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Allegory and ethical education: stories for people who know too many stories

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Abstract:

How can stories contribute to ethical education, when they reach people who have already been shaped by many stories, including ethically problematic ones? This question is pursued here by considering Plato's allegory of the cave, focusing on a reading of it offered by Jonathan Lear. Lear claims that the cave allegory aims to undermine its audience's inheritance of stories. I question the possibility and desirability of that project, especially in relation to ethical education. Some works of contemporary fiction by Jenny Erpenbeck and J. M. Coetzee are discussed as stories that use more complex strategies for ethically constructive engagement with story-saturated audiences.

## 1. Introduction

Storytellers and philosophers know that audiences bring various forms of 'baggage' to their encounters with stories and philosophical works. With respect to a storyteller's artistic goals, this is likely to be a mixed blessing. Audiences will usually be able to take in and respond to stories in a sophisticated way, appreciating how a new story embodies or plays with established expectations. But it also makes it harder to write a new story and to avoid boring or disappointing one's audience: the inheritance of stories means the storyteller risks offering something that is too similar to or fails to meet expectations drawn from other stories. For the philosopher, the inheritance of ways of understanding the world need not come, or is even very unlikely to come, from past encounters with philosophical texts. The relevant experience and 'baggage', in relation to philosophical conceptions, come from many sources, including stories and images of reality of all kinds. Both storytellers and philosophers can aim to shape audience's conceptions of reality, and in that aim both will have to deal with what audiences already believe and value. In a commentary on Plato, Jonathan Lear reads Plato's allegory of the cave in the *Republic* as responding to the problem posed by these ordinary phenomena. If you take the inheritance of stories to have had a misleading and bad influence, what kind of story can you tell that will meet audiences 'where they live' and yet not reinforce the ideas you want to challenge? People now live and are educated in a remarkably story-saturated environment: television, film, novels, comics, videogames, popular song, advertisements, and personal stories used for rhetorical and political purposes. It might seem that we know too many stories for there to be any sensible way to address the background clutter and sedimented impact of storytelling. Lear argues that Plato's allegory offers a strategy for addressing this situation. I will reflect on Lear's argument by discussing some works of contemporary fiction, by Jenny Erpenbeck and J. M. Coetzee, that strike me as enacting some related but interestingly different strategies for addressing their story-saturated audiences.

The Erpenbeck and Coetzee works that I will refer to – Erpenbeck's *The Old Child* (*Geschichte vom alten Kind*, 1999) and *The Book of Words* (*Wörterbuch*, 2005), and Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus* (2013) and *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016) – engage with Lear's argument in part because they have qualities of allegory. Further, they each have a child as a central character, and the child's ethical formation is in each case a focal point of the fictional circumstances. These works make crucial use of child characters who do not understand the ethically charged stimuli they encounter;

their phases of bewilderment, unwitting absorption and stubborn resistance can help adult readers re-visit the implicit, muddled, sometimes shockingly blunt childhood experiences that can add up to an 'ethical education'.<sup>1</sup> I will read these works, with their child figures and qualities of allegory as addressing their audiences in something like the spirit of Lear's Plato. They address us as problematic audiences with accumulated distortions and prejudices. However, I think the ethical concerns of these works lead them to treat the story baggage in a different way. They seem to acknowledge that there is no ethical blank slate available and that we must somehow work with the ethical influences that have formed us. I will suggest that these works use intermittent or imperfect qualities of allegory, as well as the in-process educations of their child figures, to give readers a difficult but constructive entry into critical reflection on their own ethical formation.

I will introduce Lear's argument by making a very broad remark about why stories seem particularly powerful, if not inevitably insidious influences. Stories represent agents responding to an environment, usually human agents responding to a human social world. While some storytelling strives for a neutral or solely descriptive stance – 'this is what happened' – it is very hard for readers to avoid absorbing evaluative and normative suggestions from fiction. We absorb such suggestions and we experience value-suggesting responses, based on such things as the portrayal of agents and their concerns, types of information offered and withheld, the priority given to some psychological and social perspectives over others, and whatever elements show up as junctures, crises and story resolutions. A story can embody and draw on a rich set of assumptions, types, story-patterns, wishes, fears and meaning-laden images and incidents, and these elements can take on variously valenced force, as if that force is simply there at work in the world of the story. This is not to explain how this is possible. It is just to point out that stories have surprisingly efficient mechanisms for plugging us into a sense of what ought to happen and what can be celebrated, feared, bemoaned and found reasonable or unreasonable.<sup>2</sup> That stories have this capacity for informationally complex, affective, and value-laden experience has made them the subject of much philosophical debate, especially in relation to ethical education and knowledge. What are the risks and benefits of forming ethically significant responses to narratives that so selectively represent and imagine lives? How is the mode of fiction able to be relevant to our real ethical circumstances? Though the discussion here emerges in many ways out of these debates, for present purposes I will focus on the limited prompt of Plato's concern with storytelling and its educational impact.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Plato's allegory as a radically unsettling story

Plato's Socrates, in the *Republic*, makes the case for extreme caution with the stories people encounter in childhood: 'The point is that a young person can't tell when something is allegorical and when it isn't, and any idea admitted by a person of that age tends to become almost ineradicable and permanent' (*Rep* 378d-e). Childhood stories are able to carry ideas that have a lasting impact. Lear unpacks this worry about story and allegory, as vehicles holding a 'deeper sense or hidden meaning':

it is that which lies at the bottom of a myth or allegory. ... it is an "under-thought" in another sense: it enters the psyche beneath the radar of critical thought. ... Precisely because the child lacks the capacity to recognize allegory as such, he cannot grasp the deeper meaning of the story that is entering his soul, and thus he cannot subject it to critical scrutiny. And so, it would seem that the young can take in the surface story, but they cannot recognize it as a surface. (Lear, 27)

