the
FICTION
of
EVIL

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The Fiction of Evil

What makes someone an evil person? How are evil people different from merely bad people? Do evil people really exist? Can we make sense of evil people if we mythologize them? Do evil people take pleasure in the suffering of others? Can evil people be redeemed?

Peter Brian Barry answers these questions by examining a wide range of works from renowned authors, including works of literature by Kazuo Ishiguro, Mark Twain, Edgar Allan Poe, Herman Melville, and Oscar Wilde alongside classic works of philosophy by Nietzsche and Aristotle. By considering great texts from literature and philosophy, Barry examines whether evil is merely a fiction.

The Fiction of Evil explores how the study of literature can contribute to the study of metaphysics and ethics and it is essential reading for those studying the concept of evil or philosophy of literature at undergraduate level.

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Acknowledgments

On a personal note, I continue to be able to write about such a wretched topic only because of the love and support of Felicia Violet-Marie Rose. I thanked her for her kindness and grace in my first book and identified her as my partner. If all goes well, by the time *The Fiction of Evil* sees the light of day, I will be able to call her my wife.

Introduction

Fiction and Evil

> The sight of evil is confusing, and it is a subject on which it is hard to generalize because any analysis demands such a battery of value judgments.
>
> Iris Murdoch, *The Fire and the Sun*

> I was born good but had grown progressively worse every year…
>
> Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

The fall of Atticus Finch

As I neared completion of the first draft of this work, a previous unseen novel written by perhaps the most beloved American author was published: *Go Set a Watchman*, the historical and perhaps literary predecessor of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, both by Harper Lee. Many of us read *Mockingbird* as children and adolescents and came to love that book with the sort of love that is especially suited to children and adolescents, the kind of love that idealizes and romanticizes, sometimes at odds with what is actually going on. That *Mockingbird* tends to elicit a kind of puerile love was evident in many – indeed, most – of the reviews of *Go Set a Watchman* authored by initially-excited-but-eventually-disillusioned readers horrified to learn that Atticus Fitch is rather less than they believed him to be. In *Watchman* we learn that Atticus has joined up with a group favoring the ideology of white nationalism, the Maycomb County Citizens' Council, and that Atticus briefly fell in with the Ku Kux Klan as a younger man.[1] Indeed, he is on the Council's board of directors. The iconic protagonist of *Mockingbird*, Scout, is initially horrified to find a pamphlet in the family home titled "The Black Plague" containing all manner of racist tripe that "makes Dr. Goebbels look like a naïve little country boy" in contrast.[2] When Scout inquires about the

pamphlet's origins, she is equally aghast to learn that her father brought the offending text into the house. Scout initially hopes that Atticus is just "pulling something," that he joined the board "merely to keep an eye on things."[3] She, along with we unhappy readers, soon learns that Atticus is not to be saved so easily.

Scout stumbles back into town and enters the Maycomb County courthouse, taking her place in the courtroom balcony reserved for Maycomb's black citizens, the very spot that she sat and watched her father so zealously defend Tom Robinson in *Mockingbird*. To her surprise, the courtroom is filled with a number of respectable men, including Atticus and Judge Taylor who presided over the Robinson trial, but also "most of the trash in Maycomb County."[4] As the courthouse clock strikes the hour, the meeting is called into session and a speaker sitting just to the left of Atticus, Grady O'Hanlon, is introduced and quickly identifies himself as a proud Southerner, born and bred, and launches into an undeniably racist diatribe with the occasional complaint about Communists and Jews thrown in for good measure. Amid O'Hanlon's breathless banter, Scout

> heard her father's voice, a tiny voice talking in the warm comfortable past. *Gentlemen, if there's one slogan in this world I believe, it is this: equal rights for all, special privileges for none.*[5]

Once before Scout recollected her father's praising equality and decrying privilege, a recollection that informed Scout's famous definition of democracy in *Mockingbird*.[6] But Atticus' ruminations read rather differently in light of Atticus' current allegiances; calls for equal protection for oppressed groups are familiarly dismissed as calls for special privileges even in our day. Nauseated, Scout staggers from the courthouse feeling judged by Maycomb, shaken to her core.

