

NATURAL NARRATIVES AND UNNATURAL READERS

Jon Cogburn and Mark Allen Ohm

1. When we ask why one should read fiction, we are really asking a set of interrelated questions. *Descriptively*, we wonder about the actual motivations and goals of fiction readers. We try to understand what it is about fiction that might help people to satisfy these goals. But these questions are quite different from *normative* investigation about the extent to which the relevant motivations and goals are conducive to human, animal, and environmental flourishing. And somewhere in between the descriptive and normative is the *instrumental*, where we ask whether reading fiction is the most rational way to fulfill the goals adumbrated by our descriptive theory. Note that normative and instrumental investigations might reveal that people ought to read fiction, but not for the reasons most people in fact do read fiction. This is fine.

2. Answering these questions requires considering six archetypes: the hedonist, the scold, the huckster, psychopath, the beautiful soul, and the hypocrite.

For the hedonist, the proper goal of human endeavor is pleasure. This is not immoralism, in part because hedonism marries easily with the utilitarian view that the good should be maximized for the greatest number of people, and also in part because most hedonists derive pleasure from the well-being of others.

The scold is mainly concerned with criticizing aspects of reality that don't measure up to her standards. If philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways, then for the scold the point is clearly to write books about changing it. And academic scolds are quite proficient at this.

The huckster, on the other hand, only focuses on the ills of the world to the extent that cognizance of them is required to get marks to purchase (often metaphorical) snake oil to overcome these ills. With one simple purchase, your life can be transformed, misery and depravity washed away.

And the psychopath? Psychopaths lack empathy.

Beautiful souls and hypocrites will be discussed below.

3. The hedonist reads fiction because it feels good, and principled hedonists¹ argue that this is in fact the end of the story. But it can't be. Descriptively, we need to know why things that feel good feel good. And in any sane normative theory "one should do x" does not follow from "x feels good." Why does fiction yield the kinds of good feelings that are morally permissible? But it will not be possible to answer this question without discussing why one should read fiction. And so the hedonist hasn't really told us anything other than the useless tautology that people read fiction because they want to read fiction.

Scolds often talk about "interrogating" texts, as if the poor novel is a prisoner forced to talk by the appropriately trained reader. What's going on here? Scolds use fiction to help uncover bits of nefarious ideology somehow presupposed or contained in the texts. Or, slightly less myopically, the fictional text might be read as itself engaging in scolding.² Both interpretive strategies yield an utterly implausible descriptive theory of why people in fact read texts. Perhaps the hedonist is on stronger ground here? But, for the scold, this is not a bug, but rather a feature, as it provides one more thing to scold people about.

The scold is on much weaker ground with respect to instrumental reason. To the extent that one is drawing up an indictment of society, it should be obvious there are much better resources than literary or popular fiction (e.g. economic statistics, legal codes, environmental studies, news media criticism, psychology, etc. etc. etc.). And the scold is getting something wrong about human flourishing as well. Yes, we must criticize injustice, but that can't be *all* we should do. For what

¹ E.g. Frank Kermode's *Pleasure and Change: The Aesthetics of Canon*.

² Our most exemplary scolds one and all stem from Frankfurt School Critical Theory. For a withering critique see Chapter 2 of Noël Carroll's *A Philosophy of Mass Art*.

then would we do once the revolution is won and humanity perfected? Such perfection can't be the perfected ability to scold, because there would be nothing to do after the revolution.

This being said, to the extent that the ability to scold represents a tangible human good, many scolds are also hucksters. Whenever one reads a defense of the study of popular culture or humanities in terms of inculcation of "critical thinking," one is firmly in this intersection.³ But hucksterism long predates the scolding variant of it. During the heyday of literary naturalism, academics widely believed that reading fiction was a necessary part of understanding the world, not just so that one could criticize, but also to develop the kind of wisdom that helps the reader accommodate herself to the world. While *this* kind of (non-scolding) hucksterism is barely alive in the contemporary academic study of literature,⁴ it has a very strong second life among booksellers and people concerned about decline of enrollments after the scolds took over.⁵ As with the hedonist and scold, the huckster must both give us a descriptive account of what fiction is such that it is conducive to personal improvement as well as instrumentally assess the extent to which other hobbies might be more conducive to the kind of improvement singled out.