Lear then extends the impact of uncritical early absorption of stories and their deeper meanings into adulthood. A child who has heard heroic stories about Achilles, for instance,

acts out a certain image of courage before he is able to understand what courage is. ... his psyche gets "Achillized." ... by the time he does acquire the capacity to recognize allegory as such, it is in an important sense too late. He can now recognize the Achilles tale as a story, but ... by the time he tries in adulthood to think about what courage is, he is already looking out from Achilles' perspective. (Lear 29, 30)

The psychic impact of stories is not so much a matter of understanding 'what is true in the story', but is more importantly an impact on dispositions to think, feel and judge in response to certain kinds of input. The exercise with stories influences what perspectives we take up and how we interpret and respond to future, non-story environments. Specifically with respect to Socrates' project in the *Republic*, of engaging with Thrasymachus on justice and happiness,

the problem seems to be that rational argument is coming too late. Thrasymachus already has an outlook on the world, and he will tend to recognize good and bad arguments in terms of that outlook. ... there is a question of how any good argument could properly influence someone whose outlook is distorted and distorting. (Lear, 25)

As adults who are confident that we can identify what is 'only a story', we are in fact disoriented by that confidence because – on Plato's view – 'we now plunge into the adult world of cultural artifacts, social practices, and physical objects – and we take it to be the real thing' (Lear, 31). Once we relegate the stories we recognize to mere imagery and fantasy, we remain vulnerable to stories about reality that we do not recognize as such.

To sum up, our early and current exposure to stories is problematic because its impact is unnoticed and so cannot be critically scrutinized, it is lasting, and it affects how we approach our deepest questions about how to live. Earlier I suggested that people now have enormous story exposure, and perhaps the phenomena of clutter and saturation could help: if you encounter a steady stream of stories, and presumably many that conflict in their ideas and hidden meanings, maybe they will interfere with or cancel each other out. Perhaps the impact is shallower or more transient, if we try to absorb ideas that do not cohere with ones we have previously absorbed. This is a delicate empirical question that I do not have the resources to address. However, I will note the possibility that the sedimentation of conflicting or divergent story meanings would be more like actual sedimentation. What if the stories just pile up and are not subject to reflective comparison, critical sorting and elimination? Maybe such 'sediment' would have a confusing, inconsistent influence. Or maybe the piling up of more and more stories would indeed weaken their grip, or the grip of later arrivals at least, but that vision of jaded, insensitive encounters with stories does not sound like a healthy phenomenon either. We do not want stories to make us apathetic or less discerning in the project of thinking, feeling and judging well. So, to rule out a quick resolution of the problem, the proliferating exposure to stories is not obviously a condition that would promote open, critical inquiry and progress in understanding.

On Lear's account, Plato's allegory of the cave addresses this problem by instilling 'an inherent discontent with the current level of experience' (Lear, 35). Socrates offers the allegory as 'an analogy for the human condition—for our education or lack of it' (*Rep* 514a). We are to imagine people who have lived since childhood deep in a cave, tied up so that they can only look straight ahead. A fire burns behind them, and other people move things around between the fire and the captives, so that they do not 'see anything of themselves except the shadows cast by the fire on to the cave wall' (*Rep* 515a). We then imagine a captive being freed, seeing the situation, and

eventually being forced out of the cave into the sunlight. Socrates depicts the various stages of bewilderment, dazzled blindness, and gradual insight into reality—eventually being ‘able to discern and feast his eyes on the sun’—that such a person would go through (*Rep* 516b). The vision of the sun is compared to knowing true goodness which is, in Socrates’ claim, ‘the source and provider of truth and knowledge’ (*Rep* 517c). The ascent from the cave makes reality ever more intelligible to the freed captive. Socrates also elaborates on the difficulty of returning to the cave and trying to communicate with the captives about the shadows that dominate their experience.

‘Do you think it’s surprising if he seems awkward and ridiculous while he’s still not seeing well ... he’s forced into a contest (in a lawcourt or wherever) about the shadows of morality or the statuettes which cast the shadows, and into a competition whose terms are the conceptions of morality held by people who have never seen morality itself?’ (*Rep* 517d-e)

There is extensive debate on how to interpret the allegory and on whether it serves Plato’s goals. Julia Annas, for instance, having tried to elucidate the different narrative details and stages of the story and their philosophical import, concludes that Plato here proves his own point about ‘the dangers in the philosophical use of images’: ‘Plato has got so carried away by the desire to stress the utterly contemptible nature of the state unenlightened by philosophical thought that the imagery, memorable though it is, has no consistent overall interpretation’ (Annas, 256). Annas’s analysis of the problem of extracting coherent doctrine from the allegory is convincing, but I think that Lear’s claim about the allegory does not depend on making that kind of philosophical sense of the relations between the levels of experience and knowledge it evokes (or, one of Annas’s concerns, on finding coherence between the cave allegory and Plato’s related images of the divided line and the sun). What Lear emphasizes is the allegory’s relation to our accumulated background of stories. What we need is a radical unsettling of the conceptual, epistemic, evaluative and affective patterns and dispositions that we have absorbed and take for granted as effective resources for orientation to reality. The allegory, on his reading, gives us a way to adopt such an unsettling perspective.

