

Art, Education, and Witness; Or, How to Make Our Ideals Clear

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I

In a letter to his brother written in 1834, the great Ralph Waldo Emerson writes, “The soul...never *reasons*, never proves, it simply perceives; it is vision.”¹ As with so much else in Emerson’s work, and the work of most writers of consequence, this line says as much about its author as about its subject, revealing as it does the sage of Concord’s commitment to ocular metaphors, and his peculiar orientation to the work of reason. The idea of the perceiving soul is useful here, though, because, like so much else in Emerson’s work, it also provides an opening for us, his readers and interlocutors, to reflect on issues of contemporary import.

My interest in Emerson’s words derives from my commitment to the following points: A certain kind of perception is essential to ethical practice. The training of this perception is, or ought to be, essential in the practice of moral education. This practice, like the training that it requires, is incomplete without a commitment to the therapeutic discipline of Emersonian perfectionism, a discipline that requires attending to what we might call the state of our souls. And cultivated aesthetic experiences, both good and bad, are among the best resources for this perfectionist enterprise.

I want to develop these points for two reasons. The first reason is to clarify the relationship between my convictions and certain philosophical studies of aesthetics and ethics. The second reason is to work out the approach to certain philosophical questions about education that follows from my perfectionist convictions. As my education in all of these domains is just beginning, I will say little or nothing about many texts and resources that bear on the topic that I have chosen. I hope, in compensation, to say a great deal about how a certain kind of neopragmatist might prepare both to receive these texts and resources, and to find words for the kinds of insights these texts and resources contain.

II

Having announced my commitments to perfectionism, neopragmatism, moral education, and the aesthetic, I should say a few words about how I come to these commitments, and about how they have come to strike me not as distinct topics, but as pieces of a larger puzzle. I should, in addition, say a few words more about how an exploration of these topics bears on the philosophy of education.

The need to assemble the puzzle that I am working on here, and to assemble it using just these pieces, or pieces like them, first impressed itself upon me in my capacity as a critical race theorist. I began to realize that the philosophical forms of critical race theory, as it is often practiced, point beyond themselves, toward the practices of postcolonial theory, ideology critique, and virtue ethics. So I started trying to make my way toward these practices, using whatever I could find to build the bridge from here to there.

More directly: Philosophical race theorists have typically — not always, but typically — asked certain questions. We ask whether races exist, what they are if they do exist (since they are not entities in the ontology of biological science), what our racial practices mean if they do not exist, and whether we should maintain our racial practices. People in other fields have typically asked different questions. They ask about the social conditions that racial discourse helps bring into being and maintain; or they ask how processes of racial formation work in and through each of us as individuals, shaping both what we perceive and how we value what we perceive; or they ask about the extent to which expressive objects contribute to the work of racial formation, especially since these objects so effectively exploit and enhance the connections between racial discourse and individual perception and judgment. My sense is that critical race theory cannot be adequately critical until it takes the second set of questions as seriously as it takes the first. Accepting this view commits me to looking for resources to ask these additional questions from within the traditions of inquiry with which I am most at ease. And that leads me to the kind of argument that I will try to make in this essay.

The aims that guide this merging of race theory, cultural criticism, and self-criticism seem to me to clearly mark out a project in or near the philosophy of education. Critical race theory, in my view, is an essentially ethical enterprise. But it cannot realize its ethical purpose until it becomes genealogical, and archaeological, in its relation to the cultural representations and expressive practices that environ and inform our racial formation processes. More than this, race theory cannot realize its ethical purpose until it demands some manner of self-excavation from the ethical agents that its genealogical analyses mean to inform. To say this is to say that the ethical enterprise of race theory is essentially bound up with the pursuit of a kind of self-knowledge, and that an encounter with the aesthetic is an essential part of this pursuit. And to say all of that is to say that race theory must be morally educative, and, further, that it must motivate an inquiry into the value of art as an instrument of this moral education.

III

The idea that art can be an instrument of moral education is not new, nor is it uncontroversial. Noël Carroll and Martha Nussbaum have recently offered influential and persuasive ways of understanding this idea. The approach that I have in mind, the one that reflecting on the prospects of contemporary race theory seems to call forth, is quite close to Carroll's clarificationism and Nussbaum's cultivationism. But bringing out its full potential and meaning will require questioning certain aspects of these influential accounts, and offering some friendly amendments.

