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Morals to Maths: Plato, Coetzee and the Fiction of Education

Introduction

In J.M. Coetzee's novel *The Schooldays of Jesus* (2016), the question of finding the 'right education' for a young child is a central and recurring theme. In particular, the novel presents us with two models of maths education. One of these is a fairly recognisable practice, and involves intellectualised forms of teaching and learning abstract concepts. The other is a rather bizarre educational programme that involves a Dance Academy in which numbers are 'called down from the stars.'

Coetzee – a Nobel Prize-winning novelist – has been subject to some criticism for what has been described as a 'maddening' book about 'silly dancing' (White, 2016). Yet my paper seeks to show how Coetzee's novel opens up questions of *stasis* and *dynamis* that, in turn, have important implications for education. To develop my case, I shall consider Coetzee's novel in relation to certain themes from Plato's philosophy, particularly as found in *Republic*. Recently, there has been renewed discussion of the relevance of Plato for educational theoryⁱ – although Plato's philosophy is still far less prevalently discussed in educational journals than the works of his student Aristotle.ⁱⁱ Part of the aim of this paper is to add a further dimension to the growing revival of interest in Plato for education, by showing how Plato's philosophy connects with certain themes in Coetzee's literature. In doing so, I shall also be working to show how 'one of the most studied contemporary authors' (Head, 2012), whose work is generating 'a rapidly expanding field of criticism' in literary studies and philosophy, manifests a central concern with education – and in such a way that deserves to be taken seriously by educational philosophers and theorists today.ⁱⁱⁱ

At the end of my paper, I shall move to say something more generally about the way the discussion presented here serves to highlight the importance of writers of literature for education. More specifically, I shall reflect on how recent philosophical examinations of the way Coetzee's writing, 'obliges us to reflect upon what Socrates was already in *The Republic* calling the "ancient quarrel" between literature and philosophy' has significant educational implications (Haynes and Wilm, 2017, p. 1).^{iv} Coetzee's (and Plato's) work reveals the *internal* relation between philosophy and

literature. Yet the way philosophy and literature need each other and interweave with each other is something that is often suppressed in predominant arguments for the value of literature today. Better attention to their interrelation, I will suggest, opens new directions for these arguments. In particular, and as we shall come to see, it opens new ways of understanding the nature of moral education – as something broader and more pervasive than is often recognised by more familiar arguments in moral philosophy and education.

Intellectualistic Maths Education

Let us turn, then, to the examples of maths education as they are presented in Coetzee's *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Both of these involve the experiences of a young child named David, who is being looked after by a man named Simón and a woman called Ines, after they all arrive to set up life in a new country. As in the case of the real Jesus, they seem to be fleeing something and to be wary of contact with the authorities.

The first example comes near the start of the novel. Simón and Ines decide to appoint a tutor for David, so that he might continue his education in the city into which have recently moved (David previously attended a mainstream school in another city, but he did not get on well there, and the family fled after David was threatened with exile to a 'remedial school'). The tutor who is appointed, Señor Robles, conceives teaching in terms of 'instilling the elements in a young mind' (Coetzee, 2016, p. 26. Robles suggests that what is first needed is to firmly lay foundations, after which 'we will be ready to erect our mathematical edifice on them' (p. 29). In Robles' first lesson, he seeks to put his method into practice by teaching David 'what is two?':

From his breast pocket Señor Robles takes two pens and places them side by side on the table. From another pocket he produces a little glass bottle, shakes out two white pills, and places them beside the pens. 'What do these' – his hand hovers over the pens – 'and these' – his hand hovers over the pills – 'have in common?'

The boy is silent.

‘Ignoring their use as writing instruments or medicine, looking at them simply as objects, is there some property that these’ – he shifts the pens slight to the right – ‘and these’ – he shifts the pills slightly to the left – ‘have in common? Any property that makes them alike?’

‘There are two pens and two pills’, says the boy.

‘Good!’ says Señor Robles.

‘The two pills are the same but the two pens aren’t the same because one is blue and one is red.’

‘But they are still two, aren’t they?’

‘Two. Two for the pens and two for the pills. But they aren’t the same two.’ (p. 28).

Their exchanges goes on in much the same way for some time, with Señor Robles getting increasingly frustrated with David. What is at stake in this, and in the example of maths education we are being given? One thing we might say here is that Señor Robles’ foundational approach largely involves making classifications. More specifically, Robles teaches ‘two’ by asking David to identify the relevant distinguishing characteristics (numerical identity) and to compartmentalise. This is, in turn, achieved through processes of abstraction: by thinking in ways that move beyond particular instantiations of objects (such as red and blue pens) and towards a universal idea or category (that of ‘pen’ in general and then ‘item’ in general). Robles’ slow and self-conscious bodily expressions in trying to encourage such ways of thinking relay the sense that he sees such practices as highly profound and to be revered. There is a certain savouring of abstraction and generalisation being exemplified here.