For Lear, the cave allegory and its companion the ‘Noble Lie’ are interesting methodologically in part because they are not aimed at attacking specific beliefs and values, but at ‘making us uncomfortable with our entire mode of acquiring beliefs and values’ (Lear, 35).<sup>4</sup> This can motivate willingness to re-think what we have accepted as giving form and intelligibility to our experience. If Socrates ‘is right that unbeknownst to ourselves we have been living in prison, then in becoming aware of that we begin to chafe at the chains’ (Lear, 35). Lear presents the cave allegory as working in parallel with the dream-state posited in the ‘Noble Lie’ to teach us ‘to be dissatisfied with all the myths we’ve heard’ and ‘to instill suspicion with respect to’ the values of the day (Lear, 34, 35). The important impact of the allegory is the unsettling, motivating one: be open to finding that your view of the world is distorted and your methods for seemingly coming to know it are systematically misleading.

It seems possible that the allegory of the cave is often the only thing people remember from reading or hearing about the *Republic*, at least once enough time has passed. I think that Lear’s approach makes some sense of its ‘sticking power’. If its primary function were to convey and promote Plato’s epistemology and metaphysics, for instance, it seems it would fade in interest for audiences who are little drawn to those philosophical projects. Rather, Lear offers it as a story with a much more flexible application, relevant, as I suggested at the outset, to the education of all of us with unreflective relations to our formative stories. However, I want to raise two questions about Lear’s approach, one of them concerning how the cave allegory in particular can grip its audience, and the other more broadly about the ethical function of a story that would make us suspicious of our accumulated inheritance of stories.

### 3. Erpenbeck's and Coetzee's intermittent allegories

Lear's point is that Plato finds a way to tell a powerful, disruptive story to a highly compromised audience. The first question is why such people would take the story to be relevant to them. By hypothesis, the situation of the ordinary people in the cave is that they are fully occupied with their vision of reality and have no reason to be dissatisfied with it. If we as cave-dwellers had such an impoverished, distorted sense of the real (never grasping that shadows are shadows, as it were, taking all appearances to have full ontological reputability), then it seems we would not have the resources to make the distinctions the allegory needs us to make. Plato, however, can count on us to make the distinction between visual appearance and physical reality and to know that shadows depend on the existence of other things and cannot reveal the full truth about their sources. If we are the real cave-dwellers, the story can grip us because we already have resources for raising doubts about our experience and our methods for acquiring knowledge. This is to say that the allegory, if it is to make sense to its real audience and have a potentially disruptive, motivating role, is itself misleading about the cave condition. The target audience of cave-dwellers needs access to some form of epistemic suspicion. Is that a problem for either Plato or Lear? It seems reasonable to think of stories, and what we call 'allegories' in particular, as always oversimplifying the real questions and conditions they concern. If the allegory exaggerates the impoverishment of our ordinary orientation to the real, that just reflects the normal practice of allegorizing.

I want to pause over this – though it may seem like a naïve worry about the allegory, taking its simplified assumptions too much to heart – to note that it is tricky to posit that a story can elicit interesting responses if you do not grant the audience some interesting resources to begin with. The subversive or disruptive story needs a hook that we can take up, to understand the relevance of the story to our circumstances, even if in a very unreflective form. One awful feature of the cave scenario is that the cave-dwellers cannot even turn their heads, and this detail marks a significant oversimplification of the resources of the 'real cave-dwellers'. We take up different visual perspectives and coordinate vision with motion around things, so we persistently experience the differing appearances of things. Similarly, with stories, I would press the point that experiencing stories is itself an exercise in changing perspectives, in coming to experience and form conceptions of things one has not directly encountered. There is a kernel of disruptiveness built into competence with stories: some grasp of the fact that this is not my story, that my experience is not the only possibility, is basic. Very broadly, this is to say both that we are not quite as the allegory of the cave envisions us, and that the allegory cannot have the power Lear envisions and perhaps Plato hoped for it, unless we depart from the allegorical vision in this way. Now, one could resist the relevance of this point by insisting that we could easily be as badly off as the fictional cave-dwellers, if not with regard to basic epistemic handling of appearances. We could lack the crucial critical resources to examine our story influences because, as Lear emphasises, we have absorbed too much too early, too deeply and uncritically. I think insisting on this too drastically would leave us without much hope of addressing our story inheritance constructively; from this discouraging vantagepoint, we can perhaps see the motivation for the ban on the poets in the *Republic* Book X.

This leads into the second question, concerning whether a story that gets us to be suspicious of all previous stories would contribute positively to ethical re-formation. My objection to this strategy is somewhat indirect. I could say that I am just not sure that such suspicion is possible, no matter how powerful the allegory positing previous distortion is, and I am indeed not sure about that. But I want instead to compare the cave strategy, giving us a vision that supports radical suspicion, to some different strategies for acknowledging the baggage of our accumulated stories.<sup>5</sup> Erpenbeck and Coetzee offer a contrast in part because they give us works that feel allegorical, but do not support that reading experience consistently. I would say they are likely to be experienced as

intermittently or impurely allegorical. I have been using the term 'allegory' without explanation, relying in part on the familiar usage of the term with respect to Plato's story of the cave. I want it here to mean the kind of story that calls for reading on two levels, the level of explicit narrative and the level of the point or message conveyed by the explicit narrative. Northrop Frye says that,

A writer is being allegorical whenever it is clear that he is saying "by this I also (*allos*) mean that." If this seems to be done continuously, we may say, cautiously, that what he is writing "is" an allegory. ... Ariosto, Goethe, Ibsen, Hawthorne write in a *freistimmige* style in which allegory may be picked up and dropped again at pleasure. (Frye, 90)

