Review essay

Thinking Outside the Empathy Box

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Peter Bazalgette, *The Empathy Instinct* (London: John Murray, 2017).

Rick Rylance, *Literature and the Public Good* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

I.

Most American children at some point in their schooling are assigned Harper Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (1960). In one well-remembered part of the story, our narrator, Scout, is critical of a fellow student, one from a troubled and impoverished family, who has been involved in a tussle at school, and Scout's father, Atticus Finch, gives her some advice:

> "First of all," he [Atticus] said, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view – "
>
> "Sir?"
>
> " – until you climb into his skin and walk around in it." (Lee, 1960, p. 30).

In recent years, at least, Atticus Finch's advice – what we would describe to Scout as *empathy* – has been taken to heart. Across the professions, having, and demonstrating, empathy for those in one's care is understood as a crucial skill, and a core part of the training of doctors, lawyers, teachers, and caregivers. Those with liberal political views are asked to develop an empathic understanding of those who voted for Brexit, or for Donald Trump (see Hochschild (2016) for

example, who attempts to scale the "empathy wall" in order to connect with right-wing voters in the American South). An "Empathy Museum" has visitors (literally) walk in the shoes of individuals from diverse backgrounds and situations, and Colum McCann has experimented with a "radical empathy" that pairs individuals with deeply opposing values to inhabit and voice the feelings of their antagonists (Lovell, 2013; Miller, 2016).

The claim that the arts have an instrumental role in making more empathic citizens has taken hold in our funding bodies. Creative Scotland's (2016) recent strategic plan holds that "By offering alternative perspectives and experiences the arts can help us to make sense of the world, generate empathy, influence how we live and work together, and help us express and form societal values." (p. 15). The Arts and Humanities Research Council (Crossick and Kaszynski, 2016) found that "The enlarged experiences with cultural engagement can be unpacked in various ways: an improved understanding of oneself, an ability to reflect on different aspects of one's own life, an enhanced sense of empathy which need not mean sympathy for others, but an empathetic appreciation of their difference, and a sense of the diversity of human experience and cultures." And in the United States, the National Endowment for the Arts entitled an essay collection on translation in literature *The Art of Empathy* (2014). In her preface, Chairman Jane Chu wrote "The essays in this collection illuminate how translation fosters this sense of empathy – understanding how people from different countries might feel and act. … Bringing other voices to the American public, voices that we might not hear otherwise, makes the country as a whole a better place. Given the wide array of ethnicities and traditions in this country, translation helps bring us together and accept the differences among us." (p. i).

But do we know that these claims of the power of art to generate empathy and togetherness are true? Of course it is the case that a talented artist can bring us to feel enormous

empathy for characters in a narrative, whether they are real or fictional. It may remain difficult to explain *why* rational people invest themselves emotionally in the lives, joys, and sorrows of characters whom we know to be complete inventions of their authors (Radford, 1975; Weston, 1975), but we do it nonetheless. But the question before us is a different one: does the experience of art change our empathy towards people who are *not* the subject matter of the art? Elaine Scarry (2002) points us to the passage in Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* (1977), where Onegin attends the ballet. The audience is enraptured by the performances, there are tears and great applause. But outside, it's a frigid night:

> Still tumbling, devil, snake and Cupid
> on stage are thumping without cease;
> still in the porch, exhausted-stupid,
> the footmen sleep on the *pelisses*;
> the audience is still busy stamping,
> still coughing, hissing, clapping, champing;
> still everywhere the lamps are bright;
> outside and in they star the night;
> still shivering in the bitter weather
> the horses fidget worse and worse;
> the coachmen ring the fire, and curse
> their lords, and thwack their palms together; … (verse XXII, p. 44).

Two recent books, published in the UK, press the case that art does in fact help in the development of empathy for people (and maybe for shivering horses as well) outside the pages of the novel or the confines of stage or screen or canvas. As noted above, this case is already

being adopted by arts funding bodies. They are quite different books, with different aims, yet each in the end builds to a case for the arts, and for public support of the arts, based upon the positive effects of increased levels of empathy. Rick Rylance's *Literature and the Public Good* (hereafter, *LPG*) addresses just what you might expect from the title, asking what are the *public good* aspects of literature beyond the pure enjoyment for the reader. Peter Bazalgette's *The Empathy Instinct* (hereafter, *EE*) begins with an enquiry into what we know about empathy as a part of human development, how levels of empathy influence social outcomes, and the importance of empathy as a force for good. Both books have as their concluding, substantive chapter an argument for the value of the arts as a promoter of empathy.