And psychopaths? We are not that interested in *why* they read. However, we do know *that* they read very, very weirdly. And this will prove to be of decisive import.

4. Jon Cogburn and Mark Allen Ohm are hucksters. The second half of "Actual Qualities of Imaginative Things: Notes Towards an Object-Oriented Literary Theory" is devoted to defending the claim that fictional texts contribute to the sum total of knowledge in the world, and that this is of necessity. They begin their defense of these claims by sketching a theory of the way in which fictional texts can be said to be actually true. Their initial definition is a mouthful.

³ Our most exemplary hucksters stem from what people used to call "postmodernism." For a withering critique see Chapter 3 of Noël Carroll's *A Philosophy of Mass Art*.

⁴ Though making a recent comeback! Consider Section 4 of this paper as well as David Comer Kidd and Emanuel Caastano's much discussed 2013 "Reading Literary Fiction Improves the Theory of Mind," and Eva Dadlez' 2013 "Fiction, Thought Experiments, and Moral Knowledge." For a nice bibliographical cross-section of the work from the past fifteen years on the psychology of reading, much of which supports contentions made by traditional (non-scolding) hucksters, click on the "Academic Papers" section of the OnFiction blog.

⁵ For example, William M. Chance's "The Decline of the English Department" and Verilyn Klinkenberg's "The Decline and Fall of the English Major."

X is true (false) with respect to subject area Y to the extent that
 imaginatively complicit readers of X will,
 all else being equal and as a result of reading X,
 better (worse) partake in reality normative with respect to Y (Cogburn and Ohm,
 2014).

While the authors don't define what it is to "partake in reality normative with respect to" something, from their examples it is clear enough what is meant. An imaginatively complicit reader of an ethically true (false) work of fiction will, all else being equal, be an ethically better (worse) person as a result of the reading. To the extent that one can make sense of a subject matter's norms, then one can make sense of a reader participating better with the reality that grounds them.

This being said, there is an interesting distinction that Cogburn and Ohm almost perversely elide. One participates well in normative ethical reality not only by being a good person, but also by being able to discern how other people should and shouldn't behave morally.⁶ With some subject matters such as physics and mathematics, these abilities are very close to being inseparable. At least for humans, it does not seem plausible that one could be good at doing math⁷ or physics textbook problems without also being able to evaluate others' abilities. But in ethics these two seem to come apart. On the one hand, we all know beautiful souls who behave in almost saintly manners but whose very kindheartedness seems to intrude on their ability to discern the cruel motivations of others. And in the other direction we wouldn't have the word "hypocrisy" if it wasn't possible for someone to be discerning yet make a hash of their own and others' lives.

We should note that we do not think that this criticism on its own disqualifies the Cogburn/Ohn account. Human beings are complicated messes of inconsistent beliefs and desires

⁶ We conjecture that Cogburn and Ohm are sloppy here because they do not want to fall into the representationalism of the account of actual truth of fictional texts that they critique in Cogburn's and Mark Silcox's "Against Brain in a Vatism." But there is absolutely no need for them to worry on this score. Mark Okrent makes very clear in "On Layer Cakes" that neither the ability to follow norms nor the ability to assess whether norms are being followed presupposes anything approximating human language. Okrent further argues that human language is actually founded upon each prior ability.

⁷ Just to be absolutely clear, the two sets of abilities are provably distinct with respect to certain properties of formal languages that are sufficiently expressively rich. For example, there is an algorithm for detecting in general whether a purported proof in first-order logic is correct, while there is no algorithm to discover such a proof. See Boolos, Burgess, and Jeffrey's *Computability and Logic* for an explanation.

and as a result it is our lot to generally muddle through. The beautiful soul is affectively in tune in a way that enables noble desires and the ability to act on them. The hypocrite is not affectively in tune but has discerned the beliefs that the beautiful soul would have (were she discerning) and is good at spouting these and using them to discern how we sort our actions in terms of their moral praiseworthiness. All Cogburn and Ohm need to say is that an ethically true work of fiction will, all else being equal, help the beautiful soul be more discerning and the hypocrite be less of a jerk.