She ultimately confronts Atticus but not before a painful argument with her uncle, Dr. Jack Finch, who browbeats her with some tortured apologia about the South's role in the Civil War and its causes. For reasons unknown, Scout is painted by Lee as terribly ill-informed and naïve about such matters: when asked to explain why so many Southerners joined the Confederate Army, the college-educated Scout replies, "I reckon it was the slaves and tariffs and things," adding, "I ever thought about it much"; Dr. Finch, barely containing his dismay, can only reply softly: "Jehovah God."[7] We are then treated to a seriously dubious historical account of slavery in the American South, albeit an account that has not quite breathed its last breath. The inevitable confrontation with Atticus goes as poorly as one would expect. Atticus insists that he

attended the Citizens' Council meeting for two reasons: "The Federal Government and the NAACP."[8] Once again, a maddeningly clueless Scout is bullied by a senior relative about matters historical and legal: when Atticus asks her about her first reaction to the Supreme Court decision – that would be *Brown v. Board of Education*, the seminal case from American Constitutional law that desegregated public education in the United States – Scout confesses that she was furious. And again, recalling her earlier interaction with Uncle Jack, Atticus leads her via a bit of Socratic reasoning to his justification for falling in with the Citizens Council:

> Honey, you do not seem to understand that the Negroes down here are still in their childhood as a people. You should know it you've seen it all your life. They've made terrific progress in adapting to white ways, but they're far from it yet. They were coming along fine, traveling at a rate they could absorb, more of 'em voting than ever before. Then the NAACP stepped in with its fantastic demands and shoddy ideas of government – can you blame the South for resenting being told what to do about its own people by people who have no idea of its daily problems?[9]

A bit later, Atticus calls the Citizens' Council "simply a method of defense against –" (although Lee has Scout interrupt him just before he can identify the aggressor to be defended against).[10] But Atticus has already named the Federal Government, the Supreme Court of the United States, and the NAACP as his targets. Atticus' rationalization is seriously demoralizing; it demands thinking that since any number of federal agencies and entities have ridiculed and rejected the Southern way of life and culture thereby disregarding States' rights and the Tenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, their nefarious influence must be resisted – indeed, could only be resisted – by taking up with thinly veiled racists. What else could a fair-minded Southerner do *but* join up? Here lies the corpse of the dogged and just hero of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Atticus Finch: may he rest in peace. While Atticus is outed as a social conservative by the end of *Watchman*, Scout looks little more progressive than he does. In trying to distinguish her own views from her father's, Scout reasons thusly:

> Her voice was heavy with sarcasm: "We've agreed that they're backward, that they're illiterate, that they're dirty and comical and shiftless and no good, they're infants and they're stupid, some of them, but we haven't agreed on one thing and we never will. You deny that they're human."[11]

With allies like Scout, who needs enemies like the Maycomb Citizens' Council?

Many readers were frustrated by *Watchman* partly because the Atticus depicted in its pages seems so at odds with the Atticus depicted in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. After all, *Watchman* is supposed to be a prequel to *Mockingbird*; on some accounts, *Watchman* was written first, presented to publishers for consideration, and sent back for revision and development prior to ultimately *becoming* its more beloved literary companion. Shouldn't there be continuity here? How could Atticus be a hero in one novel and a villain in the other? How could he be both upright and just but also backwards and intolerant?[12] Maybe these two depictions of Atticus are at odds with one another, but perhaps not. One unsympathetic reviewer of *Watchman* notes that there is no inconsistency here:

> So the idea that Atticus, in this book, "becomes" the bigot he was not in "Mockingbird" entirely misses Harper Lee's point – that this is exactly the kind of bigot that Atticus has been all along. The particular kind of racial rhetoric that Atticus embraces (and that he and Jean Louise are careful to distinguish from low-rent, white-trash bigotry) is a complex and, in its own estimation, "liberal" ideology: there is no contradiction between Atticus defending an innocent black man accused of rape in "Mockingbird" and Atticus mistrusting civil rights twenty years later. Both are part of a paternal effort to help a minority that, in this view, cannot yet entirely help itself.[13]