This review essay is about their claims for the public value of the arts as it arises through the promotion of empathy. The next section is a brief overview of the two books, and the three sections after that address in turn the key questions that ought to be asked before embracing their recommendations: Is there good evidence for the claim that exposure to the arts makes people more empathic in their real-world social lives? If so, are we sure that more empathy is the route to a better, more just, society? And, if the answers to both of the first two questions are positive, should cultural policy and arts funding turn increased attention to those artists, organizations and programs that are most likely to have a big effect on empathy?

II.

Rick Rylance's *LPG* is designed as a polemic, in response to the long-standing concern about the perceived declining value society, and government funding bodies, place on the humanities. His concern is specifically with literature, prose and poetry, where the attention devoted to poetry is welcome in a debate where so much focus in the arts-and-empathy literature is purely on

narrative forms of art. What does he mean by the term *public good*? Early on he addresses a policy debate familiar to readers of this journal:

> This book opposes views that require one to be an ‘intrinsicest’ or an ‘instrumentalist’ in how one regards art. They are unnecessary and unhelpful alternatives. … I cannot see why private enthusiasm and public benefit are mutually exclusive. (p. 5).

The reader would benefit from clarification of terms. For example, arts consumption might have instrumental benefits for the consumer without there being any discernable public benefit: consider, for example, someone who learns about opera not because she enjoys it very much but because she thinks it will help her make her way into more elite social circles.

LPG is at its weakest when it comes to economic analysis of the production and consumption of literature. Rylance gives a number of statistics on the annual monetary output of the sector, its share of GDP and employment in the UK, and its importance as an export industry, making the (unfortunately common, in arts advocacy) error in presuming that there is any policy implication, or justification for state funding, that arises out of those figures. Notwithstanding the importance he places on the market size of the literature sector, he is critical of stated preference, or contingent valuation, techniques (pp. 13-14) in that they miss out on the intrinsic value of art in an effort to calculate public values on a monetary scale. Now while there are certainly problems inherent in contingent valuation techniques (Diamond and Hausman, 1994), and with the appropriateness of using them as the sole guide to public valuation of cultural heritage (Throsby, 2003), the issue is not that the technique by its very nature excludes intrinsic benefits. If a researcher asks me what I would be willing to pay to preserve an historic work of public art in my village, my answer will incorporate all benefits to me, intrinsic (my enjoyment of the art for its own sake) and instrumental (if I believe there are benefits from the work beyond my

aesthetic enjoyment). Rylance protests that intrinsic and instrumental values of the arts are intertwined, but contingent valuation methods do not deny this.

At a much later point in *LPG* (p. 153) Rylance cites Charles Taylor's (1995) consideration of culture as an 'irreducibly social good,' and though Rylance does not pursue it in depth, Taylor provides a very important critique of contingent valuation methods, namely that they assume we can add up the public value of culture by adding up the values ascribed to it by all the individuals in the society, whereas this is incoherent when the culture itself collectively shapes our values. Contingent valuation might useful in cost-benefit analysis of an upgraded highway, where the gains can be calculated for individual drivers, but not for the preservation of a culture or language.

LPG is a much stronger book when the author is on his own field, considering the value of literature as literature, without trying to apply the economist's toolkit. Rylance's response to Plato's critique of poetry, and his wanting to ban poets from his ideal, rational, state, for example:

> Human experience is fuller, richer, more difficult, and more interesting than a world in which one thing is truthful and other things are deviations. It is human and it is good enough. One unique way of representing and comprehending this kind of plural mindedness is to be found in literature, and this is a not inconsiderable public good (p. 59).

The defenses of poetry from Sir Philip Sidney, and from Percy Shelley, are presented vividly and with what is a better conception of what we could mean by literature as a *public* good – that it enhances our public language and discourse, that *I* benefit from *others* being well-read.