5. When one examines Cogburn and Ohm’s proposed mechanism for how fictional texts bring a reader into better accord with normative reality, our concern about the disconnect between the ability to act in accord with norms and evaluating others’ actions in light of those norms morphs into a more severe criticism. For Cogburn and Ohm, texts yield interpretations that should be understood as thought experiments⁸ in exactly the way that thought experiments occur in moral philosophy and physics, consisting of recursively nested pairs of (possibly impossible) set-ups and evolutions. Texts are then true with respect to the subject matter to the extent that the actual world really would evolve in the manner that the thought experiment evolves, were the set-up incarnate. They are false to the extent that it would be misleading to think that the world would evolve that way.⁹

But from Cogburn and Ohm’s paper it is entirely unclear how the thought experiment metaphysics of a fictional work fits with their earlier official definition of fiction’s being true in

⁸ This idea has a strong pedigree. It is suggested at the very end of Mary Sirridge’s “Truth From Fiction?” and developed with respect to ethical thought experience in Eva Dadlez’s *What’s Hecuba to Him and “Fiction, Thought Experiments, and Moral Knowledge.”* The central idea that works can be false because they give readers false beliefs in relevant counterfactuals is one way of working out Dadlez’s views about how fictions work to make things seem normal. One can get to Cogburn and Ohm’s view by marrying the Heideggerian anti-representationalism mentioned above in footnote 7 with aspects of Dadlez’s “Postscripts to ‘Truth in Fiction’” and David Lewis’s suggestion that “fiction might serve as a means for the discovery of modal truth (278).” Recently the differences between scientific thought experiments and fiction have been stressed in Tobias Klauk’s “Thought Experiments in Literature.” Cogburn and Ohm respond to Klauk briefly in their piece.

⁹ Just to be clear, as with scientific thought experiments, in addition to the fact that the set-ups might be impossible, the way that the structure is recursive allows evolutions to function as set-ups for meta-narratives contained within the narrative. In this manner mimeticism can arguably be preserved while accounting for thoroughly unnatural narratives. For a typology of the narratively unnatural, see Jan Alber, Stefan Iversen, Henrik Skov Nielsen, and Brian Richardson’s “Unnatural Narratives, Unnatural Narratology: Beyond Mimetic Models.” For the key issues concerning mimeticism and the unnatural narratives see first, Monika Fludernik’s response piece, “How Natural is “Unnatural Narratology””; or, What is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology,” and Alber, Iversen, Nielsen, and Richardson’s response, “What is Unnatural about Unnatural Narratology? A Response to Monika Fludernik.”

virtue of aligning readers with normative reality. As with our previous possible problem, physics fits nicely in the intersection between the two criteria. Good physics texts will correctly describe how systems evolve given various (often impossible, e.g. frictionless planes, point masses, etc.) set-ups. And people who master the physics text will improve in their ability to both predict such evolutions and discern the extent to which people are predicting them. Here the official truth definition and what is in fact a different truth definition suggested by the thought experiment metaphysics seem to always be simultaneously satisfied (or not).

But when the norms involved don't just involve predicting the evolution of systems, it is *not at all* clear how thought experiments could provide mechanisms relevant for grounding the huckster's idea that imaginatively complicit readers will, all else being equal, be morally uplifted by true fiction. That is, if physics is the discourse where the two come closest together, once again ethics seems to be the discourse where they most disastrously fall apart. And here we seem to have a much wider gap than the one we considered earlier (between being good at instantiating a norm versus recognizing when the norm is and isn't instantiated). One could presumably be *very good* at determining whether or not plots correctly portray robust counterfactual facets of the real world yet be *very bad* not only at how one treats others but also in discerning whether other people correctly instantiate moral norms. But then one would be very good at discerning the metaphysical mechanisms on which Cogburn and Ohm hope to base their theory of fictional truth without in any manner gaining the discernment (with respect to one's own or others' behavior) that must form part of the core of that theory of truth. So it seems that something has to give.