This is the sort of incipiently racist mentality cloaked in ostensible concern for Black Southerners expressed by a character in Flannery O'Connor's "Everything That Rises Must Converge" who opines that "They should rise, yes, but on their own side of the fence."[14] And there are moments in *Mockingbird* that are suggestive of a character that is less than fully virtuous, if only in retrospect. At times, Atticus decries Yankee moralizing about equality, overreaching by the Supreme Court, and the "distaff" concerns of the Executive branch[15] – in his closing argument in Tom's trial no less! It's hard to believe that Atticus isn't bemoaning at least some epic moments of the civil rights movement here. And when Scout recounts an insult hurled by a classmate, Atticus reproaches her, but only sort of. When Scout asks, "Do you defend niggers, Atticus?" he responds: "Don't say nigger, Scout. That's common."[16] *Common*. Not unjust or wrong or even just mean, but *common* – that is, vulgar and beneath Scout's social standing. We might have hoped for more from Atticus. Perhaps we should have all along.

Philosophers, mockingbirds, watchmen

One of the assumptions that guides the work that follows is that reflection on great works of literature can be useful fodder for philosophical reflection about evil people in particular, but fodder for philosophical reflection in general. The din about Harper Lee's most recently published tome should be interesting to philosophers for many reasons, and there are at least three different questions posed by her works that are best answered by philosophers. (I write this, of course, as a philosopher and not a literary critic, for example. But if literary theorists get to dabble in philosophical theorizing about the nature of evil[17] then I get to try my hand at literary criticism.)

First all, there are ethical questions that abound post-*Watchman*. The most obvious question is this: Is Atticus Finch a good man? In light of the revelations above, how should we regard him? Anecdotal conversations with fellow readers seem to suggest that popular sentiment judges him quite harshly, and more harshly than, for example, the Ewells who falsely accused Tom Robinson in *Mockingbird* and who are probably infected by more malice than Atticus and guilty of causing much more harm. Of course, Atticus is educated and cultured in a way that Robert Ewell is not, so perhaps we are only shocked to see Atticus come up short because we never expected much from Bob Ewell in the first place. On the other hand, Atticus is a man of his time, so maybe we shouldn't be that shocked to learn that he too is infected by seriously racist beliefs about Black Southerners. Perhaps we shouldn't be so quick to hold Atticus responsible for his immoral beliefs? Still, other Southerners of Atticus' time were able to overcome their culture and upbringing. Given that Atticus had resources sufficient for him to become educated and socialized, perhaps he should have known better and for that reason we should regard him as seriously negligent and therefore blameworthy for his beliefs. I shall return to this sort of discussion in Chapter 4 when I discuss the moral psychology of Huck Finn, but if all this is right we might need to seriously revise our assessment of Atticus in *Mockingbird*. If he defended Tom Robinson only out of some deeply troubling racist and paternalist conviction that someone had to take care of the poor, stupid Blacks who can't care for themselves, then Atticus' tempered and lonely defense of Tom Robinson is not as praiseworthy as we might have thought and it is not clearly evidence of virtuous character. Of course, there is room for disagreement here, but debates about Atticus' character, his blameworthiness, and so forth are debates about ethical matters and ripe for philosophers to consider. But we aren't going to make much headway without some theory of moral responsibility and character to appeal to.

Here is a second question that demands input from philosophers if it is to be answered correctly: Is *Watchman* a continuation of *Mockingbird*? Do they occur in the same fictional universe and proceed on the same fictional timeline, even though *Watchman* was published some 55 years later? Lee herself suggested for many years that she would never publish another book and for many years her estate denied that there was anything to publish. It is commonly thought that authorial intentions matter with respect to a text's meaning, at least to some extent, so perhaps it matters if Lee never intended for *Watchman* to see the light of day. If Lee regarded *Watchman* as a first draft best consigned to the dustbin or as an entirely distinct and complete precursor to *Mockingbird*, or if she hadn't yet conceived of *Mockingbird* as we know it, then perhaps *Go Set a Watchman* just isn't a continuation of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. We probably would radically revise our assessment of other stories and their characters if we stumbled upon some new information about what their author intended. Suppose, for example, that we discover a trove of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's early and discarded drafts of stories with a protagonist named 'Sherlock Holmes' accompanied by his faithful companion named 'Watson'. Suppose also these stories are accompanied by a letter from Doyle that calls for them to be destroyed on the grounds that they are failures that he wants nothing to do with. Suppose finally that one of these stories includes some unexpected revelation about Holmes at odds with what we normally suppose of him – say, that Holmes is really a stooge and that he has been working for Professor Moriarty all along. Should we then revise our assessment of Holmes? Or can our understanding of him endure without devaluation? These questions are only going to be settled by reference to some theory of meaning and interpretation and answering them will require some philosophy of language and metaphysics.

