

Experimenting with Fiction

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In “Why a Story at All?,” Cara Furman articulates certain weaknesses of fiction and philosophy in helping us determine how to live. Providing examples from literature and life, she writes, “The reoccurring threat of fiction is that people imbibe it, unmediated, as if it has a clear message for action.” She draws on Plato and his response to the poets in *The Republic* to offer philosophical reason as the “drug to counteract” fiction’s ability to “distort,” “infiltrate,” and “corrupt.” Philosophy fares no better under Furman’s careful gaze. It can be equally unreliable for determining how to live: “A philosophy may hold up against arguments within the discipline but turn out to be catastrophic when enacted in the world. There must be space outside of philosophy to consider a given philosophy’s potential implication on action.” She articulates a way to counteract this distortion and puts forth her thesis: “This essay will argue that fiction offers a bridge between philosophy and action that ultimately allows us to experiment with what a philosophy could look like prior to enacting it on the world.” She argues that the fiction-philosophy interplay supplies reason to ameliorate potentially dangerous non-cognitive responses to fiction and that fiction provides a venue for a rehearsal of potential actions derived from philosophy.

A SPACE OUTSIDE

In focusing on fiction’s role in tempering philosophy, I did what Furman suggests; I experimented with her ideas by creating a space outside them to view their implications for action. I drafted a fictional moment too long (and too dull) to be included in this response. My fiction tells the story of a mother watching her silent and stoic young child in the midst of the chaos of a playground. The mother contrasts this physical and emotional shutdown with the vividly expressed imaginary worlds her child spins safely behind her bedroom door. The mother recalls eavesdropping on her child as she plays out the dilemmas of her days with different endings, trying on worlds more exciting than hers, spinning fictions from the edges of her reality. The piece ended with the mother’s recognition of her role as a silent and secret audience member. My story parallels that of Furman’s watching Flora, except mine highlighted the mother’s feelings of intimate access to her child’s struggles and pleasures.

In writing this fiction, three questions related to Furman’s thesis arose. First, do her ideas need to be limited to literary fiction? Can other arts serve the same function for philosophy? Second, is the mother’s silent witnessing of her child’s fictions akin to her child’s dramatic creating? Might a nuanced distinction between authoring fictions and receiving them be necessary for Furman’s purposes? Third, is fiction’s value in determining how to live necessarily tied to action? In other words, does an experience with fiction need to extend to action to serve philosophy in the way Furman proposes? Below, I take each of these questions in turn.

DEFINING FICTION

Furman stipulates her “broad” definition of fiction as, “a wide range of imaginative literary constructions that make no claim at retelling reality.” “Broadness” here refers to inclusion of multiple expressive modes within a single domain, the literary arts. My fiction stretches Furman’s definition beyond the literary by positing the dramatic play of a preliterate child as a mode of fiction that can serve the role she ascribes to literature. Can dramatic or filmic fictions (or even visual fictions, such as Picasso’s “Guernica”) similarly help ground philosophy? I wonder if Furman narrowed her scope to the literary for purposes of argumentation or if she intended to exclude the literary hybrids of drama and film, and the strictly visual arts. Are there relevant differences in these other art forms? I intentionally push Furman here to test the edges of her definition of fiction.

