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On the Road to Virtuousness: Empathy for Rough Heroines

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ABSTRACT. This paper examines a challenge regarding the role of moral development in empathetic resistance to fiction by introducing a problem from moral philosophy, recently described by Olivia Bailey as the "puzzle about the relation between empathy and virtuousness." In the first part, it is argued that one's moral development or progress on the road to virtuousness should be considered in explaining our engagement with rough heroes. The second part examines whether there are cases in which empathetic imagination should be cultivated with vicious perspectives, focusing on rough heroines. The paper concludes by offering two motivational grounds (one moral and one epistemic) for empathizing with certain vicious perspectives: first, it contributes to our moral education by helping us recognize that sometimes what motivates us to refrain from empathetically engaging with morally challenging perspectives is the influence of implicit bias; second, empathy with morally challenging perspectives is the best way we have to turn our attention towards the existence and scope of our implicit biased background and thus improve our cognitive skills.

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1. Introduction

The present paper starts from the assumption that carefully considering the relation of empathy and virtuousness in our engagement with fiction may shed light on both the limits of our ability to empathetically engage with morally vicious fictional narratives and the nature of our moral stance towards vicious perspectives in fictional and real-life narratives. Previous discussions on rough heroes have predominantly focused on aspects such as the rough hero's characteristics (Eaton, 2012), the perspective of the narrative (Eaton, 2003; Gaut, 1998) and the tactics employed to foster pro-attitudes (Vaage, 2016, Paris, 2022), or the nature of the ethical flaws of the artwork (whether intrinsic or extrinsic, whether quarantined in the work or expanded towards actual persons) (Clavel-Vasquez, 2020). My approach will instead shift the focus to the audience, examining how a reader's moral character and progress toward virtuousness influence her engagement with rough heroes.[2] I will do so by introducing a problem from moral philosophy, recently described by Olivia Bailey in terms of the "puzzle about the relation between empathy and virtuousness". Following John McDowell's Aristotelian account, Bailey has argued that the virtuous person cannot empathize with vicious perspectives, because part of what it means to be virtuous is that one cannot perceive the world in a less-than-virtuous manner. In this paper, I will discuss the puzzle in relation to fiction and argue that one's moral development is related to difficulties in engaging first-personally with vicious perspectives.

2. Empathy for Rough Heroes

We often enjoy engaging imaginatively with morally flawed or rough heroes and unethical actions. We are fascinated by the authors' ability to create fictional circumstances that allow us to overcome the initial resistance we experience during imaginative engagement with the narrative, prompting us to sympathize and align ourselves with characters whom, in real life, we would want to see

[2] From this point of view, I agree with Panos Paris that "Eaton is mistaken not only to suggest that the phenomenon of RH-empathy reveals more about the works than it does about the audience, but also to imply…that these can be clearly separated" (Paris, *forthcoming*). In line with this, Clavel-Vasquez argues that imaginative resistance to rough heroines can be explained by considering one's own interpretative horizons, which are determined by the sociocultural context (Clavel-Vasquez, 2018).

punished.[3] Sometimes, the way the narrator presents the story enables or prescribes something more: by following the flow of fictional events, we relate to the heroes and "test" their point of view (Moran, 1994, p. 105). Through this first-personal or empathetic imaginative engagement with the hero's perspective we are prompted to not only see the world through their eyes and understand their situation, scope, and emotions, but also to relate affectively with the hero's experiences from a first-personal perspective.[4] Simply put, we can use our imagination to switch perspectives, which allows us to simulate or recreate first-personally the thoughts or feelings of the fictional other. Still, it is not always clear what this "first-personal" engagement or reenactment of experience consists of. Olivia Bailey presupposes that empathetic engagement with another's perspective requires an understanding of why a person is in a particular emotional state by apprehending the other's emotions as intelligible (that is, as appropriate or fitting). Through this type of "rich" empathetic imagination, which Bailey calls *humane understanding*, we gain a deep understanding of what it is like being in their situation by experiencing affective states ourselves.