That brings up a related third question. Are the characters in *Watchman* the same characters as those in *Mockingbird*? Do the names 'Scout' and 'Atticus Finch' and 'Calpurnia' refer to the same individuals in both novels? Or are the characters of the two novels different and distinct people who just happen to share the same name (in the same way that the author of this text shares the name 'Peter Barry' with an established literary theorist who may have a thing or two to say about these matters)?[18] The popular assumption seems to be that the names 'Scout' and 'Atticus Finch' and so forth refer to the same individuals across novels, but that assumption is not universally endorsed. At least one commentator contends that:

> [I]t's silly to view the Atticus Finch of "Go Set a Watchman" as the same person as the Atticus Finch in "To Kill a Mockingbird," as

many commentators have done. Atticus is a fictional character, not a real person.[19]

But if that's right, then we shouldn't be troubled by Atticus' seeming fall from grace; the disappointment named 'Atticus Finch' in *Watchman* isn't the same person as the hero of *Mockingbird* named 'Atticus Finch'. It only makes sense to blame or mourn him if 'Atticus Finch' refers to the same character in both novels – that is, if they really are the same person. But don't we usually think that fictional characters can be identical across texts and over time? That names like 'Sherlock Holmes' and 'Harry Potter' and 'Seymour Glass' refer to the same individuals? How else to make sense of the thought that the stories and novels written by Doyle and J. K. Rowling and J. D. Salinger are interrelated? I see no way of making progress in answering these questions without a theory of identity and some theory about the ontology of fictional characters.

I shall have something to say about all these questions in later chapters, but my primary concern in this work is not to settle any of them, although by now it has to be clear that sorting out literary texts is going to require some contributions from readers who self-identify as philosophers. As suggested by its title, *The Fiction of Evil* is about evil – or, more precisely, about what it is to be an evil person and how evil people differ from the rest of us who are merely bad or unjust or nasty or whatever. I have attempted to answer this question in another, rather different sort of work.[20] My previous book, *Evil and Moral Psychology*, was written for an audience of professional philosophers and contains a more sophisticated treatment of many of the issues addressed in what follows. The intended audience for *The Fiction of Evil* is a bit different insofar as I hope that it will also be of interest to undergraduate students interested in the topic of evil in particular or ethical theory in general or in the intersection of philosophy and literature. *The Fiction of Evil* could be used in humanities courses combining both, where individual chapters are assigned in tandem with literary works either in part or in whole, although I would also like to believe that it stands just fine on its own. I certainly hope it to be accessible to a reasonably well-read and intelligent reader absent much formal education in philosophy. In the next section, I describe what to expect in *The Fiction of Evil* and the literary works that pair nicely with each chapter.

Fiction and evil in *The Fiction of Evil*

In Chapter 1, I return to at least some of the philosophical questions that emerged from my discussion of *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *Go Set a*