In the essays that eventually became the book *Love's Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum argues that works of literature are indispensable instruments of moral inquiry and argument. She writes:

only the style of a certain sort of narrative artist (and not, for example, the style associated with the abstract theoretical treatise) can adequately state certain important truths about the world, embodying them in its shape and setting up in the reader the activities that are appropriate for grasping them.²

I am not confident that Nussbaum adequately defends this quite strong claim, but I am confident that something slightly weaker is surely right, and interesting enough to reward further consideration. Even if literary narratives are not the only ways to state certain moral truths — an entire philosophical psychology, among other things, comes in train with that view — it is surely the case that these narratives can help communicate these truths, and bring us into more productive relationships to them.

Nussbaum argues, I think rightly, that narrative art is distinctively good at expressing the view (or the “family of related views”) that she finds in Aristotle and the novels of Henry James (*LK*, 105). This view holds in pertinent part that, as Nussbaum puts it, “good deliberation require[s] a highly complex, nuanced perception of, and emotional response to, the concrete features of one’s own context, including particular persons and relationships” (*LK*, 7). This Aristotelian approach is an alternative to rule-based and rationalist approaches to ethics, like the stereotypes, at least, of the approaches of Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, for whom right conduct is a matter of cold calculation, and for whom ethical deliberation issues in relatively context-independent principles and duties that require little exploration of the peculiar nuances that distinguish superficially similar settings and persons from one another.

On the non-Aristotelian approaches to ethics, ethical deliberation relies on what Nussbaum’s hero Henry James calls “standing terms,” or the rules and algorithms that invite us to apply stock labels to certain fact-patterns. Nussbaum takes the novel to show, and insist on, three problems with standing terms. The first problem is that, even for someone armed with the right principles, a kind of perceptiveness and sensitivity in interpretation is necessary to see which principles apply to which situations, and to see what the principles require in those situations. For instance, what may seem in the abstract like a simple case of lying may actually be an example of heroism — as when your roommate falsely tells your violent stalker that you are not at home. The second problem is that matching rule to situation is still not enough; as Aristotle puts it, excellence means responding “at the right times... with the right aim, and in the right way” (*LK*, 156). In other words, a further kind of sensitivity is needed to understand just *how*, and *when*, to do the right thing. Nussbaum goes to moments from James’s novels to illustrate this point, but I find myself thinking of a generic science fiction plot, in which some cyborg, android, or otherwise emotionally vacuous entity is learning how to interact with humans. Having this entity learn or download the right input-output strings for ethically controversial situations might seem promising, but it is really a recipe for comedy or an ongoing plot complication. The third problem with basing ethical deliberation on standing terms is that rules by themselves do rather little to prepare us for the novelty of new ethical problems. In ethics, as in the law, the rules that we have developed for past situations may need revision in light of the new situations with which life always confronts us. Here again, a kind of perceptive sensitivity, now more clearly revealed as a kind of creativity, is a necessary part of the proper use of the standing terms.

In all of these ways, and for all of these reasons, the burden of ethical deliberation is, in a way, to find the right way to see what one is facing. Accordingly,

the Aristotelian/Jamesian approach insists on the importance of perception. For Nussbaum, this means “the ability to discern, acutely and responsively, the salient features of one’s particular situation” (*LK*, 37). She also follows James in describing this ethical work as a matter of responsible lucidity, and avoiding or correcting for the “obtuseness” promoted by society’s overemphasis on the standing terms of moralistic judgment. Ethical agents are like improvising artists, working toward creative interpretations and responses to the situations in which they find themselves. And certain works of narrative art not only model this process but also insist, at the level of their form, on the truths that require it — truths pertaining to the importance of emotional response and responsible attentiveness to the concrete nuances of particular contexts.

The Aristotelian commitment to discerning, lucid perception gets many things right, but Nussbaum’s account of it strikes me as inadequate or underdeveloped in at least one basic respect. She says far too little about the importance of achieving a lucid and permanently provisional perception of the *perceiver*, especially with regard to the specific, predictable, and patterned obstacles to lucidity that contemporary societies generate and sustain using our powers of perception. Put differently, the account on offer is in danger of falling prey to the dangers that often attend ocular metaphors. As John Dewey pointed out in his complaints about the spectator theory of knowledge, perceptual metaphors for real-world transactions are often bound up with the assumption that the parties to the transactions are complete, self-sufficient, and irremediably distinct: the perceiver is *here*, while the object to be perceived is *there*, and the relationship between the two is static rather than dynamic, distant rather than intimate.³ But the burden of achieving a lucid perception, or of being, as Nussbaum puts it, “finely aware and richly responsible” to the situations that call forth ethical deliberation has largely to do with reflecting on and working through the mutual dependence of the object and the perceiver on each other. Effective discernment depends on the recognition that the object of perception is what it is in part because of the interests, needs, and assumptions that we bring to our encounter with it. As a consequence, effective discernment depends also on the willingness and ability to call into question the ensemble of needs, interests, abilities, and assumptions — in other words, the *selves* — that we bring to our attempts at perception.