It is a good question how someone can make it clear that 'by this I also mean that'. In the Erpenbeck and Coetzee cases, to explain how they do this, intermittently or in Frye's nice term, in a *freistimmige* style, would take some intricate discussion; I will just make a few programmatic claims and hope that some excerpts make them plausible. These are works that portray one or a very few characters in a focused way, but they do not immerse readers, I am claiming, in the characters' experience or 'life-world'. The characters are relatively wooden and sketchy, with some scattered moments or hints of 'coming to life'. The reader cannot sink into the fictional world and take that engrossing immersion to be, presumptively, the goal and point of the work. It seems there is something to be thought about, some reason that this story is being told in this way, that does not amount to the interest, appeal, or life-like richness of the people and events portrayed.<sup>6</sup> However, these works are also narratively too long and complex to work consistently as allegories. Though I am considering novellas rather than novels in Erpenbeck's case, even in the novellas there is too much incident and detail, giving readers a bit too much of 'the contingent happenstance of life' for the narrative incident to function in a clearly symbolic manner or for the plot to be translatable into a general point or message. These works are also odd as fictions because they seem almost tentative or reserved in their handling of what is known or what can be known about the lives they depict; they do not convey confidence about having or reaching a sustained understanding of these lives, and so there is further difficulty in seeing the representation of those lives as conveying or supporting a message.

Here is the opening paragraph of Erpenbeck's *The Old Child*:

When they found her, she was standing on the street with an empty bucket in one hand, on a street lined with shops, and didn't say a word. When she was brought to the police station, all the official questions were put to her: What her name was, where she lived, her parents, her age. The girl replied that she was fourteen years old, but she couldn't tell them her name, nor where her home was. At first, the policemen had called the girl 'miss', but now they stopped. They said: How can you not know where you came from, where you were before you stood on the street here with your empty bucket? The girl simply could not remember, she couldn't remember the beginning. She was an orphan through and through, and all she had, all she knew was the empty bucket she held in one hand and continued to hold as the policemen questioned her. One of the men tried to insult the girl, saying: Scraping the bottom of the bucket, eh? But the girl didn't even notice that his words were meant to give offense, she replied simply: Yes. (Erpenbeck, 5-6)

The girl's awkward status as a 'real person' is noted fairly directly in the second paragraph:

The girl was indisputably present in all her height and bulk, but as for her origins and history, she was so surrounded by nothingness that there seemed, from the beginning, to be

something implausible about her very existence. So they relieved her of her bucket, took her by her fleshy hand, and brought her to the Home for Children. (Erpenbeck, 6)

This outcome is welcomed by the girl.

Just as others strive to break out of fenced-in enclosures, to escape from prison, the workhouse, the insane asylum or barracks, the girl has achieved quite the opposite: she has broken into such an enclosure, the Home for Children to be precise ... (Erpenbeck, 9)

In these opening passages we have a familiar story pattern, in which a child is alone and vulnerable, and is placed in an institutional home. In the British tradition, *Jane Eyre*, *Oliver Twist* and now *Harry Potter* may come to mind. Unusually, Erpenbeck's girl wants to be in the Home for Children. She endures social humiliation, invisibility and careless cruelty there, none of which are depicted as affecting her in the ways one might expect.

... she feels at the moment when she is being given a shove that nearly makes her fall down, a moment when she might perhaps even sob a little, a great sense of relief at occupying this lowermost place that no one will fight her for [...]. While the others no doubt know what is owed to them by Life: Life owes them freedom, and freedom lies outside the walls of this institution, the girl knows that in truth freedom is this: Not having to shove anyone yourself, and this freedom exists inside the walls of the institution and nowhere else. (Erpenbeck, 20)

She achieves some social acceptability when it becomes clear that she will say nothing whatsoever, to complain or to 'tell on' her peers, either when she herself is attacked or when she witnesses the abuse of others.

From the girl's perspective, however, these two incidents [...] do not appear to be related to one another. It is as if she is altogether lacking in self-interest. Each of the events exists for her in its own right, as if a bridge in her head – the one that in most cognizant beings links what has been done to them to what they do to others – has collapsed. (Erpenbeck, 58-9)

The story reaches a fairly bewildering conclusion, although one that strongly intimates that the girl had good reason to forget or suppress her previous life. We also learn one geographically, historically anchoring fact, which is that the Home for Children is in Dresden and that the anniversary of the bombing is marked there with a strange mixture of memorial and celebration (Erpenbeck, 85-7). The girl takes it to be like a birthday party, until she hears the speech mentioning that people were boiled alive in the river. This brief reference, suddenly making the story world intersect with the real course of human events, is important to the 'impurity' of the allegory. The girl's story could otherwise be read as a scrupulous but somewhat abstract imagining of a failure of agency and freedom, of a general mode of being that represents a break between crucial kinds of human input and output. But if we have to imagine her existing in a historically determinate setting, in the aftermath of utterly concrete human actions and suffering, the abstract, meaning-seeking imagining is at least partly halted or made to feel inappropriate.<sup>7</sup>