Although in its final section Peter Bazalgette's *EE* covers the same ground as Rylance's *LPG* (though, as we shall see below, with some profound differences), the earlier sections have share nothing in common. *EE* is focused on the importance of empathy to social well-being, from encounters between individuals, to communities, to nations and globally. He begins on a striking, and contestable, note, attributing twentieth century genocides, from the Turks and Armenians, through the Holocaust, to Rwanda, to a deficit of empathy amongst the perpetrators of the killings, that dehumanizing the 'other' is a failure of empathy, and that the heroes of those conflicts, who risked all to save lives of those under threat, were driven by empathy. It is a bold claim, but it is underidentified: altruism, and bearing personal cost and risk in a quest for justice, *might* be driven in some individuals by empathic responses to those in need, but could also be the result of a commitment to ethical standards that do not involve empathy, or from a strong sense of reciprocal altruism (Keen, 2007, p. 15; Flesch (2007) suggests that the teaching of kinship and reciprocal altruism are key to the evolutionary role of stories in the earliest human societies). Although Atticus Finch gave Scout sound advice about using empathy to better understand people, we never get the sense that Atticus's (dangerous to his personal well-being) courtroom, and jailhouse, defense of the unjustly accused Tom Robinson comes from his *empathy* for Robinson. Bazalgette places too great a weight on empathy as the fount of all human goodness.

EE is much better at looking at empathy on the smaller scale, where the focus is on how empathy develops in humans, how exactly it is an *instinct*, though one that needs nurturing to fully develop, the consequences when empathy remains undeveloped, in terms of anti-social and destructive behavior, and how in such cases the empathy deficit might be remedied. His guide through what we have learned about empathy through psychology and neuroscience is very good at presenting complicated research for the layreader in a way that does not oversimplify or

condescend. The case studies, in schools, prisons, hospitals, and care centers are varied, interesting, and inspiring in terms of how better understanding of the role of empathy can work to change people's lives for the better.

III.

Does engagement with the arts make people more empathic? Both *LPG* and *EE* answer with a resounding 'yes'. What is the evidence?

Since this section looks into the research literature, it is important to define some terms. *EE* has a useful explainer pp. 64-67 (see also Decety (2010) on the development of empathy in humans from infancy). *Emotional empathy*, sometimes called *affective empathy*, occurs when one *feels* the experiences – joy, sadness, hope, fear – being felt directly by others. It was first considered in depth by the eighteenth century Scottish Enlightenment philosophers David Hume (1969) and Adam Smith (1969), who used the term *sympathy* to describe emotional empathy (more on sympathy below), and who saw it as the root of our sense of morality and justice: we *feel* the pain, and in turn the wrongness, of someone who has been treated unjustly. Smith also saw emotional empathy as key to the development of good character; just as we empathize with others feeling joy or pain, so do we know that *they* empathize with *us* when *we* are demonstrative in what we are feeling, and this knowledge inspires us to moderate how we present ourselves. We do not feel emotional empathy when we think someone's reactions to their situation is disproportionate. Smith also noted that our emotional empathy (continuing to use the contemporary term) is guided by what we know to be the cause of someone else's emotional state; he gives the example of feeling badly for a person who has lost his mind, but is happily singing and dancing in the street (Smith, 1969, p. 49). *Cognitive empathy* arises from our

understanding, rather than our *feeling*, the thoughts and emotions of others. This can be broken down into *Theory of Mind* (ToM), which allows us to know another person's state of mind by their expressions and actions, and *perspective-taking*, which, as it sounds, has us try to see the world from another's point of view (without necessarily *feeling* what they are feeling). Cognitive empathy does not imply any sort of fellow-feeling or kindness; a skilled confidence man will be well-endowed with cognitive empathy. Finally, we now use the word *sympathy* to indicate our *concern* for the pain of others, without necessarily feeling that pain ourselves.

There are two ways in which people have tried to make the case that engagement with the arts leads to increased empathy: research-based, and, what I will call for want of a better word, rhetorical.