Nussbaum does come very close to making the point that I have in mind. As a commentator moved by a similar criticism concedes, the kind of ethical practice into which Nussbaum recruits the novel is “an explicit and necessary labor in self-knowledge.”⁴ But the knowledge of self that is at stake here is, or seems to be, knowledge of something that is created and exists in a certain kind of isolation. This isolation is not complete, of course. One of Nussbaum’s principal points, one worthy of the phenomenological tradition that leads from G.W.F. Hegel to Emmanuel Levinas, is that finding the right way to perceive the other, in all of his or her particularity and specific relationships, can “create a new and richer bond” between people, effectively enabling “two separate people to inhabit the same created world” and language (*LK*, 153). So the worry is not that Nussbaum’s agents are isolated from each other, but that they remain indifferent, both to certain of the conditions and

structures that shape their interactions and perceptions, and to the need to question, continually, the self's embeddedness in these structures.

IV

One way to bring out this worry is to compare what Nussbaum says with what she might have said. As I have mentioned, she compares the task of ethical discernment or lucid perception with the work of the improvising artist: the jazz musician or stage actor. She begins by pointing out that these artists "are not free simply to create anything they like." They inhabit traditions and work in, or in the wake of, specific communities, genres, and idioms. They do their work while remaining "responsively alive and committed to the other actors [or musicians, or whatever], to the evolving narrative [of the work], to the laws and constraints of the genre and its history" (*LK*, 155). In this connection, she points out that

a perceiver who improvises [like the jazz musician] is doubly responsible: responsible to the history of commitment and to the ongoing structures that go to constitute her context; and especially responsible to these, in that her commitments are internalized, assimilated, perceived, rather than read off from an external script or score. (*LK*, 156)

The talk in this passage of commitments being internalized and perceived is important, and directly to the point. The aspirant to lucid perception creatively builds on the internalized commitments that come with a commitment to an ongoing form of life, with its histories and traditions. Nussbaum is keen to refer to these standing commitments and practices in order to rebut the claim that ethics-as-improvisation is unbounded, subjectivist, and chaotic. Far from it, she says: an ethics of creative interpretation has not only all the order but also all the dynamism, subtlety, and potential for novelty as a jazz performance. The ethical agent, like the musician, is a participant in an ongoing form of life, in traditions and communities that have prepared him or her to improvise in certain ways, in deference to certain ways of proceeding. These preparations are defeasible, but they are the starting point, and they set the shared context that renders the inhabitants of the ethical life-world intelligible to one another.

Remember, though, that the shared context for ethical improvisation is also *internalized*, which means in part, or ought to mean, that the context takes root in us at the level of habit, shaping our immediate responses to morally problematic or dubious situations. This is an important point for a postcolonial ethic, or, for that matter, for an ethic that means to promote responsible lucidity not just in postcolonial contexts, but in postKantian contexts. To speak of internalization now, after Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Michel Foucault, must mean to call for some kind of deep interpretation. To speak in this way now is to suggest that responsible lucidity will require self-critique, and that ethical perception can be responsible only after we develop a *critique* of perception, ethical or otherwise. Having brought up this dialectic of internalization and improvisation, Nussbaum might be ready to say, with Foucault, that virtue consists in something more than evaluating the self for its fidelity to a rule of conduct.⁵ For Nussbaum, this "more" has to do with a willingness to improvise on and around the rule, to create a novel perception that answers to the nuances of the immediate setting. But we might go still

further, especially in the grip of ideas about internalization; we might say, with Foucault, that virtue is neither fidelity to a rule nor creativity in the space marked out by the rule, but instead a critique of the constitutive power of the rule: the rule's role in creating its own self-regulating ethical subjects. Judith Butler says, on Foucault's behalf, that virtue is not "a way of complying with or conforming with pre-established norms; it is, more radically, a critical relation to those norms."⁶ Nussbaum never, as far as I know, quite brings herself to say anything like this. Instead of calling for a critique that highlights and challenges the constitutive relation between the self, the perceiving self, and a rule of conduct, she focuses, as she puts it, on "the dialogue between perception and rule" (*LK*, 157).