6. In *Meditations on First Philosophy*,¹⁰ Descartes attempts to assess what can be known by determining the full extent of that which can be doubted. He considers those things that can help him reach such hyperbolic doubt (such as the mind of the insane or dreams as reality). However, in sleep such things as mathematical truths of simple arithmetic or geometry (such as a square having four sides) are still held to be true. It is at this point that Descartes introduces a God whose

¹⁰ Taken from: *Meditations on First Philosophy*, 3rd ed. Trans. Donald A. Cress, Cambridge, Hackett Publishing Company, 1993.

will is not constrained by his rationality. This perverse God is able to bend, manipulate, and completely change these mathematical truths, because this God, “is able to do anything (p.15).”

For the purposes of addressing the problem with Cogburn and Ohm’s theory, such a being’s *omnipotence* is beside the point. We are concerned with possible morally depraved *omniscient* creatures. The epistemic analogue of the most impressive denizen in Descartes’ bestiary would be an evil creature that was all knowing. Since her omniscience would give her perfect insight into counterfactual reality, she would be able to tell of any proposed thought experiment how true it is. And thus, insofar as Cogburn and Ohm are correct about fictions constitutively giving rise to interpretations (which just are counterfactual thought experiments), this creature would have nothing to learn from fiction.

But if she were maximally evil, she would have much to learn from true fictions, as according to Cogburn and Ohm, reading morally true fiction would lead her to be a better creature. Independent of the plausibility of a demon learning to be better, Cogburn and Ohm’s own account of the underlying metaphysics undermines the very possibility of the demon existing in the first place. For them, the way the fiction would help her be a better person is by increasing her counterfactual knowledge. But this then refutes Cogburn and Ohm’s theory, since by hypothesis, the demon’s counterfactual knowledge is perfect.

7. A certain kind of naturalistically minded philosopher might not be too bothered by this kind of thing. Perhaps we need only worry about physical possibilities and thus can brush aside worry of how supernatural beings might or might not cause problems for our metaphysical views? In epistemology proper, this dismissing of the skeptical worry has been too fast though, as science fiction brain in vat scenarios and science fact virtual reality seem to bear much of the epistemological weight that the demon once did.¹¹ Likewise, with respect to our evil knower there are creatures at hand who do the same work.

The distinctive feature of psychopaths is a complete lack of compassion stemming from the inability to automatically empathize when witnessing other people’s suffering. Extreme narcissists and people classified as having antisocial personality disorder often share many of the

¹¹ See Cogburn and Silcox’ “Against Brain-in-a-Vatism” for a discussion of this point.

traits of psychopaths such as radically inflated sense of self-worth, sexual promiscuity, and compulsive lying. And people in social situations that encourage cruelty such as soldiers and prison guards are often able to radically diminish their empathic responses in certain contexts. But, unless they are psychopaths, traumatic stress disorders are likely to result. For the psychopath, witnessing a person dying is not affectively different from witnessing a blade of grass being cut down.¹²

Interestingly, the psychopath processes words and certain meanings differently than the non-psychopath.¹³ Current evidence strongly suggests that the divergent brain structures resulting in the lack of empathy also result in their having trouble processing the semantics of phrases in a variety of ways. For example, in comparative tests, psychopaths perform more slowly and make more mistakes in processing abstract words (e.g. “justice”) as well as illustrate a preference to respond in concrete modes (“move the gable”) rather than abstract ones (“instantiate justice”), and these deficits have been localized in poorer functioning of the right anterior superior temporal gyrus (Kiehl et. al. 2004).

More strikingly, while they possess the ability to decode literal meanings behind metaphors, they systematically fail to understand the emotional valence behind metaphorical statements. For example, Hare et al. report those deemed to suffer from psychopathy as having trouble with these types of metaphors; they, interpreted the metaphor ‘*the sea is the mother of life*’ as being very negative. Another psychopath considered ‘*Man is a worm that lives on the corpse of the earth*’ to be strongly positive in connotation, and ‘*Love is an antidote for the world’s ills*’ to be strongly negative in connotation (p.1504).