READING AND WRITING

Regardless of the form of the fiction, a second question arose in constructing my story. Does the mother’s experience of her child’s fictions function similarly to the child’s experience in authoring them? Echoing her thesis, Furman writes, “[F]iction ought to be the space of *experiment* and of considering how philosophy might influence action. It is the space to work through life again and again as Socrates, Lessing, and Flora all demonstrate” (emphasis added). Earlier, she had written, “I ... interchange reading and writing fiction to highlight the ways that both allow the individual an *exploration* of alternative worlds” (emphasis added). Perhaps this is a semantic issue, but “explore” seems qualitatively different than “experiment.” Exploration seems a more capacious description; there is openness, a fluidity and interactivity to exploration. Experimentation brings to mind the scientific method — the ability to select the subject, construct a hypothesis, develop a procedure and control the conditions. Proposing that fiction offers audiences a space to experiment with ideas may even presuppose that audiences know something of the content of a fiction before experiencing it. In contrast, Maxine Greene writes that the arts, including fictions, can affect audiences in different ways; they can “*plunge* us into adventures of meaning,”¹ help us “fall off the world” and “open new perspectives.”² For Greene, experiencing fiction as an audience member requires a release of control, and an openness to enter into the author’s ideas and worlds.³ In cases of resistant texts, fictions can even alienate audiences from story and characters so that they might at once experience and fail grasp authors’ ideas.⁴ Of course, audience members contribute to the meanings we make of fictions, and in this sense we build relationships with these works. But we typically consider the locus of primary or experimental control to sit with the author. It is clear how Socrates, Lessing, and Flora experiment with ideas. It is less clear how readers of literary fictions do so.

MULTIPLE EXITS

Furman describes fiction as “bridging” philosophy and action. My third and final question asks whether fiction’s service to philosophy must always extend to action. Although my fictional mother’s access to the imaginary worlds of her child affords her intimate understandings, these understandings have no foreseeable or knowable implications for action. Yet it seems that these sorts of understandings also

ground and influence ideas about living. This leads me to ask: might fiction's bridge to action unduly narrow the range of relevant destinations? Can fiction's bridge affect our perception and attention as Martha Nussbaum describes in her work on Henry James' *The Golden Bowl*?⁶ Can it lead to the self-understanding that Nel Noddings' work on "The Sunflower" reveals? Can it pull us toward new visions of the world that Greene describes? Or, as Betty Sichel argues, can it move readers to see their own worlds with "a new vision and vitality.... [and] gain greater understanding and sympathy for the complexity of moral life?"⁹ Can fiction's bridge bring us to these destinations as well? Michael Katz's response to Sichel reminds us that "not all stories function in the same way; the differences between them need exploration."¹⁰ There are differences in stories and in people's responses to them that matter for Furman's ideas. This is why I ask: must fiction's bridge necessarily lead from philosophy to action? Are there other exits?

CONCLUSION

Furman's project in "Why a Story at All?" engages me. I discovered my response to it when I attempted to do what she suggests: write fiction to experiment with the plausibility of her ideas. Questions arose. One challenged her restriction of fiction to the literary and pointed to the way her theory might extend to include other sorts of fictions, other sorts of arts. Another initiated inquiry into whether her ideas hold as tightly for readers and viewers of fiction as they do for writers and creators. It wonders whether her theory should narrow to fiction writers if "experimentation" remains the central metaphor. A third asks whether fiction must directly influence action. It questions whether influencing our understandings of the world, others and ourselves might also describe how fiction serves philosophy in helping us determine how to live. It is no small paradox, however, that in writing fiction to critically evaluate Furman's ideas, I testify to their power.

1. Maxine Greene, "Arts Education and the Humanities," in *Artistic Intelligences: Implications for Education*, ed. William J. Moody (New York: Teachers College Press, 1990), 149, emphasis added.

2. *Ibid.*, 151.

3. *Ibid.*, 149.

4. Maxine Greene, *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).

5. Ann Chinnery, "Premodern Postures for a Postmodern Ethics: On Resistant Texts and Moral Education," *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. Ronald David Glass (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009), 43.

6. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

7. Nel Noddings, "Thinking, Feeling and Moral Imagination," in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy of Education Volume XXII: The Philosophy of Emotions*, eds. P.A. French and H.K. Wettstein (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press).

8. Greene, *Releasing the Imagination*.

9. Betty Sichel, "Beyond Moral Stories" in *Philosophy of Education 1996*, ed. Frank Margonis (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 1997), 6.

10. Michael S. Katz, "Moral Stories: How Much Can We Learn from Them and Is It Enough?," in *Philosophy of Education 1996*, ed. Margonis.