Let's now briefly turn to Coetzee, to get 'the feel' of some others works of intermittent or impure allegory. His novels' titles seem to promise that we will find in them one of the world's most powerful life stories. The novels follow some events in the life of a young boy named David, who is an orphan, as far as can be known. He and a man named Simón arrive as refugees in an unknown country and city (having left a never-specified situation). Simón devotes himself to caring for David

and to finding David's 'mother' (and in *The Schooldays* they will argue about the meaning of 'huérfano', the Spanish word for orphan, and whether David is indeed an orphan (Coetzee 2016, 16-7)). David has some unusual qualities and tendencies, but he is not portrayed as strikingly divine or benevolent.<sup>8</sup> As a character, he is a child who likes to have his own way and can be sweet as well as infuriating. A child's version of *Don Quixote* is a treasured book. The sense in which he likes to have his own way is sometimes but not always the tired, frustrated assertion of a child's will; he has self-confidence and some obscure but unyielding principles that make him able to resist pleas and demands of parents and teachers. Perhaps there are faint echoes of the young Jesus speaking with elders in the temple (Luke 2:41-50). He carries on a number of rather philosophical conversations with his guardian, Simón. Here they are talking soon after they arrive in Novilla.

'I'm hungry,' complains the boy.

'Be patient. We will have a big breakfast in the morning, I promise. Think about that.' He tucks him into bed, gives him a goodnight kiss.

But the boy is not sleepy. 'What are we here for, Simón?' he asks quietly.

'I told you: we are here just for a night or two, till we find a better place to stay.'

'No, I mean, why are we here?' His gesture takes in the room, the Centre, the city of Novilla, everything.

'You are here to find your mother. I am here to help you.'

'But after we find her, what are we here for?'

'I don't know what to say. We are here for the same reason everyone else is. We have been given a chance to live and we have accepted that chance. It is a great thing, to live. It is the greatest thing of all.'

'But do we have to live here?'

'Here as opposed to where? There is nowhere else to be but here. Now close your eyes. It is time to sleep.' (Coetzee 2013, 20-1)

In *The Schooldays of Jesus*, when Simón and David have succeeded in forming a family unit with Inés as the mother, David raises questions about this:

'But was I born out of Inés' tummy?'

'You are forcing me to repeat myself. Either I can reply, "Yes, you were born out of Inés' tummy," or I can reply, "No, you weren't born out of Inés' tummy." But neither reply will bring us any closer to the truth. Why not? Because, like everyone else who came on the boats, you can't remember and nor can Inés. Unable to remember, all you can do, all she can do, all any of us can do is to make up stories.' (Coetzee 2016, 18)

David serves in the novels to pressure the adults, especially Simón, to expose the points at which they can no longer reason. Simón does not lie to David at these points; he responds as *reasonably* as he can, affirming some kind of admittedly unsatisfying starting point – we do not remember, there is nowhere else to be.<sup>9</sup>

Returning to the Plato-Lear problematic, Erpenbeck's and Coetzee's works strike me as worrying, in sympathy with Plato and Lear, about their audiences' inheritance of stories. But they do not dismiss the stories or cast our relation to them in a solely cautionary light. The stories – of the life of Jesus, of orphans, of Don Quixote, of saints, the children and witches in fairy tales, the almost-stories of nursery rhymes and songs – show up with some mysteriousness. The child characters who come across them will often construe them in an odd way or return to them repeatedly in efforts to interpret and digest them. Erpenbeck's nameless girl watches a film incorporating a fairy tale that

makes her cry, until she notices the other children laughing at the moments when she cries (Erpenbeck, 36-7). The child narrator in *The Book of Words*, sitting in church, takes off from 'In the beginning was the word' (John 1:1) with the following line of thought:

Up in front, Jesus is nailed to the cross. The man in the pulpit is telling the story of Creation, and if I understand correctly, what happened was that reality filled God's words to the brim with all the things God spoke of when he still had no one to talk to but himself: The trees grew into his word tree, the fish swam after his word fish and quickly slipped into it between scales that were already there from his speaking of scales ... (Erpenbeck, 171-2)

The child's line of thought in part puts the New and the Old Testament stories, John's Gospel and Genesis, into unexplained contact, as she repeatedly notes the visual image of the crucifixion narrative while trying to follow the sermon. The idea that trees and fish fill words with reality seems to offer solace, as a solid meeting of speech and reality, albeit not quite making sense of God as creating the trees and fish. But this idea is unravelled throughout the novella, as the child, for instance, reaches the thought that,

Since the railway has been abolished, words can run away from their things in all sorts of ways, they can hide in the underbrush or the mountains. Trees, fish and birds stand in silence somewhere while someone who possibly has never seen them before is talking about them, or someone who has seen them neglects to bring them up. (Erpenbeck, 173)

The child raises the possibility that the words people use do not show what they know, both because people speak in ignorance and because they fail to speak of what they do know. She thus summons up the potential for fear and cowardice, and negligence and neglect in one's use of words. The child doggedly repeats the shifting stories and increasingly fragmentary words used with regard to people who surface and disappear in her life.

Meanwhile, Coetzee's titles as noted above make the reader try to connect what they know of the Biblical stories of Jesus to the characters and events of the novels, and I will here mainly assert that it is a persistent question how to do that. It feels like there is significance in the contrasts and echoes between the emblematic life of Jesus, heading toward a crucial climax and radical transformation, and the life of the young David, in which states of low-key, cobbled-together equilibrium are punctuated by hasty, scrabbling responses to bureaucratic threats. There are moments of transport and possibly transformative experience in the novels, and David is repeatedly treated as 'special', but the prospect of his life story becoming an emblematic one (such that people could fruitfully ask, 'What would David do?') seems remote. The story that is most prominent for the child character David, *Don Quixote*, prompts a somewhat heated argument between David and Simón, when David insists on reading or 'reading' *Don Quixote* in his own idiosyncratic fashion, without being able to understand the letters and words (Coetzee 2013, 160-6).<sup>10</sup> Simón is driven to say, dourly, that, "For real reading you have to submit to what is written on the page" (165). Coetzee puts the child's and adult's conceptions of learning to read into conflict, so that the reader cannot simply construe this apparently constructive, empowering process as an innocuous one.