While test subjects were able to literally paraphrase such metaphors, the depth of their lack of empathy rendered them utterly incompetent at determining whether the phrases were supposed to denote something positive or negative. So instead, the psychopath gives the phrase a positive or negative valence depending merely on how arousing the image is to the psychopath or on the psychopath’s idiosyncratic positive or negative attitudes involving some of the associated concepts. For the first,

¹² For more on psychopaths, see Hare (1991, 1993).

¹³ For problems with processing of affection and connotation in words see Hare et. al. (2003, 1991b) and Brink et. al. (1999).

If the arousal value of an event or experience is more important than its emotional valence, it is easy to see why “*The sea is the mother of life*” might be viewed as negative and “*Memory is a dog that bites when you least expect it*” as positive; the former has little arousal value (and therefore is “negative”), whereas the latter has considerable arousal value (and therefore is “positive”) (Hare et. al. 1991, p. 1505).

Idiosyncratic factors can intrude other than mere arousal value. For example, Hart et. al. (Ibid.) report that a psychopath who hated his mother might also respond to “*The sea is the mother of life*” with a negative valence.

Thus far, we have two ways that psychopaths are bad readers. First, they tend to have processing difficulties with abstract objects, and second, their affective responses to metaphors are highly non-standard. Though we have started with these because they directly involve reading comprehension, it is our third fact that is most highly relevant in connecting thought experiments and norms other than those of mere causal prediction. Briefly put, psychopaths’ complete lack of empathy makes them unable to understand moral reasons for behavior. This is *the* reason that there is an important legal scholarship on whether psychopaths are criminally culpable.¹⁴

If a psychopath hits you, she¹⁵ has no problem understanding why you get angry. But if somebody else becomes angry at the psychopath on your behalf, the psychopath simply doesn’t get it. The third party wasn’t herself harmed, so why should the third party be angry? The psychopath’s own complete lack of empathy renders her unable to understand the pain of others as part of an innate moral calculus. And while the psychopath understands why you got angry that she hit you, this doesn’t (for the psychopath) on its own yield any kind of reason for her to refrain from hitting you. The thought of how the psychopath might feel if the same were done to her simply doesn’t operate as a moral reason for the psychopath. The psychopath proves that such reasoning

¹⁴ See the comprehensive discussion in Levy 2011. Our discussion of the centrality of moral ignorance to psychopathy comes from Levy’s overview of this scholarship. Levy’s article is also very helpful in properly distinguishing psychopathy from other disorders it is often confused with, such as narcissistic personality disorder and anti-social personality disorder. The component necessary for psychopathy is an inability to empathize.

¹⁵ We use the feminine pronoun in generic contexts to balance out thousands of years of doing the opposite. But it is a bit strange here because psychopaths are overwhelmingly likely to be male. This is almost certainly because of the sexual dimorphism with respect to size of various parts of the prefrontal cortex (far more men have much smaller prefrontal cortices) and the relation between this size of these areas and anti-social personality disorder and psychopathy (Rain, et. al.). This being said, we aren’t dealing with natural kinds here, and it’s certainly possible that female psychopathy is routinely being diagnosed as something else, such as borderline personality disorder.

only works to the extent that one automatically feels vicarious pain, as the overwhelming majority of humans do in the overwhelming majority of cases. But this is just what the psychopath can't do.

8. These deficiencies reveal that psychopaths are *not* analogous to brains in vats with respect to our epistemic evil demon. Remember that the brain in the vat was supposed to be a naturalistically acceptable version of the Cartesian demon with enough of God's omnipotence to be powerful enough to fool us all. The psychopath was supposed to be a naturalistically acceptable version of the Cartesian demon with enough of God's omniscience to be able to predict the actual outcome of any (possible or impossible) hypothetical event, but to be also constitutively out of synch with the kind of normative reality invoked by Cogburn and Ohm in their definition of truth in fiction.