The difference between Nussbaum's dialogue and Foucault's critique may seem small and subtle, but it is in point of fact fairly profound. Establishing a critical relation to the norms that constitute the self means establishing a critical relationship to the disciplines, habits, and conventions that frame one's capacity to perceive ethical phenomena. We are, in a way, what we see: one of the central mechanisms of subject-formation is the training of common sense, which arms us with ready-made templates for interpreting the world, and especially the social world. Calling this into question means accepting and cultivating a kind of suspicion of one's most immediate reactions and perceptions. This suspicion is an essential part of the ethical enterprise on some accounts, but it ought to be, on any account, a part of the ethical burden of postsupremacist or postcolonial societies.

To be postcolonial is to exist in a state of at least nominal disaffiliation from colonial relations of dependence and exploitation, but it is also to remain affected by, and to continue to have to work through, the legacies of those relations, and their persistence in altered forms. This is the condition not just of obvious colonial powers and their former colonies, like France and Algeria, or Great Britain and Ghana. It is also the condition of *herrenvolk*, or "master race," societies like South Africa, Australia, and the U.S. (U.S. possessions notwithstanding) after the abandonment of *de jure* forms of ethnoracial expropriation and oppression. We pledge in these places to do better, to come to grips with our histories and transcend them, and to make ourselves into viable multiracial democracies. But we can pursue this aspiration responsibly only if we excavate the legacies of the past, unearthing the deposits that the past has left in our economies, cultures, and psyches. This means, among other things, attending to the specific perceptual lenses and models to which our colonial legacies predispose us in our attempts to interpret and navigate the social world around us.

All of that to say: the sort of virtue theory that Nussbaum develops is rich and valuable, but essentially incomplete in its application to actually existing societies — *until* it commits to the practice of self-excitation in the face of certain *specific* ethical and cultural challenges. In speaking of a practice of "self-excitation," I mean the sort of thing required by Dewey's account of habit, or by Stanley Cavell's account of Emersonian perfectionism. More specifically, I mean to invoke the *therapeutic* forms that these ideas take in the presence of a commitment to demythologize, excavate, and examine certain specifically modern forms of subjection and

subjectivation, as in Foucault's accounts of biopower and governmentality, and Susan Bordo's call for the systemic critique of cultural images. Even more specifically, I mean to invoke this therapeutic perfectionism in the spirit of the specific ethical and political challenges that have inspired W.E.B. Du Bois's talk of double consciousness, Addison Gayle's call for a black aesthetic, and Steve Biko's arguments for the black consciousness movement. Putting these ideas in conversation with Nussbaum's rich and valuable account of narrative edification begins to reveal the untapped potential of her thoughts on the ethics of lucid perception.

V

The idea of self-scrutiny and self-critique in relation to specific psychocultural templates is not obscure, as evidenced by my having just unpacked it by appealing to an assortment of familiar figures and ideas. Still, the discussion has to this point been abstract enough, and has unfolded at enough of a distance from my avowed interest in a kind of critical aesthetics, that an example may be of some use.

At this point, the best example, or the most fitting one, would come from Henry James himself, allowing us to use one of Nussbaum's own preferred narrative artists to contest or deepen her point. Unfortunately, I would have to be Toni Morrison, or Ross Posnock, or in any case someone other than myself, to take this course: someone whose ability to appreciate and engage Henry James is not in its infancy. Such a person might emulate Morrison's strategy for rereading James,⁷ and dwell on Nussbaum's glancing engagement with the novel *What Maisie Knew*: on her indifference to the inability of that novel's main character, and, apparently, of the novel, to transcend or complicate the racialist perception of a "brown" lady as "a dreadful human monkey."⁸ (This example has the additional virtue of pointing us toward a contemporary controversy of some moment, the *New York Post* editorial cartoon that seemed to many to depict President Obama as a monkey.⁹ I fear space will not permit further consideration of this example. This is the condition of philosophy, with the Owl of Minerva and all that.)

So turning to Henry James *would* be the right move, were I not incapable of saying anything more, or more plausible, about James than what I have just said. Instead of trying, and failing, to do justice to the complexities that attend even this seemingly clear case, I will turn to a humbler, more recent, and more accessible example, drawn from the contemporary cinema.