However, in the case of rough heroes, this type of engagement raises psychological and moral concerns. How can anyone relate empathetically to a hero who embraces evilness, such as Tony Soprano? What does it say about us if we adopt the perspective of a character like Walter White of *Breaking Bad*? Since most of us consider ourselves fair, ethical, and virtuous (Tappin & McKay, 2017), our ethical attitudes towards such heroes should be different. In real life, the revelation that an individual is a drug dealer and murderer would evoke horror and outrage, and our reaction would not be alleviated by any information about the perpetrator's other positive character traits. One may, of course, deny that we actually empathize with rough heroes. We may understand their situation, scope, and emotions, sympathize or ally with them, but we do not engage with them from a first-personal perspective. For some, empathizing may be too hard, or even impossible. Thomas Szanto argued that we resist empathically relating to an evil character either because we do not want to be morally tainted, or because empathizing with an evil character can make us reassess our moral self-conception (in ways that may be unfavourable to us). Others accept

[3] I take it that sympathy refers to an affective state related to the character's emotional state that is nevertheless not isomorphic to it (see de Vignemont & Singer, 2006). Allegiance refers to the "sustained, strong pro-attitudes that keep us invested in the success of a deeply morally flawed protagonist" (Clavel-Vasquez, 2018).
[4] Admittedly, an empathic response to a character is neither required for engagement with every work of fiction nor the only mode of imaginative engagement.

that we can and often do empathize with rough heroes and this comes with certain merits: Anja Berninger (2021) maintains that since empathy creates a sense of similarity between the empathizer and the target of empathetic response, empathy towards morally problematic heroes may undermine our self-trust, which can be morally beneficial in various ways (for example, we become aware of our moral fallibility). William Kidder (2022) also stresses the cognitive value of empathy towards rough heroes, in that we acquire an important lesson about "humanity's susceptibility to moral deviance".

3. Empathy and Virtuousness

While most discussions assume that we respond empathetically to fictional characters in much the same way we engage with real agents (Robinson, 2010, Currie,1997, Coplan, 2004, Gilmore 2020), little attention has been given to the correlation between the difficulties we encounter in relating empathetically with real-life morally problematic narratives and the problems in relating to vicious perspectives in fiction (Goldie, 2003, pp. 65-66 is an exception; see also Sodoma, 2024, p. 7).

I will now introduce a problem from moral philosophy, recently described by Olivia Bailey in terms of the "puzzle about the relation between empathy and virtuousness". Following John McDowell's Aristotelian account, Bailey argues that the (truly) virtuous person cannot empathize with vicious perspectives, because part of what it means to be virtuous is that one cannot perceive the world in a less-than-virtuous manner. Yet, as Bailey argues, people who are less than virtuous sometimes need their "minorly vicious" perspectives to be empathized with, because they desire for the appropriateness of their (mildly vicious) emotions to be "appreciated" at first-hand. Insofar as the above thoughts are plausible, it seems that the virtuous person would be unable to understand the perspective of the less-than-virtuous in a first-personal manner and attend to the other's need for their vicious emotions to be empathetically understood. Therefore, the (truly) virtuous person is missing a potentially crucial way of understanding other perspectives of the world in a first-personal manner and responding to the needs of the less-than-virtuous others.

I will try to summarize why this thesis is, I believe, correct. As much discussed, McDowell's Aristotelian conception of the "fully" virtuous person is very demanding – some even ascribe to

McDowell the demand for "a god-like nature" (see Blackburn, 1998). However, we need not address this issue here. For the present discussion, it is enough to maintain that for ordinary people who go on to become virtuous (people at various stages of moral development) certain morally deviant possibilities do not appear as attractive (Bailey, 2021, p. 9632; see Curzer, 2002, pp. 154-155). McDowell argues that the way we perceive virtues and vices, whether in life or in art, depends and draws on a practical knowledge of how to act that is shaped by our upbringing and our participation in the relevant social practices. Thus, moral character functions as a 'second nature' which allows us to perceive a moral reality by seeing an action as right or wrong, and to determine the reasons for our actions. The fully virtuous person is one who has silenced all "considerations which compete with the demands of virtue" (Seidman, 2005, p. 68); such a person cannot empathize with vicious perspectives because these do not appear as having intelligible motivations. *Mutatis mutandis*, individuals in earlier stages of moral development (yet striving for progress) similarly experience difficulties empathizing with more vicious viewpoints. So what the "puzzle about the relation between empathy and virtuousness" shows is that one's moral development or progress on the road to virtuousness is related to difficulties in engaging first-personally with vicious perspectives, in that "increasing virtue translates into a diminishing ability to empathize deeply or precisely with vicious emotions" (Bailey, 2021, p. 9632).[5] Even the morally mediocre person's attempt to take in the perspective of someone who is considerably less virtuous is impeded; nevertheless, morally mediocre people are in a better position to fulfil the vicious others' empathetic needs, and according to Bailey, this is a significant moral role that the less-than-virtuous people have (referred to as the "division of moral labor").