But creatures that have difficulty understanding abstract concepts, the points of metaphors, and moral reasons will at the very least make characteristic mistakes in predicting the evolution of systems involving human beings, whose behavior cannot (by naturalistically plausible creatures)¹⁶ be correctly predicted without abstract concepts, metaphors, and moral reasons. At the very least, the important beliefs and desires that motivate us often involve abstract concepts, metaphors, and moral considerations. A psychologically true novel in the sense of Cogburn and Ohm's thought experiments will be one where the characters do what those characters really would do in the real world, were the novel's set-up incarnate. But such a novel would either be one that a psychopath would not be able to be imaginatively complicit in, or it would be one from which she would be unable to learn. Instead of seeing the evolution from the set-up as broadly characterizing some aspect of human psychological reality she would see it as a set of unconnected events with odd moral valences. Or she might misinterpret the motives of the characters in a way that would preclude applying this knowledge to situations in the actual world or analogous hypothetical set-ups when planning her own behavior. So the psychopath's readerly incompetence gives us reason

¹⁶ We don't take ourselves to have addressed the question of whether such a creature is in principle impossible in the way Descartes' demon may or may not be. There are too many other interesting things to be said, perhaps slightly over half of which end up weighing in our favor, about the role of such far away possible worlds with respect to philosophical claims.

to after all *affirm* the connection between being able to learn to predict from fiction and being able to learn to be a better person from fiction.

9. One of the central tasks for the recent field of “narrative ethics”¹⁷ is to come up with a typology of ways that people address ethical issues through story telling. With respect to the stories told, we worry about how characters respond to conflicts, the morality of institutions that place characters in situations, the moral valences of the characters’ actions and the consequences of those actions, and the positive and negative valences in the language which reflect an authorial judgment on the characters and institutions of the text.¹⁸

Cogburn, Ohm, and Silcox audaciously claim that moral thought experiments are not different in kind from scientific thought experiments. In both cases there is a set-up and an evolution. However, what makes the moral thought experiment moral is that being attuned to the counterfactual reality made explicit by the moral thought experiment will positively affect the reader’s moral dispositions. The psychopath’s inability to learn from these shows to some extent how this works. The counterfactuals will be stated in morally valenced ways and often have antecedents and/or consequences involving human distress and others’ responses to this distress. A sensitive reader for whom the text scans will learn to produce incarnate set-ups with her own behavior that lead to actual narratively structured events in the real world with less misery in it and more concrete goods (particular realizations of truth, beauty, and love) than there would be otherwise.

Given our discussion above, we can see how this works by considering Jack Kerouac’s *On the Road*. Interestingly, the text tends to generate different interpretations depending upon where the reader is in life. Teenagers tend to take the novel as teaching that there are far more possibilities for action than normally presented by their parents or teachers, and that seizing unconventional possibilities ultimately leads to the kind of wisdom expressed by the novel’s final

¹⁷ For a wonderful overview, see James Phelan’s article “Narrative Ethics” in the living handbook of narratology.

¹⁸ Of course this is more complicated when one properly differentiates author from narrator. Remember that on the Cogburn/Ohm account interpretations are recursively nested in a way that permits meta-narration. So for example, the aspects of the correct interpretation of the story the narrator is trying to tell can form the set-up for aspects of the correct interpretation of the story the author is trying to tell. In this manner, the ethics of the told can be taken to be prior to the ethics of the telling.

sentence/paragraph. This only really works as an interpretation of the novel if one fails to distinguish between narrator (Sal Paradise) and author (Kerouac) and consequently reads many sections of the novel with a tin ear.

Once one is able to better separate author from narrator, the interpretation changes substantially.¹⁹ Many scenes that a teenager takes as serious models for how one ought to behave now read as hilariously satirical. These include Kerouac's writer friend who sits on the balcony and pretentiously intones about the greatness of France. When connected with the subpar Holden Caulfieldism of that character's short story, the scene is extraordinarily funny, though never described as such by the narrator. And the narrator's own appraisal of the characters he is describing is constantly undercut by the things the characters do in a funny way, such as Carlo Marx noting how much more psychoanalytic and philosophical progress he'd be making with Dean Moriarty if Moriarty didn't have such a predilection for attending midget auto races.