The broad point that I hope these examples help to flesh out is that these works engage with the inheritance of stories in a tremendously conscious and awkward, yet not immediately subverting mode. The stories are in a way built into reality, especially as the child characters come across them, as common 'stuff' that people in their worlds know about and refer to casually. The origins of the stories are usually not explained to or understood by the child figures. So far that suggests the stories could be showing up in the ordinary, accepting mode of 'shadows'. However, the role and

value these stories have for the characters is made to be a wonderfully interesting question. The child characters sometimes raise these questions for themselves, as they stumble over some feature of a story or their larger encounter with it (is this to be cried over or laughed at? what does creating a world out of words have to do with someone being nailed to a cross? why do I have to read words at all?). Occasionally the adult figures are pressed to respond to the children's questions, whether about 'made-up' stories (you are *not* reading *Don Quixote*), or about the relation between stories and 'real life' (when we do not know our own past, we have to tell a story about it). The reader is privy to all of this, as well as to the mixed questions that spill out of these works, not able to be confined to the characters' horizons of experience and concern: what makes a character implausible and how does that affect what we do with such a character? what makes someone an orphan and how should an orphan-story go? do different stories 'meet' intelligibly – can they be related, compared, and overlaid in meaningful ways? These are all ways in which the 'shadow' presence of the stories becomes less simply given and more a matter of interlocking layers of questions.

#### 4. Stories and *in medias res* ethical education

These works at various levels press the idea that it is not settled how one incorporates a story into one's own resources.<sup>11</sup> The characters and the readers to some degree take in and work with the stories at hand and to some degree are unsettled about the meanings, purposes, and responses that can be understood and relied on in grasping these stories. A point that Kathryn Morgan makes about Plato's use of myths (though not directly about the cave allegory) seems pertinent here: Plato encourages Socrates's interlocutors (and his own readers) 'to become aware of varying levels of discursive seriousness and commitment to truth' (Morgan, 167).<sup>12</sup> That methodological project is not aimed directly at undermining one's confidence in stories, but aims at making one more aware of the possible functions of stories. In what particular way is a story serious or playful, or serious *and* playful? Taking up Erpenbeck's and Coetzee's works, we are encouraged to ask such things as whether negligence or fear could explain what is and is not said in a story, and whether a story can legitimately fill in the gaps when knowledge and memory fail. This kind of questioning might well lead one to start distrusting a given story, but not because one has reason to see oneself as disoriented by all stories. Plato's own allegory is an element in a larger work containing various kinds of discourse, including argument, imagery, more story-telling, and the ongoing dramatization of conversation, and in this respect the *Republic* is similar to the Erpenbeck and Coetzee works. They all give their audiences a mixture of modes, an encounter with different kinds of sources, highlighting the need to think about the possibilities for using discourse in orienting and disorienting ways. Perhaps this sounds like an overly subtle distinction between kinds of unsettling effects: seeing and being motivated by a vision of one's story-laden disorientation versus halting uncertainly over the features and functions of stories. I agree that these effects might feel somewhat similar in one's psychological-epistemological reckoning, but I want to make a case for the relevance of the latter, more tentatively disrupting model, specifically with respect to ethically meaningful stories.

Let's suppose that an ethically meaningful story is, very broadly, one that takes people's efforts to live good lives as a central concern. The story somehow crucially incorporates that kind of effort into its descriptive and narrative elements. I have assumed in this essay, following Plato and Lear, that this can be done badly, in a misleading, disorienting way.<sup>13</sup> I am also assuming that it is easily possible to have soaked up such ethically misleading, disorienting stories in an uncritical fashion. However, it also seems plausible to assume that stories that take hold in people, especially the ones that have gripped people for a long time, do so because of some interesting relationship between what the stories offer and what people can be moved by. This is not at all to deny the

possibility of criticism and change, but one could not, for instance, simply reject patriarchal story-patterns without trying to grasp why they have been able to take hold and what might be relevant to uprooting and revising them. There is rich data, relevant to people's needs, hopes and tendencies toward affiliation, available in stories. So that is one reason to pause over the rejection of problematic stories.

A perhaps more controversial claim is that there must be some continuity between the old and the new-and-improved stories, with respect to ethical meaning. What I mean by that, in one way, takes Plato's worry about stories very seriously: the conceptions of reality and of what is good and worth seeking that can be held within stories are indeed likely to have been formative influences. They are not external visions of ethical possibilities, but are – at least to some degree, with respect to some stories and story-patterns – expressive of our ethical state-of-play. To the extent that they embody and explore what can make sense to people as ethically good and bad efforts in living, they have to be used as materials for *in medias res* processes of reflection and change. We cannot simply start over ethically, with a blank slate, because that would mean rejecting ourselves and trying to tell and entrench stories that mattered to utterly different beings. At least something about who we are and what concerns us needs to be taken to matter, to be worthy of concern, for ethical criticism and re-formation to have a point.