4. Points of Entry to Vicious Perspectives

The above analysis of the relationship between empathy and virtuousness stops short of explaining how the less-than-virtuous (the morally mediocre) can nevertheless empathize with seriously vicious perspectives and relate to experiences that are far removed from their own, such as being

[5] As Bailey herself comments, Adam Morton also argued for the "blinkering effect" to our empathetic capacities. Our moral sensitivities constrain our empathetic imagination not only towards those who perform atrocious acts, but also in understanding less vicious and relatively harmless behaviours (Morton, 2011, p. 318).

the mob boss Tony Soprano or the sociopath Ripley.[6] There are at least two possibilities we should examine.

One possibility could be that ordinary individuals have first-personal access to certain vicious perspectives, in the form of memories from past situations and previous stages of their ethical development.[7] For example, according to this idea, we can understand and empathize with a friend's sense of *schadenfreude* regarding an opponent's failure, because we can imaginatively return to previous stages of our moral development, even though this emotion is out of our *current* emotional repertoire. Even though this idea seems at first plausible, things are significantly more complicated. I may remember that I used to feel *schadenfreude* towards some rivals at work. Yet, I am no longer able to first-personally engage imaginatively in the emotion, in the sense of appreciating *schadenfreude* as an appropriate emotional response for the rival's failure. For this kind of imaginative engagement would require that I quarantine my background emotional dispositions to relate to a past self from a first-personal perspective (see Goldie, 2011). However, in case I have gone through a moral transformation, such that I have built up new dispositions (and, possibly, acquired new virtues), this first-personal access to a past self is disrupted (see Paul, 2017, pp. 267-268). I might be able to relate from a third-personal perspective, but I cannot simulate my former emotional perspective from my current first-personal perspective.[8] So, the idea of triggering past experiences may suffice to explain an understanding from the third-person perspective, but does not explain first-personal or empathetic engagement.

Another possibility is to accept that the ordinary virtuous person can at most experience empathy with *some parts* of a vicious perspective. Maybe taking in or endorsing a vicious perspective is gradable. This alien perspective involves several mental states, thoughts, feelings, perceptions, desires, motives, and so on. One need not imagine believing, feeling, perceiving, and

[6] Anja Berninger (2024) discusses the case of the experience of Holocaust survivors as being "too far removed from the sorts of experience the audience can draw on in trying to imagine what things were like" to argue that we are not able to empathetically imagine what they have been through.

[7] This idea assumes that to be able to empathize with another's emotion, it is necessary that one has experienced a similar emotion, see P. Bloom *Against Empathy* (2016, pp. 147-149).

[8] Compare from M. Boyle: "A person who consciously inhabits a point of view, we said, does not merely have some first- order mental state, on the one hand, and a second- order belief that she is in this state, on the other. Rather, her point of view on herself and her point of view on the world fuse into one, in such a way that she can express her first-order point of view in thinking herself to be in the corresponding mental state" (Boyle, 2024, p. 169).

desiring what the fictional hero thinks, feels, perceives, and desires in full. For example, it is possible to imagine being a mob boss without imagining from the inside every aspect of what it is like being a gangster. I can imagine being Tony Soprano and realizing that I have to murder my beloved cousin to end a bloody conflict with another crime family. I imagine being coerced and feeling guilty and stressed, so I stand in a first-personal relation to *this aspect* of Tony's mental situation. I cannot, however, imagine *choosing* murdering my cousin (see Sodoma, 2024), nor do I see the proposition that I have to murder my cousin as convincing (see Boyle 2024, p. 96). I can imagine certain aspects more or less vividly. For example, I vividly imagine "from the inside" feeling guilty (after all, I do too experience guilt over how I treat some of my relatives). But I can imagine desiring what Tony desires up to the degree that I can imagine seeing something good or desirable about it (see Scanlon, 1998, p. 38).

