green's view, then, emotions are relevant to showing when they enable self-knowledge or knowledge of the quality of experiences. He stops short, however, in suggesting that emotional responses to fiction can play a role in our coming to learn about objective moral facts.

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5. Moral Knowledge and Moral Understanding

Although both showing and telling—whether they occur within literary fiction, or in non-fiction—can transmit propositional moral knowledge, the two communicative acts differ in ways that are normatively significant. Moral showing of the sort I have discussed here enables addressees to gain more than propositional moral knowledge. This is because this kind of showing proceeds by enabling acquaintance and, as I said in Section 2, acquaintance with evaluative properties enables addressees to not only know that those properties obtain, but also to fittingly respond to them.

In closing, it is worth briefly mentioning that there is another way we might construe the additional epistemic benefit of showing–namely, in terms of *moral understanding*. On the view popularized by Allison Hills (2009), moral understanding is a kind of intellectual know-how that cannot be reduced to propositional knowledge but which enables agents to reliably gain moral knowledge, on their own, across different contexts.[30] In other words, moral understanding is a skill that underwrites one's ability to gain moral knowledge, without needing to take another person's word for it. On this view, the reliability of the agent with moral understanding is attributed to the fact that she is responsive to the features of circumstances in virtue of which the moral facts obtain. So, for instance, when faced with an unjust situation, the agent with moral understanding will not merely come to believe that the situation is unjust, but she will also come to believe this in virtue of her responsiveness to the features of the situation that make it unjust. For instance, the understanding agent will be responsive to the fact that the situation involves an arbitrarily unequal distribution of goods, and that the arbitrariness of the distribution is what makes the situation unjust.

Hills and her followers invoke moral understanding in order to explain an observation that has recently puzzled many philosophers–namely, that there seems to be something problematic about deferring to so-called 'thin' moral testimony, even when one can gain knowledge by doing so (Callahan, 2018; McGrath, 2009; Nickel, 2001). Thin moral testimony—like '*x* is wrong' or '*y* is morally required'—is testimony couched in terms that are purely evaluative or, at the very least, have relatively little descriptive content.[31] The idea defended by Hills and others, then, is that even though thin moral testimony can convey moral knowledge, it cannot convey the more valuable epistemic good of moral understanding. Now, whether or not invoking moral understanding can explain what is *wrong* with trusting this kind of moral testimony, it certainly seems true that trusting thin moral testimony will not typically enable an addressee to develop moral understanding. Indeed, it seems potentially true of even certain forms of more detailed moral testimony–for example, '*x* is wrong because it is cruel' or '*x* is wrong because it causes unnecessary suffering'. After all, from the fact that one knows that some act causes unnecessary suffering, it does not follow that one is sensitive to whether any token instance of suffering is unnecessary, or even sensitive to unnecessary suffering qua wrong-making feature, in the way requisite for moral understanding. The latter outstrips what thin moral testimony can transmit.

30 For alternative accounts of understanding, see Grimm (2014) and Kelp (2015).

31 For responses to the so-called 'puzzle' of moral testimony, see Sliwa (2012), Howell (2014) and Fletcher (2016).

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Unlike thin moral testimony, the kind of showing I have examined here is a way of communicating, using language, that can enable readers to foster increased moral understanding. As I have said, this sort of showing recruits a reader's capacity to affectively respond to the lower-order features of the scenarios they are directed to imagine. These are features which make it the case that certain moral properties obtain. It follows, then, that this kind of showing can enable readers to increase their responsiveness to the lower-order, morally relevant features of the sort of situations, actions and states of affairs they might encounter in literature. In short, by increasing readers' responsiveness, fiction can enable readers to foster increased moral understanding.

Of course, it is doubtful that any reader will be completely transformed, morally, by reading one piece of literature. One may be more likely to gain a new moral belief about what is possible (that, for example, a beggar can be dignified) than they are to come away from a piece of literature with a perfected moral responsiveness that enables them to reliably detect the different ways in which a beggar can be dignified. But this is to be expected, as gaining moral understanding is more difficult than gaining moral knowledge. However, if we take seriously the idea that moral understanding is a kind of cognitive skill, then we should acknowledge that gaining it takes practice. My claim here is that showing in fiction provides readers with an opportunity for that practice.

Conclusion

I have sketched an account, built out of Gricean resources, of the distinction between showing and telling. Where telling conveys a belief to an addressee by inviting them to trust, showing enables agents to possess reasons for a belief without needing to trust the speaker. This account makes sense of Herod's showing Salome that John the Baptist is dead. It also finds application in the context of literary fiction. My account of showing via fiction centred the idea that fiction, when it engages its audience's emotions, can enable readers to know what values obtain in the fiction and what values would obtain, in the real world, if things were relevantly similar to the way they are in the fiction. However, insofar as a fiction conveys this evaluative knowledge by way of acquaintance, it does more than transmit moral knowledge–it also gives readers the opportunity to foster increased moral understanding. In this respect, the sort of showing via fiction that I have been interested in here is markedly different from the sort of thin moral testimony that many philosophers have been increasingly interested in of late.

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