Perhaps this claim also commits me to expecting that there is a thread of ethical meaning worth clinging to in all stories, if there is to be a way to move from the old to the new with continuity.<sup>14</sup> Can we bring a minimal, quite abstract ethical non-cynicism to stories, as long as we take on board the caution with stories and the difficulty of knowing what they offer us that are suggested in the works of Plato, Erpenbeck and Coetzee? I do not mean that each story has to succeed in offering a (possibly slight or partial) vision of what one can in fact take to be good; the thread might rather be an insight into what people have been able to find good, the story allowing that finding to become to some degree intelligible. Facts about what people have been able to find good should be approached as fascinating and important, and not to be discarded without deep attention. A thoroughgoing cave allegory for ethical reality is actually hard to imagine, if it means taking people to have little or no access to what can matter positively and otherwise to themselves. While Socrates highlights the challenge facing the transformed, returning cave-dweller who debates morality with former peers, those 'whose terms are the conceptions of morality held by people who have never seen morality itself' (*Rep* 517e), I think the 'shadow' morality cannot be completely irrelevant to or disjoint from 'sun-lit' morality. If the shape of something worth calling ethically meaningful life did not show up in some way, even in the shadow patterns, there really would be no basis for conversation with the returning visionary.

A related but pragmatically directed claim is that new stories, if they are to have an impact, must have threads we can grasp and possibly be moved by (as the allegory of the cave needs its audience to have some experience of varying perspective and limited understanding). The purely suspicious story would have difficulty giving us anything to attach ourselves to. This is to say roughly that even stories hoping to uproot old stories have to risk some failure of distance from the old stories, in order to make contact with audiences who are partially formed by those stories. The Erpenbeck and Coetzee works strike me as having some wisdom about taking this risk. They seem able to register the fact that, for better and for worse, a host of simple, complex, disturbing, beautiful, mysterious stories have been and are powerful for beings like us, and they let that fact show up in their own story environments.

## 5. Conclusion

Let me conclude with some brief remarks about how the Erpenbeck and Coetzee works handle the difficult project of *in medias res* ethical story-telling. In offering experiences of intermittent or impure allegory, they make readers ask over and over, 'what else is being said here?' and 'why is this story being told in this way?'. But they do not convey assurance that all the story elements can be mapped onto a unifying point or set of claims. In this respect they seem, in sympathy with Plato and Lear's argument, not to trust us to be fully immersed in a fictional world. We are capable of soaking up ethically noxious and distorting ideas, perspectives and dispositions from stories, and strategies for exposing and questioning what we have already soaked up are needed.

Erpenbeck, for instance, tells an orphan story that does not respect the pattern of striving and values that we so enjoy in works such as *Jane Eyre*. The story-form of individual maturation and achievement of freedom and happiness is present in readers' thinking but is not able to take hold in the frame Erpenbeck provides. We have to think about why it does not. The novella gives its child character a 'failure' to form dominance-seeking, moral judgement-making, and retaliatory impulses, and this leaves readers to wonder what non-institutional life could be, such that a child could treasure the extremes of non-status and non-reactivity that Erpenbeck's character achieves in the 'Home for Children'. The orphan story can be turned into a story in which there is no safe and good alternative, inside or outside the 'Home', and in which what is taken to be safety and goodness by a child figure cannot be accepted by the reader as ethically decent enough. The vulnerability and the striving for happiness that make sense of *Jane Eyre* and *Oliver Twist* as characters are not thereby discarded, but the new story can make a reader unsatisfied with the assumptions about or the scope of what is relevant to vulnerability and happiness, as envisioned in the earlier stories.

When Coetzee and Erpenbeck summon up Biblical and more broadly Christian stories (as in the lives of the saints and stories of miracles), I would again say that these are not summoned up in order to be dismissed. They have to be paused over to consider such things as what they say and omit, what human practices they have served, why they have spoken to people, what questions they still pose, what they leave obscure, as well as directly questioning their ethical limitations and harmfulness. Coetzee's novels make the notion of an emblematic life story, one that could be an ethical inspiration and guide to others, seem neither especially promising nor wholly mistaken. The father figure, Simón, is influenced by his son's not-clearly-followable example. The child's surprising enthusiasms and lack of concern for fitting into an uninspiring society, while not amounting to an ethical guide, still seem to mark out in an exemplary way the possibility of a recalcitrant, passionate, goodness-seeking life. Erpenbeck's attention to Biblical affirmations of a perfect relation between God's mind, words and world seems to acknowledge appreciatively that people have wanted to trust this relation. The child narrator's unfolding discovery that words are used radically differently, to neglect, hide and deny reality (as when the bodies of torture victims are cast as angels falling from the sky (Erpenbeck, 123)), indeed casts an awful light on the claim that 'the word is made flesh'. But the aspiration to use words in a way that meets reality in an ethically responsible way is both in the Biblical narrative and drives Erpenbeck's narrative.

Finally, the device of the child as a narrative focus is central to how these works provide unsettling encounters with an inheritance of stories. These figures are not particularly life-like or endearing child characters. They seem to be rather deliberately offered as beings in the process of social formation, devices for staging the encounter with ethically freighted stories and traditions. The child interlocutor or narrator allows things to be thought, said and done that show ignorance and incomprehension. When adults try to explain or help, their explanations and interventions often simply feed the child's bafflement or distress. The adult reader may remember the pressures to adapt and claim comprehension that children can feel, but may also feel uncomfortably affiliated with the adult characters' variously helpless, plodding, earnest, obscuring or ethically bankrupt

positions. The child characters have an ethically amorphous quality, and in this way they can signal the non-obviousness of ethical ideas and commitments. They are learning about the cave, as it were, but they do not yet take what they are given as real or comprehensible. The question of whether the ongoing form of life is an ethically decent one is open – the child does not have reason either to accept or deny it, but is still coming to know its terms and expectations.