Drawing on Carlotta Pavese's reflections on kinds of gradability of know-how (Pavese, 2017), I would like to suggest that empathy is gradable in regards to how many aspects of the other's experience one imagines, and in regards to how well or vividly one imagines those aspects (see Aumann, 2023; also Bailey, 2018). Our moral development affects our imaginative capacities and limits what we can empathize with and to what degree; nevertheless, the morally mediocre person is in a better position than the virtuous person to imaginatively apprehend vicious perspectives. As Bailey correctly points out, following McDowell, just as the non-virtuous seek "independently intelligible" desires or what McDowell calls "points of entry" into appreciation of a moral outlook, *mutatis mutandis* the morally mediocre can find "points of entry" to the vicious perspective. What could be such a "point of entry" be?

One shortcoming of the discussion about engaging with vicious perspectives is the acceptance of the idea that we can somehow empathize or simply ally with a hero despite them being utterly remorseless.[9] But the narratives of such heroes – if they exist in fiction – would not allow for a point of entry to their emotional state. What needs to be addressed is the role of reflective thinking and remorse in vicious narratives as the required "point of entry" (Kidder, 2022 is an exception): what makes a vicious perspective a candidate for the virtuous person's empathetic

[9] See Eaton 2003; Clavel-Vasquez is cautious to say that they "show remorse but it is not a central part of the narrative" (Clavel-Vasquez, 2018, 203).

response or compatible with it is that the non-virtuous agent expresses some kind of remorse or relates with her own reprehensible emotions in a reflective way. She has to some degree objectified the viciousness of her perspective, she is self-aware of the morally flawed nature of her beliefs and dispositions, and that means that she has not "surrender herself" to them but maintains a psychological distance. She may be viewing the world from an immoral perspective, she is perhaps vicious, but at the same time she has not capitulated to viciousness.

What I would like to suggest, therefore, is that what contributes to the differentiation of vicious perspectives enabling an empathetic response from vicious perspectives that do not, is the vicious hero's experiencing moments of remorseful behaviour. For if the hero hadn't tasted remorse or stood reflectively towards her own perspective, then indeed we would not be able to empathetically adopt her perspective and, furthermore, we would not perceive any moral reason to do so. Part of what permits the readers to engage first-personally with vicious heroes is that fiction provides a rich narrative universe which often (if not in all of the cases) invites the reader to share the vicious hero's moments of remorse and self-reflective thinking, even if these moments are not central to the narrative. It might be more difficult to empathize with real-life vicious perspectives, because their self-reflecting thinking (if existing at all) is not usually available to the second person perspective.

5. Should we Empathize with Vicious Perspectives?

In the final part of my essay, I focus on the second challenge posed by Bailey, namely whether there are cases when we should cultivate empathetic imagination with vicious perspectives. Bailey argues that at least in the case of "mildly vicious" perspectives, humane understanding or first-hand appreciation of the intelligibility of another's emotion is something everyone needs because it contributes to one's flourishing. According to Bailey, "not receiving the sort of humane understanding which empathy affords is a source of suffering" (2021, p. 9639). Obviously, vicious perspectives from fiction, such as rough heroines, are a different case given that they do not exist and do not need to be humanly understood. But this remark entails that the ethical flaws and immoral perspectives are quarantined in fiction and overlooks the many paths through which

emotional responses to fiction transfer to real life. As Stacie Friend has argued (2020), emotions in response to fiction may carry over to similar real-life narratives and heroes and still be subjected to appropriateness or correctness categories. Empathy for fictional characters has the power to motivate desires to act (Harold, 2000) and can have "a profound, lasting, and more often than not unconscious influence on our attitudes" (Paris, *forthcoming*). So, examining whether we should empathize with rough heroines involves allowing that sometimes our emotional responses to fiction interact with other mental states or motivate action towards non-fictional female criminals. If fiction can morally affect audiences, are there any reasons we *should not resist* empathetically engaging with vicious perspectives? Although I cannot here examine this problem in depth, I will outline the main points of a possible account by focusing on the special case of rough heroines.