The Last King of Scotland seems to be about former Ugandan dictator Idi Amin, who once declared, in jest, that he was the last king of Scotland (to insert himself into the royal lineage of the United Kingdom).¹⁰ But the film is really about a Scotsman named Nicholas Garrigan, who becomes Amin's personal physician. This ambiguous allegorizing invites us to layer Garrigan's story over Amin's, as Manohla Dargis fairly acknowledges in her *New York Times* review. The doctor, she says, is an "empathic point of entry," a starting point from which the spectator can watch as the film "creates a portrait of this famous Ugandan dictator from inside the palace walls."¹¹

Interestingly, though, the film is *not* a portrait of Amin. It is a portrait of Garrigan coming to terms with Amin, or with his investment in Amin, or with the

blowback from the colonial enterprise as represented by Amin. The Ugandan dictator becomes part of the backdrop, as is so often the case in the tradition of cinematic narrative that I call the drama of moral gentrification. In moral gentrification films, like *Mississippi Burning* or *Dances With Wolves*, modernity's "race problems" appear as real problems for people of all colors.¹² But the narratives of these films explore these problems principally as challenges to the self-understanding and self-respect of essentially blameless whites, who have to find some way to justify themselves on a problematic moral landscape. The darker peoples who also occupy this landscape, and struggle with its problems, recede into the background, becoming an undifferentiated mass, or a few bit players on the broader stage of white redemption. In this way, the souls, the fortunes, and the fates of white folks come to dominate the depiction of life-worlds and historical moments with which non-whites have in fact been intimately involved — like the Japan of Tom Cruise's *The Last Samurai*.¹³ White characters effectively *gentrify* these worlds and moments, making them palatable as cinematic and narrative phenomena by importing and working out their own problems on this colonized terrain.

I am, of course, talking in part about the imperatives of the motion picture industry *qua* industry. This is a business in which rational people, making rational calculations about profit and loss, can bestir themselves to ask Danny Glover to add white heroes to his planned film about the Haitian Revolution.¹⁴ That dynamic has a great deal to do, of course, with what I have in mind. But the point is deeper, and goes to the conditions that facilitate the moral gentrification narrative.

Manohla Dargis reviewed the film in the *Times* under this title: "An Innocent Abroad — *Seduced by a Madman*."¹⁵ Like practically everyone who does not study African history and politics for a living, the typical viewer of this film is meant to accept the two-part view expressed in this title. Garrigan was innocent — which is not to say that he was blameless or virtuous, but that his individual vices were not interestingly connected to the social and political ills that frame the action of the film. And Amin was psychotic or, as Dargis goes on to say, a "flamboyantly lethal nut job."¹⁶ Of course, both parts of this view are problematic.

The innocent white hero suggests that the problems of postcoloniality are like facts of nature, to be weathered and endured, and then escaped, rather than confronted and understood. Garrigan was, of course, not personally at fault for British imperialism. But his life, like the movie about his life, was made possible by specific sociohistorical dynamics, dynamics in which the social fact of whiteness played an essential role. Wiping the slate clean of this fact — by asking, for example, about the white heroes of the Haitian Revolution — invites us to forget these dynamics, and it does so with the aid of a narrative tradition that normalizes this ethical and historical sleight of hand. This is not productive engagement with the history that still shapes our present, and it is not a substantive rejection of colonial politics; rather, it is a superficial distancing *and* reinscription.

Like the device of the innocent white hero, the savage black tyrant normalizes a technique for reinscribing colonial relations while pretending to critique them. The

historical figure named Idi Amin reached the highest ranks of the British Empire's African military. He built and maintained political alliances before and after he took control of Uganda. And he ran a country for almost a decade. If we take seriously any reasonable account of political power, and of what it means to acquire and maintain power, Amin could not have been simply "a nut job." As political theorist Mahmood Mamdani has put it, he was not "an anthropological oddity"¹⁷; rather, he was "a rational actor — a fascist, rather than a buffoon or a gorilla."¹⁸

The inability to credit Amin's rationality is an instance of a broader problem — call it the inability of liberal political culture to imagine rational brutality. It leads us also to make Adolf Hitler a monster, someone beyond the pale of humanity, instead of someone who ruthlessly applied and refined techniques for political domination that had been developed and applied in, among other places, Europe's colonies and the southern United States. But this imperviousness to the banal humanity of evil grows more pronounced when the evildoers are black and African. With figures like Amin, the trope of savagery comes in, and, as Frantz Fanon says in a related context, reason walks out. So instead of truly giving the spectator a portrait of the dictator, and instead of providing a glimpse of the individual, complex *person* who did the terrible things that Amin did, the film tosses off a sketch of the same irrational, black tyrant that first reached the screen with *The Emperor Jones* and that, one might argue, got Denzel Washington an Oscar for *Training Day*.¹⁹