Watchman above. Since my ultimate goal is to say something about the nature of evil personhood, there are some matters that I can only address briefly and partially. But given the methodology of *The Fiction of Evil*, I feel compelled to say at least something about the ontology of fictional characters, about the relationship between conceivability and possibility, and a few other dark matters. As I suggest in Chapter 1, the thesis that guides this work is that there are putative evil characters from literature that are conceivable and that their conceivability has implications for the thesis that there are actual evil people. Further, I contend that reflection on these putative evil characters helps to understand just what makes someone an evil person – that is, how evil people differ from merely morally bad people. It will matter, for example, that Claggart seems to lack any disposition to take pleasure in his efforts to destroy Billy Budd and that Dorian Gray is only rightly regarded as an evil person once he becomes seriously cruel and not just somewhat so. Thus, it makes sense to talk about the fiction of evil insofar as I think that there is a canon of literary works that inform philosophical ruminating about evil and evil people. My general task in Chapter 1 is to explain why reflection on fictional and unreal characters says something about the actual world. I mention a number of literary works in Chapter 1, but some stories from the Sherlock Holmes canon would pair nicely to stimulate discussion, especially "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" in which Holmes' proposed solution to the mystery is nomically impossible or stories like "The Final Problem" and "The Adventure of the Empty House" in which Holmes seems to fall to his death from Reichenbach Falls only to return alive and well. Some selections from the Harry Potter canon would also work well, especially those that concern seemingly impossible magical events and authorial intention.

Insofar as I think that there are genuinely evil people who walk about in the actual world – not just mean people or bad people, but *evil* people – I identify as an *evil-realist* and I endorse *evil-realism*. But evil-realism is not the only game in town. Philosophers who are skeptical about the existence of evil and evil people are *evil-skeptics* and they endorse *evil-skepticism*.[21] There are surely multiple arguments for evil-skepticism and I attempt to face up to some of them in Chapters 2 and 3. This task is necessary given that the title of *The Fiction of Evil* has a rather obvious connotation. Speaking of the fiction of evil might suggest a dismissive attitude toward the subject matter. If I speak of the "fiction of bipartisanship" I probably mean to suggest that there isn't really anything like that. On some accounts, evil really is just a fiction and there are no evil people. Of course, no one doubts that there are some bad people or unjust people or vicious people or whatever, but evil-skeptics deny that

there are any actual evil people, properly understood. On some accounts, to call someone 'evil' is to demonize them, to invoke mythical specters and antediluvian notions best left in the past. So understood, the concept of the evil person might have a role in mythology or fantasy, but it has no role in the real world. So mythologized, I of course admit that there are no evil people – that evil is just a fiction – and if I thought that the only way to understand the evil person was to invoke a mythological conception of evil personhood, I would be an evil-skeptic. My task in Chapter 2 is to resist a series of arguments that suggest that the evil-realist is committed to a mythological conception. The hope is to understand what it could mean to describe characters like Cathy from John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* and The Misfit from Flannery O'Connor's "A Good Man is Hard to Find" as "monsters" without falling into the trap of mythologizing evil. The latter short story would be an excellent literary selection to be paired with the chapter.

In a similar vein, in Chapter 3 I resist a series of arguments offered by a nineteenth-century philosophical giant: Friedrich Nietzsche. Perhaps to the surprise of some – namely, those who regard Nietzsche as a "teacher of evil" – I detect at least two different arguments in Nietzsche's corpus against evil-realism. Nietzsche's evil-skepticism is not grounded in the thought that evil-realists are committed to a monstrous conception of evil personhood, but rather in the thought that there is something suspect about the history and etymology of terms like 'evil'. Briefly, Nietzsche contends that once we are clear about how and why the term 'evil' was introduced and popularized, we can discern good reasons for abandoning use of that term and talk of evil people. My unenviable task is to explain why Nietzsche's evil-skepticism is unfounded. (In the interest of full disclosure, Chapter 3 is a bit different from the others insofar as my primary resource for reflection is not a literary text but philosophical ones. Some readers may be inclined to gloss over or skip this chapter and potential instructors may wonder what to do with it. That said, Nietzsche is a profound and difficult thinker with much of importance to say and Chapter 3 would work well as a companion to some selections from works like *On the Genealogy of Morals* or *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*.)