To access the humor of the novel, one must take the narrator's start-up/evolution as a start-up of the narrative being told by the author. The narrator's fallibility then makes the novel no longer just an optimistic American panegyric to possibility. Those who pursue the unconventional will end up absurd, sometimes overwhelmingly so as with Kerouac's writer friend.

Then, in advancing middle age, once one has made some important life decisions, seized and rejected enough important possibilities and lived through the outcomes, the novel again reads quite differently. One reorders the major moments of the evolution so that moments of abandonment are now flagged as central pivots. The very act of going "on the road" means leaving someone. Paradise leaves his mother. Throughout the novel, Moriarty is always abandoning women. Paradise's one trip without Moriarty ends when he abandons a migrant farm worker and her son. Then, at a central pivot, Moriarty abandons Paradise when Paradise is ill in Mexico. Paradise decides he is going to somehow save Moriarty and promises that they will be brothers and that he will take Moriarty to Europe with him. But he never does that, and in the novel's final scene Paradise runs into Moriarty on the street in New York and decides to go to a concert with other friends instead of hanging out with him. In the final paragraph, in addition to noting that God is

¹⁹ We are not arguing that teenagers "misread" the text. Cogburn and Ohm state that part of what makes great novels great is that they generate inconsistent interpretations that nonetheless jointly yield important truths. This seems correct to us.

Pooh Bear, Paradise muses on Moriarty's father who had abandoned him. Much of the causal movement of the novel involves Paradise and Moriarty unsuccessfully trying to find Moriarty's father, and in the very last paragraph the narrator notes that they never did.

Note that extracting this interpretation requires not just distancing author from narrator, but distancing narrator from narrator. The narrator describing his experiences is not the same narrator who experienced them, and the narrator nearing the end of his narration has changed profoundly as a result of the telling of it. Parts of the narrator's narration are now seen as working as set-ups.

What do we learn now? Narcissists like Dean Moriarty can be extraordinarily charismatic, but are dangerous in part because their complete narcissism leads them to abandon people. The narrator's portrayal of himself as having a stable romantic relationship at the end of the novel represents not just his abandonment of Dean the abandoner, but also an abandonment of a way of life characterized by abandonment. And it's here that he realizes that God is Pooh Bear. He still thinks of Dean Moriarty lovingly, even while having had to reject him and what he represents. Pooh loves all of the other denizens of the Hundred Acre Woods, eccentrically flawed as they are. Yet Pooh himself is extraordinarily conventional. The sentiment reads so beautifully in the final paragraph that one takes it to be, at least briefly enough for him to get the final beautiful sentence out, authorially endorsed.

10. Our meditations on Kerouac suggest one final attempted objection. Doesn't the psychopath's inability to differentiate morally true from morally false fiction show that one already has to be able to differentiate moral truth from falsity prior to being able to correctly interpret the fiction? Isn't this what's going on with *On the Road*? People at different levels of moral development just recognize the moral truths they already know in the text? But then doesn't it follow that no one really learns about ethics from fiction? And so hasn't all of this just amounted to a refutation of the huckster?

While this bit of casuistry has a superficial plausibility, note that Noam Chomsky and Jerry Fodor have been roundly criticized for making the same argument with respect to our

understanding of the concept “carburetor.”²⁰ Rather than address these issues, we should just note that unless one believes that all knowledge is somehow *a priori*, then one has to make sense of the boot-strapping ways we go from partial to varying levels of knowledge and wisdom. With respect to ethics, nearly all humans innately empathize when directly presented with the suffering of others. But it takes quite a bit of moral education to learn to empathize with less present forms of suffering, to extend our moral community, to learn to realize truth, beauty, and love in a world with so much trauma, to learn how to attune oneself to those who cause suffering. . . The tradition of narrative ethics suggests that a primary way we humans accomplish all of this bootstrapping is by telling stories to one another.

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²⁰ For a discussion and devastating rebuttal see Fiona Cowie’s What’s Within? Nativism Reconsidered.

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