And here, finally, we reach the point of this detour into the cinema. The irrational black tyrant is not just a trope or a stereotype; it is an image, as readily available to us for immediate and affectively loaded perception as the cross is available to the right sort of Christian. Modern cultures have worked quite hard to provide their participants with a variety of ready-made templates, like these, for understanding racialized bodies. These templates become common sense for us; they become resources for the intuitive and heuristic cognitive processes that enable our judgments, beliefs, and prejudices to manifest themselves immediately, without recourse to consciously managed processes of deliberation. We learn quite literally to see the world through the lenses of complex conceptual frameworks, and to respond immediately with the appropriate affect. A lifetime of cultural training prepares us to see the cross as that-which-deserves-reverence, and as that-which-when-desecrated-requires-outrage. In the same way, regimes of cultural training prepare us to see black and brown bodies as thugs, and to react to their presence as occasions for clutching belongings, or withholding jobs, or opening fire.

In contexts that cultivate modes of perception like these, and prepare us to accept without puzzlement the image of the psychotic black tyrant, it is misleading, or as I said earlier, incomplete, to call for an ethics of perception without also calling for more. To be sure, responsible lucidity is no simple matter, and I do not mean to discredit or minimize Nussbaum's achievement in articulating her view so persuasively. But perception without self-critique is effectively blind: it overlooks the systematic obstacles to properly nuanced perception of ethnoracial others, and is, as a consequence, likely to misperceive those others.

VI

My point in all this is simple enough: Nussbaum's call for an ethics of lucid, creative perception must contend with more than the generic forces that make for "obtuseness" in ethical deliberation. There are specific historical, psychocultural, and social obstacles that we must work through under postcolonial conditions. If we are to create our ethical lives with the improvisational spirit of the jazz musician, we have to take seriously Nussbaum's reminder that the improvising artist must contend with "the laws and constraints" of his or her genre or idiom. Living in postcolonial conditions means improvising within the symbolic and semiotic laws and constraints of modern race-thinking (and, of course, much more besides). Living ethically under these conditions requires excavating our relationship to these constraints, criticizing our commitments to them, and criticizing the perceptions that these commitments motivate and recommend.

I have so far said that our engagements with art may contribute to moral education in the way that Nussbaum suggests without yet doing the ethical work I call for here. But I do think art can help cultivate the ethical knowledge and self-knowledge that post-colonial conditions require. It may do this in many ways, I think — as we can see if we turn from Henry James to, say, Junot Diaz. But one of these ways goes through an account of narrative edification offered by Noël Carroll.

Carroll argues that art can educate us morally by helping us to elucidate and illuminate our ethical commitments. He develops this "clarificationist" view in part as a response to certain doubts about art's ability to promote or communicate moral knowledge. "Art issues in truisms," this worry contends, "and artists simply remind us of the ethical truths that we already know." Or: "artworks neither make arguments nor adduce new evidence for moral arguments already in play." So how can they contribute to anything properly called a moral education? Carroll responds by pointing out that education, properly so-called, requires more than propositional knowledge. We do not *know* effectively until we can pair our knowledge-that something is the case with some know-how — some insight into how to use that knowledge. In addition, we do not *know* comprehensively until we can develop and follow out the connections between instances of knowing-that — until we can see the implications and complexities of the propositions to which we have assented.

In light of this broader conception of what it means to have and acquire knowledge, Carroll argues persuasively that narratives can do more than state truisms. Literary narratives, he says, are relevantly similar to philosophical thought experiments, which "operate on the listener's antecedent conceptual knowledge, exploiting her or his ability to apply concepts in order to clarify that knowledge and to bring it out into the open, or to dispel and unmask conceptual vagueness and/or confusion."²⁰ To see narratives as thought experiments is to focus on their ability to "make connections — that were hitherto recessive or obscure — between what is already known and other parts of our cognitive stock. They illuminate the relevance of what is already known...by refocusing that knowledge in a novel way."²¹

I agree with Carroll's clarificationism, as far as it goes, but I worry that his focus on *conceptual* clarification leans too far in the direction of what Dewey called intellectualism. In *Art as Experience*, Dewey writes eloquently, as eloquently as he would ever manage, about the way that reason "must fall back upon imagination — upon the embodiment of ideas in emotionally charged sense."²² This line expresses a basic tenet of Dewey's holist philosophical psychology and phenomenology, and deepens the point that I keep making about the immediacy of ideologically and conceptually loaded perception. Clarifying our concepts is not enough, if some of these concepts are sufficiently bound up with affective commitments to resist excavation and clarification.