Chapter 4 marks a transition into moral psychology – that is, that branch of ethics that deals with agency and action and character and such. I discuss the moral psychology of Aristotle not because I think that Aristotle offers a defensible conception of evil personhood but because his discussion of character suggests a method for understanding what evil people are like. Aristotle identifies any number of conditions of character in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and he considers what sort of condition of character is the very best condition, but he also has

something to say about what the very worst condition of character is like. And, I submit, the evil-realist should follow Aristotle here insofar as she is trying to identify the very worst condition of character when she tries to understand what the evil person is like. I also spend some time discussing the character of Huck Finn from Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, not because I regard Huck as an evil person – he surely isn't – but because reflection on Huck complicates some distinctions that Aristotle draws. By the end of Chapter 4, we will have a strategy for moving forward and at least the beginnings of a thesis about evil personhood.

But only the beginning. In Chapter 5, I consider some proffered conceptions of evil personhood that, I submit, are inadequate. But their failures suggest a more promising alternative. While it is possible to produce a mythical conception of evil personhood after reflecting on characters like Satan from Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Iago from Shakespeare's *Othello*, I propose a conception of evil personhood that is comparatively minimalist. I contend that Satan and Iago and other putative evil characters are rightly regarded as evil because they are *virulently vicious* – that is, because they suffer from grave moral vices and lack moral contrition. The project in Chapter 5 is to begin to make the case that nothing more dramatic is necessary to understand what makes someone evil.

In Chapter 6, I consider another rival view defended by the philosopher Colin McGinn, partly because McGinn is the author of a text very much like this one that seeks to offer a philosophical conception of evil by ruminating on putative evil characters from fiction, but mostly because I think that McGinn's view goes astray. Very roughly, McGinn suggests a conception of evil personhood that understands evil people in terms of a tendency to take pleasure in the suffering of others. McGinn and I are both interested in Claggart, the antagonist of Herman Melville's *Billy Budd: Sailor* and we both suppose that Claggart is evil. However, I contend that even the most charitable version of McGinn's conception fails. If I am correct, a tendency to take pleasure in the suffering of others has surprisingly little to do with being an evil person.

In Chapter 7, I consider Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* insofar as I find Dorian to be a terribly plausible example of an evil person. We can see a marked decline in Dorian's character as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* progresses and, I contend, that progression is exactly what we should expect if evil personhood is understood as virulent viciousness. The claim that evil personhood consists in virulent viciousness needs to be amended slightly, but Dorian is a masterful illustration of what the evil person is like on the conception of evil personhood that I defend.

Chapter 8 is concerned with the evil person's prospects for rehabilitation and redemption. While I allow that evil people might be rehabilitated insofar as it is possible for even an evil person to become a better sort of person, I am deeply skeptical about evil people's prospects for redemption. I regard redemption as a praiseworthy achievement, a morally valuable transformation of character, but evil people will chronically lack what is necessary to deserve praise for their transformation. In this chapter, I am especially interested in Alex, the protagonist of Anthony Burgess' fantastic *A Clockwork Orange* who is rehabilitated, perhaps twice, but deserves no praise for his transformation and remains unredeemed.

Notes

1 White Citizens' Councils were prominent in the United States, especially in the American South, during the 1950s and 1960s, and aimed to frustrate school desegregation. But they never quite went away. The Southern Poverty Law Center regards the contemporary Council of Concerned Citizens (CCC) as "the modern incarnation" of such Citizens' Councils. Such groups still have influence. Dylan Storm Roof, the 21-year-old mass murderer responsible for the horrific shooting at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 cited the CCC's website as his gateway into racial extremism in his manifesto.
2 Harper Lee, *Go Set a Watchman* (New York: HarperCollins, 2015), p. 102.
3 Ibid., p. 104.
4 Ibid., p. 105.
5 Ibid., p. 108.
6 Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 281.
7 Lee, *Go Set a Watchman*, p. 193.
8 Ibid., p. 238.
9 Ibid., pp. 246–247.
10 Ibid., p. 251.
11 Ibid., p. 250.
12 Not all commentators have held that Atticus is the praiseworthy paragon of justice that he is typically taken to be. See, for example, Monroe H. Freedman, "Atticus Finch – Right and Wrong," *Alabama Law Review* 45:2 (1994), pp. 473–482.
13 Adam Gopnik, "Sweet Home Alabama: Harper Lee's 'Go Set a Watchman'," *The New Yorker* (July 27, 2015).
14 Flannery O'Connor, "Everything that Rises Must Converge" in *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 409.
15 Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, p. 233.
16 Ibid., p. 84.
17 Terry Eagleton, *On Evil* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).
18 Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995).