The devices considered here – the quality of intermittent allegory, the explicit reference to an inheritance of stories, and the figure of the child in ethical formation – cannot offer a fool-proof strategy for exposing entrenched, ethically freighted stories to critical scrutiny. But I think they show Erpenbeck and Coetzee taking Plato's worry to heart and trying out strategies that make sense, given the need to meet their audiences in the middle of their story-laden formation.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>1</sup> These works give very interesting attention to their child figures' formal educations, often highlighting mismatches between schools' efforts to train and educate and how the children experience those efforts. See, for example, Erpenbeck's *The Old Child*, pp. 24-7, and *The Book of Words*, pp. 125-7, and Coetzee's *The Schooldays of Jesus*, pp. 38-52.

<sup>2</sup> Philosophers writing about emotional response to fiction often discuss this complex power. See Jenefer Robinson (2005), Chs. 4-7, on the rich bases for emotional engagement with literature; Noël Carroll (1997) on criterial prefocusing of responses and the way a work can help one form 'convictions about what outcomes one would ... prefer to obtain' (205); and Susan Feagin (1996) on the shifts, slides, and sensitivities triggered when reading that can involve 'changes in mood, attitude, perspective or point of view, as well as the adoption of a new set of values and objectives' (64). Feagin's larger argument stresses that such experience encourages flexibility, rather than construing it as entrenching problematic baggage.

<sup>3</sup> I note here some relevant texts that can steer researchers to this larger context: Wayne Booth 1988 and Martha Nussbaum 1990 are tremendously influential works that put ethical concerns with fiction into the centre of conversation. Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen 1994 and Andrew Gibson 1999 offer very different critical responses to views such as Nussbaum's. Noël Carroll 2000 gives an excellent guide to philosophical debates on art and ethics. John Gibson 2007 and Joshua Landy 2012 develop views about the ethical potential of fiction while avoiding 'moral message' views. Eleonore Stump 2010 includes discussion of the powers of narrative with specific attention to Biblical parables. Sarah Worth 2017 responds to contemporary sceptical arguments about the benefits of reading. Tzachi Zamir 2007 develops a general account of moral learning from literature and applies it to Shakespeare. There is rich ethically focused writing on J. M. Coetzee, including the essays in Anton Leist and Peter Singer 2010 (including one by Jonathan Lear). Also of interest, philosopher Thomas Wartenberg has developed resources for using children's literature to teach philosophy, including ethical issues (<https://www.teachingchildrenphilosophy.org/>).

<sup>4</sup> The Noble Lie presents our childhood education as a dream experienced while really we were being formed under the earth, by divine forces, out of ores of different qualities (*Rep* 414b-415d).

<sup>5</sup> See Plato's discussion, shortly after presenting the cave allegory, of problems attending radical, rational demolition of a person's ethical code: "'Now, when he's changed his mind about what to respect and about his former familiar code,' I said, 'and at the same time can't discover the truth, where can he turn?'" (*Rep* 538e).

<sup>6</sup> Roger Bellin on *The Childhood of Jesus* in the *Los Angeles Review of Books*: 'It's a compelling and confounding work of political philosophy wrapped in a less compelling, even seemingly intentionally

flat, work of fiction, one that falls somewhere between episodic and plotless. The strongest sensation one has while reading is puzzlement, the sense that the story is a cipher whose key has been lost' (Nov. 6, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Erpenbeck's *The Book of Words* is somewhat more unclear in its anchoring details because there seem to be multiple possibilities for real-world reference, such as Argentinian disappearances, Guantanamo Bay detainees, German and European Christian and cultural traditions, and late 1970's pop music.

<sup>8</sup> Various points along with the titles summon up the Biblical family story, as, for instance, there is a non-sexual relation between the two 'parents' of David, and the family deals with it being the year of the census.

<sup>9</sup> See Paul Standish on Coetzee and moral education: 'Such shifts in perspective promise possibilities of moral education that are not exhausted, maybe they are not begun, by rational argument alone'; Standish also notes Coetzee's attention to 'the persistent background scene of our moral life and education' (Standish 2009, 39).

<sup>10</sup> He 'reads' it as including a line from an actual and strange nursery rhyme, 'There was a man of double deed' (Coetzee 2013, 165). See <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/56374/the-man-of-double-deed>.

<sup>11</sup> See Landy's notion of a 'formative fiction' (Landy, 8-19).

<sup>12</sup> See also Morgan's discussion of Plato's metaphor (from *Laws* 803b-804b), of people as puppets: 'A puppet is intrinsically a toy, but we are not sure of what type; even a toy might have a serious purpose. Constitutionally, then, we have an element of the non-serious, the untrue, the unreal in our make-up, and this entails an inversion—or at least a confusion—of normal standards of what is and is not play' (Morgan, 177-8).

<sup>13</sup> I here avoid taking a stand on tricky issues, such as whether such a story has to actively call for an ethically distorting response in its audience, and whether doing so would make it worse artistically.

<sup>14</sup> See Lear on Plato's rejection of the possibility 'that the world is essentially a bad place, an occasion for despair' (Lear, 41).

<sup>15</sup> With thanks to Elisa Caldarola, Francesco Campana, Diarmuid Costello, Mario Farina, Liam Gearon, Peter Lamarque, Christoph Menke, Stephen Mulhall, Juliane Rebentisch, Martin Seel, Paul Standish, Gabriele Tomasi, Christiane Voss, Emma Williams, and two anonymous reviewers.

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