Putting the worry this way points beyond the idea of clarifying concepts, and toward the prospect of clarifying the reacting, perceiving, and desiring self that endorses and acts on the commitments. The critique of perception that I called for in connection with Nussbaum is a critique of the perceiving self. This self is always in process, and is always susceptible to the easy, intuitive connections that stereotypes and prejudices enable and promote. For this reason, this critique must be a perfectionist enterprise, committed to a continual scrutiny and reworking of the self: to an ongoing pursuit of Cavell's as yet unattained but attainable self. Narrative art can play a role in this self-critique, not just by emphasizing the principles and concepts to which we seem committed, but also by highlighting the kind of persons we have become. Artworks can trigger our immediate responses, and they can provoke us into deploying the powers of cognitively funded perception that we have cultivated during a lifetime of socialization. These responses should then become the object of scrutiny, as we monitor ourselves for signs of the unconscious commitments to injustice and dehumanization that make the colonial and postcolonial conditions so difficult to engage and to change. The right artworks, even, and perhaps especially, ethically problematic ones, position us to ask: "What does it mean that I respond to this piece as I do? What kind of person am I, for this work to resonate with me?"

The idea in play here becomes clearer when we set aside Carroll's favored examples and return to *The Last King of Scotland*. Carroll makes his point by appealing to narratives that are good, both aesthetically and morally. His examples — *The Third Man*, *Great Expectations*, and *Howard's End* — state moral truths, and they do so by putting skillful artists to work in the service of moral truth.²³ But less skillful artists, working unwittingly in the grip of moral errors, can open different analytical possibilities. They enable us to ask: What does it mean that Denzel Washington and Forrest Whittaker both won awards, earning honors that had eluded black actors for many decades, by playing depraved sociopaths? What does it say about us that these are the roles that we, the viewing public and the critics, find intuitively appealing? What kind of people are we to capitulate so easily to seeing these men in this way? (We might raise similar questions about Halle Berry's Academy Award, won for a redemptive errand into the desiring soul of white masculinity called *Monster's Ball*.²⁴)

Films like *Training Day* are useful resources for ethical reflection, but not because they help us to “dispel and unmask confusion” about how to understand or apply our ethical concepts. They are useful because they invite us, albeit in ways that are orthogonal to their manifest mission and message, to interrogate our *lack of confusion* when confronted by a stereotype from central casting. They invite us to cultivate suspicion in the face of lucidity that comes too easily, lucidity that is immediately satisfying because of its responsibility not to the standing terms of ethical discourse, but to the standing terms of modern race-talk.

VII

I will close by taking up the question that may by now have reasserted its hold over you: what does all of this have to do with the philosophy of education? In *Experience and Education*, Dewey explains that “the business of the philosophy of education” has to do with “the introduction of a new order of conceptions leading to new modes of practice.”²⁵ The argument that I have developed here answers to this description.

I have tried here to amend two views about the role of narrative art in moral education. Carroll’s clarificationism holds that artworks can help us clarify the ethical concepts and principles that we endorse. Nussbaum’s cultivationism holds that artworks are an important, perhaps indispensable, source of insight into the importance of perceptual discernment, among other things, in ethical life. Neither view takes what strikes me as the necessary next step: to connect its recommendations to the specific challenges of ethical life, and moral education, in postcolonial contexts.

This oversight takes the specific forms that it does because both authors undertheorize the position of the knowing and perceiving self. Nussbaum’s ethical perceivers, as inhabitants of postcolonial societies, are likely to find the path to responsible lucidity routinely and systematically blocked by certain specific perceptual predispositions. More precisely, they will likely *not* find the path blocked, though blocked it will be. This is so because the blockages are ideological, disciplinary, or unconscious, and therefore resistant to excavation. So the call to guard against ethico-perceptual “obtuseness” will be otiose, absent some more robust engagement with the specificity of the social and cultural setting. Similarly, Carroll argues persuasively that narrative artworks may clarify our conceptual commitments. But clarifying our conceptual commitments may not uproot the deeper, affective commitments that, in racialized societies, frame our very modes of perception. For this we will need a deeper project of clarification, one that attends to “the embodiment of ideas in emotionally charged sense” and investigates our affective responses, both for evidence of our commitments, and for the character that these commitments define.