In general, research-based studies are of two types. One type considers individuals' history of engagement with various forms of the arts, and looks for correlations with indicators of emotional and cognitive empathy. An example would be Mar et.al. (2006). Participants in the study were evaluated on their engagement of literature by a test involving how many authors (of non-fiction, literary fiction, and other genres) they could recognize (fake names were put in the survey to ensure participants were not just guessing). Participants then faced various empathy tests – a self-report on perspective-taking, empathic concern, and personal distress when others are distressed, and a technique often used in this line of research known as *reading the mind in the eyes* (MIE), where participants are shown many different sets of eyes, and asked to identify the associated emotional state (science fiction fans will be reminded of the Voigt-Kampff empathy test used to tell androids apart from humans in Philip K. Dick's (1968) *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*). They found those who were predominately fiction readers scored higher on MIE than non-fiction readers, and in general a higher correlation on empathy scores

for fiction readers. The study's authors recognize well the limitations: we cannot know whether reading fiction *caused* higher empathy scores, or if people who are more empathetic tend to be drawn to reading fiction; self-reporting on empathy tests (not including MIE) can be distorted by participants feeling a need to *seem* empathic; and there are no indications regarding how higher empathy scores translate into actual social engagement (a matter we will return to in the next section of this review).

A second type of research study actually provides participants with selected literature, rather than asking what they have read beforehand, which is followed by empathy tests. One study of this type, cited by Bazalgette in *EE*, is by Djikic et. al. (2009). In this experiment, participants first completed a questionnaire meant to uncover degrees of empathic feeling – the empathy questions were buried within a longer survey, such that participants did not know that empathy was the key interest. The participants were then randomly separated into two groups. The experimental group read Anton Chekhov's short story "The Lady with the Little Dog". The control group read a document, of similar length, telling the same story (two people, each in an unhappy marriage, meet and fall in love), controlled for length, readability, and complexity, but presented in documentary form, like a deposition in a divorce hearing. After the reading, participants were given the same questionnaire they began with. Those who read Chekhov had a larger change in self-reported indicators of empathy than those who read the non-literary account. The participants, as so often in academic studies, were first-year undergraduate students. None of them had read the story before (and presumably none had spent years in an unhappy marriage). The authors of the study conclude: "It is not our argument that art necessarily causes permanent or strong personality changes in those who encounter it. A relationship of an individual psyche to a work of art is a highly complex process that cannot be

easily brought into the laboratory. Instead, this study shows that the potential for change is there, given that human psyche appears to respond to the artistic form through subtle shifts in the vision of itself. This potential is worth exploring." (Djikic et. al., 2009, p. 28). It is a rightly cautious reading; we cannot credibly make the leap from a short-term experiment such as this with claims about long-term causal effects of engagement with literature.

In *LPG*, Rylance cites the study by Kidd and Castano (2013). Here, in a series of five, similar experiments, participants were evaluated through pre-test questionnaires and an author recognition test, given short pieces to read from literary fiction, popular fiction, or nothing at all, and subsequently evaluated through further questionnaires and the MIE test. As with Djikic et. al. (2009), Kidd and Castano find that reading *literary* fiction improves scores regarding ToM. Like Djikic et. al., they suggest that their short-run experiments hold clues to the long-run: "our findings demonstrate the short-term effects of reading literary fiction. However, taken together, the relation between the Author Recognition Test and ToM performance and the finding that it is specifically literary fiction that facilitates ToM processes suggest that reading literary fiction may lead to stable improvements in ToM." (Kidd and Castano, 2013, p. 380). But this is something of a leap: we cannot infer from short-run tests the effects of long-term engagement with literature, and the correlation between scores on the author recognition test and ToM leaves us with no idea about the direction of causality. (A further problem is whether this study can be replicated: see the debate between Panero et. al. (2016, 2017) and Kidd and Castano (2017)). Rylance is encouraged by Kidd and Castano's results: "It stands as a compelling piece of evidence that reading literature brings public benefit" (*LPG*, p. 191), although with caution: "[the studies] are too small to sustain large inferences and need further development for secure conclusions. The authors can only be confident about short-term gains in ToM abilities on the

basis of these results" (*LPG*, p. 192). The caution is warranted. Throughout the psychology literature on reading and empathy, there is not enough there to give us much confidence at all in how engagement with reading fiction has a causal relationship with different measures of empathy. It's not that the studies themselves are flawed in design. It is simply too difficult to chart over a long period what the effects are, separating correlation and causality.

The rhetorical arguments for how lifelong engagement with the arts would develop empathy, though not arising from a laboratory setting, might for some actually be more persuasive. Novelist Barbara Kingsolver (1995) believes that "the power of fiction is to create empathy" (pp. 230-1). It has that virtue in being able to bring us understanding of the many through directing our focus to individuals:

> A novel might make us weep over the same events that might hardly give us pause in a newspaper. … Art is the antidote that can call us back from the edge of numbness, restoring the ability to feel for another. By virtue of that power, it is political, regardless of content. If *Jane Eyre* is a great romance, it has also given thousands of men a female experience, and a chance to feel the constraints that weighed upon women of Jane's time. … I *know*, for example, that slavery was heinous, but the fate of sixty million slaves is too big a thing for the heart to understand. So it was not until I read Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that I honestly felt that truth. (p. 232).