19 Joe Nocera, "The Harper Lee 'Go Set a Watchman' Fraud," *New York Times* (July 24, 2015).
20 Peter Brian Barry, *Evil and Moral Psychology* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
21 Luke Russell, "Evil-Skepticism and Evil-Revivalism," *Journal of Value Inquiry* 40:1 (2006), p. 90.

1 Literature as philosophy

In philosophy, there have arisen counter-worlds, to accommodate the imagined-but-unlived possibilities of this world. She had written of these worlds. Her colleagues had written of these worlds. Not a one of them believed in these worlds that were "real," but not "actual" – or "actual" but not "real." There are subjects that philosophy cannot approach. There are subjects so bared, so exposed – the antic beating heart, which no words can encase.

Joyce Carol Oates, *Mudwoman*

It is no chance matter we are discussing, but how one should live.

Plato, *Republic*

During this period our graver and more high-powered critics have had to attempt a massive reappraisal; they have pretty well agreed that writers can be too healthy for their own good. Today we are all looking for darkness visible, and we know that a realistic awe of evil is a mighty valuable thing for the writer to have.

Robert Lowell, "Art and Evil"

Plato, poets, and an old quarrel

One of the more remarkable facts about Plato's dialogues is that many of Plato's doctrines are bound to strike an unfamiliar reader as strange or alien or just plain wrong: we are told variously that no one willingly does wrong, that the just man cannot be harmed, that injustice harms its perpetrator, that it is better to be just and whipped than to be unjust and wrongly thought honest, and so forth. It is probably a tribute to Plato that legions of philosophy students come to nod their heads in agreement when these noble truths are asserted even though ordinary life suggests that they are patently false.

Part of the reason that Plato is so convincing is his preferred method. The typical Platonic dialogue features Socrates, the historical teacher of

Plato, as the protagonist who encounters some other character claiming to have knowledge about a favored topic. Socrates then gets him to concede that he does not really know after all. In the *Apology*, Socrates insists that every claimant to knowledge that he has engaged so far has failed to demonstrate that he really has it (21b–23b). Socrates' method of philosophical interrogation and investigation has come to be called the *elenchus*. Sometimes the elenchus results only in the negative conclusion that the subject matter in question isn't really understood; this is the result in *Euthyphro*, for example. Sometimes the elenchus results in a positive conclusion; at the end of the *Gorgias*, for example, Socrates takes himself to have shown that no one ever does wrong willingly. But whatever the result, Socrates' refutations are typically decisive and his interlocutor either kowtows to Socrates or clearly appears wrong.

  Socrates, of course, has his critics. The Greek poet, Aristophanes, lampoons Socrates in *The Clouds* as a teacher of useless and dubious information. For his part, Plato accuses poets of misrepresenting reality and fostering shameful feelings, noting that "there is from of old a quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (*Republic* 607b5–6), a quarrel that arguably rages on.[1] Importantly, the old quarrel between philosophers and poets is not a trifling disagreement about style, but a substantive disagreement about something of substance: each offers a different account of how we ought to live.[2] Martha Nussbaum makes the case that Plato rejects a particular view of human life endorsed by the poets of his time. On this poetic view, what happens by chance is of great importance to the ethical quality of people's lives, and good people should care deeply about what happens by chance.[3] For Plato, by contrast, what matters is simply virtue, and good people will be largely unconcerned with chance since they can bear the slings and arrows of fortune, however outrageous. It is striking to note the asceticism prized by Plato:

> [The soul] reasons best, presumably, whenever none of these things bothers it, neither hearing nor sight nor pain, nor any pleasure either, but whenever it comes to be alone by itself as far as possible, disregarding the body, and whenever, having the least possible communion and contact with it, it strives for what is the case.
>
> (*Phaedo* 65c)

The outcome of good reasoning is knowledge – grasping "what is the case" – and the soul is best able to complete this function when divorced from the physical world. The more Plato's ascetic removes herself from the world, the less subject she will be to mere chance.