In light of this call for a deeper clarifying project, Dewey’s idea of a new *order* of conceptions — as opposed to talking simply about new conceptions — is instructive. We know everything we need to know to do the work that I am calling for. People like Donald Bogle and Marlon Riggs, for example, have explored in detail the semiotic economy of racialized and racializing images that frame what we

once called “race relations.” And people from Aristotle to Rosalind Hursthouse have given us more than enough of the resources that we need to think seriously about the pursuit of virtue.²⁶ But we typically decline to put these traditions together. We decline to talk about the impacts of racialized perception on the pursuit of virtue, until someone uses a cartoon monkey to complain about the policies of the first black president. Putting our old “ethnic notions” into conversation with even older ideas about virtue and character education would create a “new order of conceptions,” and connect Dewey’s vision of the philosophy of education to the imperatives of a postcolonial age.

1. Ralph Waldo Emerson, “To Edward Bliss Emerson, May 31, 1834,” in *The Selected Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Joel Myerson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 133 (emphasis in original).

2. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 6. This work will be cited as *LK* in the text for all subsequent references.

3. John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1929), 231–32.

4. Peta Bowden, “Ethical Attention: Accumulating Understandings,” *European Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (1998), 68.

5. It consists, Foucault would say, in “self-transformation in relation to a rule of conduct.” Judith Butler, “What is Critique? An Essay on Foucault’s Virtue,” in *The Political*, ed. David Ingram, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2002), 217.

6. Michel Foucault, “What Is Critique?” in *Political*, ed. Ingram; and Butler, “What is Critique?” 215.

7. Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 13.

8. Christina Britzolakis, “Technologies of Vision in Henry James’s *What Maisie Knew*,” *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 34, no. 3 (2001), 383.

9. Sean Delonas, “They’ll Have to Find Someone Else to Write the Next Stimulus Bill,” *New York Post*, February 18, 2009, <http://www.nypost.com/delonas/delonas.htm>.

10. *The Last King of Scotland*, DVD, directed by Kevin Macdonald, (2006; Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2007).

11. Manohla Dargis, “An Innocent Abroad — Seduced By a Madman,” *New York Times*, September 27, 2006, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2006/09/27/movies/27king.html>.

12. *Mississippi Burning*, DVD, directed by Alan Parker (1988; Los Angeles: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2001); and *Dances with Wolves*, DVD, directed by Kevin Costner (1990; Los Angeles: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 2003).

13. *The Last Samurai*, DVD, directed by Edward Zwick (2003; Burbank, Calif.: Warner Home Video, 2004).

14. Rebecca Frasquet, “Danny Glover’s Slavery Film Lacked ‘White Heroes,’ Producers Said,” *Agence France-Presse*, July 25, 2008.

15. Dargis, “An Innocent Abroad” (emphasis added).

16. *Ibid.*

17. Mahmood Mamdani, *Imperialism and Fascism in Uganda* (Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 1983), quoted in Michael C. Vazquez, “Hearts in Exile: A Conversation with Moses Isegawa and Mahmood Mamdani,” *Transition* 10, no. 2 (2001), 128.

18. Vazquez, “Hearts in Exile,” 128. My thanks to Kathleen O’Mara for affirming the validity of this line of analysis for me.

19. *The Emperor Jones*, DVD, directed by Dudley Murphy (1933; New York: Criterion Collection, 2007); and *Training Day*, directed by Antoine Fuqua (2001; Burbank, Calif.: Warner Home Video, 2004).
20. Noël Carroll, "The Wheel of Virtue," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60, no. 1 (2002), 8.
21. Carroll, "Wheel of Virtue," 8.
22. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934; repr., New York: Capricorn, 1958), 33.
23. Graham Greene, *The Third Man* (1950; repr., New York: Penguin, 1999); Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations* (1861; repr., New York: Penguin, 2002); and E.M. Forster, *Howard's End* (1910; repr., New York: Barnes and Noble, 2003).
24. *Monster's Ball*, DVD, directed by Marc Forster (2001; Vancouver: Lions Gate, 2002).
25. John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (1938; repr., New York: Collier, 1963), 5.
26. See Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films* (New York: Continuum, 2001); Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); and *Ethnic Notions*, DVD, directed by Marlon T. Riggs, (1987; San Francisco: California Newsreel, 2004).