This differs from the claims of the experimental psychologists not only in the power of the writing (for which we cannot fault the scientists) but also in drawing upon specific examples of literature that allow us to empathize with large numbers of people for whom we would otherwise be somewhat numb to their condition. Paul Slovic's (2007) experimental research provides confirmation: it is simply too difficult for human beings to comprehend the feelings, the

sufferings, of millions; the only way we are capable of comprehending events is through stories of individuals. (The next section of this review considers whether such stories actually move people to *act* upon that empathy).

A more modest claim for art is that whilst it may not necessarily generate the affective empathy felt by Kingsolver, it at least develops the reader's cognitive empathy through presenting a diversity of characters, points of view, and complex situations. Martha Nussbaum (1998) claims that great literature takes the reader past her limited vision and pre-conceptions, arousing her from her "ethical torpor" (p. 344). John Carey (2006) writes that "whatever we read constantly modifies, adapts, questions or abrogates whatever we have read before" (p. 195). He continues:

> I am not suggesting that reading literature makes you more moral. … My claim is different. It is that literature gives you ideas to think with. It stocks your mind. (p. 208).

And this highlights an important distinction. Research studies suggest, tentatively, that engagement with literary fiction improves Theory of Mind. *If* we find that claim persuasive, it remains to know whether the arts actually change our *behavior* in positive, pro-social ways. Do the arts change our *affective* empathy (as Kingsolver claims), and, in turn, does that move us to action?

IV.

How do we make the leap from empathizing with characters from a work of art – the executed rebels in Goya's Third of May (1808), for example, or the children working the factories in Dickens's *Hard Times* – to a changed behavior? It might well be that it does not happen at all, that we are moved by the art, but then simply leave matters there. On the

"industrial novels" of the nineteenth century, Raymond Williams (1958) writes: "Recognition of evil was balanced by fear of becoming involved. Sympathy was transformed, not into action, but into withdrawal" (p. 228). Even worse, it might be that our empathy for those presented to us either in fiction or in documentary evidence prevents us from understanding our *own* role in conflicts. Susan Sontag (2003) on our experiencing images of war:

> The imaginary proximity to the suffering inflicted on others that is granted by images suggests a link between the far-away sufferers – seen close-up on the television screen – and the privileged viewer that is simply untrue, that is yet one more mystification of our real relations to power. So far as we feel sympathy, we feel we are not accomplices to what caused the suffering. Our sympathy proclaims our innocence as well as our impotence. (p. 102).

Getting at the pith of the matter, Claudia Rankine, author of the searing work of poetry and prose *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014), on race relations in the United States, says: "Empathy is not a cure" (Kellaway, 2015).

And so it is worth asking: is the emphasis on empathy as the cure to social ills misplaced? Bazalgette's answer is an emphatic "no": the entirety of *EE* is devoted to its importance. In *LPG* Rylance sees empathy, and behavior arising from empathy, as a key public benefit arising from the reading of literature. But it is a contestable claim.

Consider first the role of empathy in professional practice. Though physician empathy for their patients has become what is regarded as a critical skill, to be put in the core of medical education (Jeffrey 2016), it has been contested. Macnaughton (2009) questions whether it asks the impossible of a physician to have affective empathy towards her patient, given the bilateral power relationship between the two. In her account of being an actor employed by a medical

school to portray patients with varying symptoms, for examination by medical students, Leslie Jamison (2014) was asked to report on how the students *demonstrated* their empathy: "'that must be really hard,' they all say" (p. 3), but when in her real life she was a patient, she was less sure about its importance. For her heart surgery, she has a doctor who is a "straight talker". She is distressed about her condition and prospects, but:

> Instead of identifying with my panic – inhabiting my horror at the prospect of a pacemaker – he was helping me understand that even this, the barnacle of a false heart, would be okay. His calmness didn't make me feel abandoned, it made me feel secure. It offered assurance rather than empathy, or maybe assurance was evidence of empathy, insofar as he understood that assurance, not identification, was what I needed more. (p. 17).