Let's take *Griselda*, Netflix's portrayal of the terrifying drug lord, the Cocaine Godmother. The narrative depicts a heroine who, although transcends her gender role since she runs a cartel, nonetheless reflects basic gendered representational stereotypes about women who commit crimes (Griselda is initially presented as a victim of her abusive husband, and eventually as a deranged monster, reflecting the "mad, sad or bad" stereotypical representation of female criminals). Griselda aspires to be a rough heroine – after all, Sofia Vergara, who portrayed Blanco and participated in the production of the show, stated that her goal was to create a heroine in the tradition of Tony Soprano.[10] Yet, despite the narrative's prescriptions, we find it difficult to sympathize or ally with Griselda; instead, we experience what Adriana Clavel-Vázquez described as affective resistance: we need greater effort to develop strong and sustained sympathetic attitudes towards rough heroines because we perceive them as violating gender norms and expectations (Clavel-Vázquez, 2018, p. 202).[11]

As argued above, morally mediocre agents are posited as being better than the virtuous to empathetically apprehend vicious perspectives, opening up a significant moral role for them. Let's suppose, moreover, that morally mediocre folks like us care to improve morally and progress on the path to virtuousness. Do we have any motivational grounds to empathize with rough heroines?

[10] "I always dreamed of Griselda to be a little bit like Tony Soprano. He was a very bad guy, but you wanted him to win; you could justify some of his behaviors", Vergara stated to the *New York Times,* https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/24/arts/television/sofia-vergara-netflix-griselda-blanco.html

[11] Clavel-Vásquez considers engaging with the rough hero as allegiance, and others as sympathy or strong affection (Eaton, 2003, Carroll, 2013).

In my view, we have at least two. The first is moral: the tension between the prescriptions of the narrative and our emotional responses can trigger a reflection on the grounds that tend to impede our empathetic response to rough heroines. Understanding that the reasons for empathy's failure (and thus for our fictionally inappropriate response) might result from stereotypes and implicit biases can be necessary to surmount deeply rooted obstacles in the path to virtuousness. Specifically, reflection on the differences between empathizing with rough heroes and rough heroines can draw the attention of the empathizer to ways in which her empathetic skills are problematic, despite her belief that what motivated her response was the heroine's vices. It can, in other words, become a tool in the process of moral development, by enhancing a "clear [moral] perception" that "insulates" (McDowell, 1988, p. 91) the sexism or other biases they may have. After all, as Robert Johnson points "we think better of those who acknowledge their social or cultural biases and trust the insights of those who are in a better position to see what they may have difficulty seeing" (Johnson, 2003, p. 824). So, we have at least one moral reason to *voluntarily* try to empathize with rough heroines: it contributes to our moral education by remaining aware that sometimes what motivates us to refrain from empathetically engaging with morally challenging perspectives is the influence of implicit bias.

The second reason is epistemic: biased ways of seeing socially disadvantaged groups are widespread and are not restricted to fiction (Goffin & Friend, 2022, p. 135); for example, female criminals are seen as deprived of agency and autonomy, and a "misogynistic form of punishment" (Manne, 2017) is sought for them because they have violated the essence of femininity (Kennedy, 1992). Allowing that sometimes our emotional responses to fiction interact with other mental states or motivate action toward non-fictional agents, empathizing with rough heroines can provide phenomenal knowledge about female criminality. The objection is, however, that implicit biases are deeply rooted and affect both our epistemic beliefs and motivations for action even when we explicitly reject discriminations and honestly have good intentions. Empathy is also biased in various ways, as its opponents have fiercely argued (Bloom, 2016; Prinz, 2011). Yet, empathy with alien perspectives is the best way we have to turn our attention towards the existence and scope of our implicitly biased background and, in this sense, improve our cognitive skills. From that point,

attending to the stories of rough heroines can be a means of recognizing female criminals' subjectivity and accepting their agency.

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