Cognitive empathy certainly helps in understanding what people need from us; the usefulness of affective empathy in practice is less evident.

More broadly, how sure are we that empathy is the route to sound moral judgment? We don't expect art, except maybe in children's literature, to teach moral lessons – as Landy (2008; 2010) points out, the body of the world's great art would give a thoroughly confusing and contradictory vision of how one ought to behave. That's not to say serious art cannot have a moral vision, but that is a different matter from looking to literature for moral lessons (Lamarque, 1996).

But does empathy as a learned trait lead to better morals? Bloom (2016) and Prinz (2014) make their case *against* empathy generally on the grounds that it is so selective in its concerns. We are physiologically incapable of empathizing with everybody, or even with a lot of people at once, and so our weighing of moral concerns is distorted by which individuals happen to capture

our empathic attention. It will be naturally biased to those close to us and similar to us (long ago recognized by Hume and Smith). Even a conscious effort to read literature from other cultures is not wholly satisfactory:

> The problem with discussions of "the other" is that they characteristically emphasize generous imaginings, and thus allow the fate of another person to be contingent on the generosity and wisdom of the imaginer. But solutions ought not to give one group the power to regulate another group in this way. (Scarry, 2002, p. 106).

One could see the "effective altruism" movement as an attempt to move beyond empathy in our philanthropic choices, towards a more carefully considered weighing of outcomes that puts different people's needs on a more equal footing.

Art directs our empathy in particular ways; it is core to the critique of "sentimentalism" in art that it quite deliberately sets out to foster empathy in a particular direction (Tanner, 1976; Jefferson, 1983). Consider that Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is often cited as an example of the power of empathy through literature to bring about positive social change (see, for example, Kristof, 2017). Perhaps it did, in showing the horrors of life under slavery. But remember also that a competing literature was designed to provoke empathy for poor Southern whites as opposed to blacks: the film *Birth of a Nation* (1915) is obviously meant to do so, and schoolbooks in the American South into the mid-twentieth century made claims that slaves in fact had better living conditions than poor whites did. We can always cite examples of works that generate empathy in cases where we *already believe* such empathy is appropriate, but if that is the case, what are we to say about works that, through trying to exploit our "empathy instinct", distort our moral choices towards judgments that are wrong? Should we evaluate works based upon their ability to "correctly" direct our empathy?

V.

In the previous two sections we have seen that the question of whether engagement with art increases our empathy beyond that for the characters portrayed in the art, and whether this leads to better social outcomes, are both questionable, though both Bazalgette and Rylance would answer each question in the affirmative. In this final section, let us give both authors the benefit of the doubt on these questions. What, then, are the implications for cultural policy? In terms of funding, for arts education or grants to arts organizations and projects, we can focus on one question in particular: if empathy is an important instrumental benefit of the arts, should funding give preference to art that is most likely to foster empathy? (This is a question that can be adjusted for *any* instrumental justification for arts funding, where the arts are a means to an end. See Hadley and Gray, 2017).

The dilemma is neatly stated by Keen (2007):

> If novels do cultivate readers' empathy, and if empathy undergirds both caring and justice in society, then fiction apparently has a vital job to do today. However, the tethering of fiction (or novels, or narrative) to caring also shows a wish to raise the status of fiction and to boost a minority activity, reading. Linking novel reading to a widely shared moral principle – caring – without demanding that fiction be about caring allows broad claims about the medium to exist without evaluating content. This is a neat trick. (p. 20).

Taking a step back, there is a long debate, stretching back to Plato, on whether art should be evaluated according to its moral worth. Carroll (1996; 1998; 2000) provides a useful taxonomy of possibilities. *Radical autonomism*, or *aestheticism*, holds that art must solely be evaluated on its aesthetic merit: "There is no such thing as a moral or an immoral book. Books are well

written or badly written. That is all" (Wilde, 1949, p. 5). A prominent current exponent of this view would be Richard Posner (1997; 1998 – see Nussbaum, 1998, and Bloom, 1998 for rejoinders), who does not disagree that authors bring a moral framework to their art (and that would include Oscar Wilde), but as *material* to the work, and not something that should be part of our evaluation of the value of the work. *Moderate autonomism* would permit ethical criticism of art, but as something wholly separate from its aesthetic value. In this framework, we could criticize Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will* for its glorification of the Nazis, but would put that entirely aside in measuring the film's aesthetic worth. *Moderate moralism*, to which Carroll himself subscribes, finds the moral framework of a piece of art as something inseparable from its aesthetic value. We can trace this view to Aristotle, who held that a tragedy can only work aesthetically as a tragedy if the hero is morally compelling. Artists work with an assumption about the moral framework their audience will bring to it: Carroll (1996) notes the modern, aesthetic failure of Bret Easton Ellis's (1991) *American Psycho*, in which the author failed to gauge the moral intuitions of his readers. Gaut (1998) holds that a racist joke fails as a joke, which is by definition meant to be funny, because of its racism, and we cannot separate the two saying, "yes, that's a very funny joke. On the other hand, it is very racist" (But see also Roberts, 2016). Finally, there is the *radical moralist*, who holds that art can only be discussed from a moral point of view. Carroll's example is Plato (Cornford, 1941) and we could also include the Tolstoy of the essay "What is Art?" (1990) (though not Tolstoy the novelist).

The role of ethical criticism of art is a deeply complex question, one far beyond the scope of this review. But it was very surprising to find Bazalgette be so attracted to the radical moralists Plato and Tolstoy:

> Plato is often quoted as wanting to ban poets from his ideal society, but that's not strictly accurate. He actually wanted to ban the wrong sort of poet, mere entertainers, in favour of those with a more positive purpose: 'Good speech, good accord, good grace, and good rhythm follow upon goodness of character.' (*EE*, p. 255).

But that is a most distorted view of Plato, citing a passage from Book III of *The Republic* in which Socrates describes the limited role for poets in properly educating young boys, and ignoring Book X where in fact he really *does* want to ban poets for bringing irrationality to what ought to be a rational state. This single paragraph is deeply troubling for what it implies about acceptable art. He goes on to approvingly quote Tolstoy from "What is Art?":

> Leo Tolstoy understood that storytelling is just the beginning: 'The task for art to accomplish is to make that feeling of brotherhood and love of one's neighbor, now attained by only by the best members of society, the customary feeling and instinct of all men.' (*EE*, p. 290).

Posner (1997) claimed that aestheticism in the evaluation of art is in fact a moral outlook, even while claiming that morals have no place in aesthetic criticism: it is the outlook of liberal individualism. Carroll (1996) notes that aestheticism in the early twentieth century was a reaction against censorship. And one does not have to fully adopt radical autonomism in artistic criticism to see that radical moralism brings great dangers should it become an ideology. *EE* argues passionately for increased public funding of the arts, arts education, and public broadcasting. But the way in which it does so is alarming.

A further problem with evaluating literature on its power of generating empathy occurs through the treatment of writers from minorities. Novelist Kamila Shamsie has expressed concern that valuing minority authors for their social function – bringing empathy and

understanding of minority cultures – comes at the expense of appreciating the literary merit of their work (Kean, 2017). Note also the National Endowment for the Arts (2014) publication extolling the virtues of literature in translation: it is about the empathy, and Americans' gaining perspectives from distant lands, rather than the value of literature from other languages as literature.

Rylance's advocacy for literature as a public good, warranting public support, is very different, with great literature – fiction and poetry – expanding the reader's vision and ability to consider multiple perspectives, without necessarily carrying a moral message. Empathy will come from negotiating the complexities presented by literature, without their being a specific directive to empathize:

> The Janus messages – facing two ways simultaneously – are one mode of ambiguity. It is a discovery condition in that it asks us to ponder opposing emotions, or to reflect on the mindset of another. It is particular to literature – and perhaps all art – when pain or loss are in tension with beauty of expression or design. It uplifts as it negates. It extends as it narrows. It finds alternatives as it concentrates. It grows as it ends. (*LPG*, pp. 166-7).

And further:

> It is awareness of different minds and personalities, their quiddity and ambiguity, and the dialogue of separateness and resemblance, that lies at the core of literature's social benefit. (*LPG*, p. 179).

It is contestable whether engaging with the arts will make us more empathic, and whether that empathy will make a difference in our social welfare. Neither of these books, nor the literature on the two subjects, offers much that is conclusive. Great care is warranted in making empathy a

new instrumental value to add to all the others – economic growth; better health; more "creativity" – in cultural policy.

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