This is further borne out later in the novel when Robles comes to associate the capacity to ‘see objects as members of classes’ as the very foundation of thinking (p. 30). Notably, Robles also further relates this ability to our capacity for language (p. 30-31). Language, like maths, is hereby portrayed as a tool that allows us to chop up and split up the world. Hence the word ‘pill’ is understood to be a label or marker that can stand and cover a range of different singular objects. Yet David causes a problem for Robles’ smooth picture of inculcation into the established categories and sets. He does not ‘go on’ in the intended way (‘two, but they aren’t the same two’).

Robles subsequently diagnoses David with having a ‘cognitive defect’ (p. 30). After this, David’s education becomes the responsibility of the Academy of Dance. Here, the boy learns maths in a different way, from the beautiful dancer Ana Magdalena and her husband the composer Juan Sebastian Arroyo.

Dance and Maths Education

As I stated in the introduction, the second model of learning maths that we find in *The Schooldays of Jesus* presents us with a much less familiar picture. Coetzee forewarns us of this irregularity, and in their first visit to the Academy, Simón and David are told that this ‘is not a regular school’: ‘it is an academy dedicated to the training of the soul through music and dance’ (p. 43). In an evening recital for parents, Ana Magdalena explains the philosophy behind the Dance Academy further, and in ways that reveal something of the connection between maths and dance being conceived here:

Uno-dos-tres: is this just a chant we learn at school, the mindless chant we call *counting*; or is there a way of seeing through the chant to what lies behind and beyond it, namely the realm of the numbers themselves ... Our Academy is dedicated to guiding the souls of our students toward that realm, to bringing them in accord with the great underlying movement of the universe, or, as we prefer to say, the dance of the universe [...]

To bring the numbers down from where they reside, to allow them to manifest themselves in our midst, to give them body, we dance. Yes, here in the Academy we dance, not in a graceless, carnal, or disorderly way, but body and soul together, so as to bring the numbers to life. As music enters and moves us in dance, so the numbers cease to be mere ideas, mere phantoms, and become real ...

In the dance we call the numbers down from where they live among the aloof stars. We surrender ourselves to them in

dance, and while we dance, by their grace, they live among us. (p. 68).

Clearly, the practices of the Dance Academy are in contrast with the more familiar approach enshrined in the teaching of Señor Robles. But what does it advocate instead? At the very least, the practices of the Dance Academy appear to be strange and mystical. In fact, Coetzee even seems to tempt us with the image that this is just mystification – the product of bizarre eccentrics (it is perhaps not too much of a stretch to imagine a ‘zany’ drama or dance teacher coming up with a similar kind of idea). David’s non-biological father, Simón feels a degree of scepticism, as he listens to Ana Magdalena, about what is being proposed by the Academy’s philosophy: ‘*The training of the soul. He touches Inés’ arm*’ (p. 43). Yet, by all accounts, the boy David comes to flourish at the Dance Academy. Furthermore, at the end of the book, Simón himself seeks lessons from the Dance Academy. Taken in one way, the alternative model of maths education we are presented with appears to be just a form of mysticism. But is it also possible to see in this something else?

It may be helpful at this point to register the possible connection with a well-known historical debate about maths education. Part of progressivism’s concerns during the 1960s were that children in schools were learning a number calculations such as $8 \times 8 = 64$ in parrot fashion, because they had spent the morning chanting their eight times table with others in class. However, what they memorized remained empty for them: they had no sense of how they might apply this in life – in, for example working out the area of a floor; nor did the number relationships mean anything to them in abstract terms. Thus there was a sense that children were being rushed ahead with acquiring the ability to repeat calculations but without appropriate understanding of what they were saying or the ability to apply those calculations. The numbers were coming to be nothing much more than repeated phrases, without the conceptual understanding that was needed. [I think the children were in a sense worse than calculating machines. The programming of machines enables them to do calculations that are much greater than normal human beings can do (at least to do them more quickly). So the machine’s 8 times 8 is logically connected to (4 time 2) times (1+1+1+1+1+1+1+1), etc. Yet Progressivism is itself problematic on account of its somewhat romanticised conception of childhood and the learning process – and the kind of easy relativism into which it seems to slide.

Does the Dance Academy model a *different* kind of maths education – something that goes beyond both intellectualism *and* progressivism? To approach this thought, consider how dance might itself be understood as another way in which number relations are realised. Put otherwise, consider how dance itself involves patterns and rules and counting. These are not, notably, patterns that are to be followed in a purely *cognitive or cerebral* way. While a novice dancer may well be counting in their mind the steps being performed in a sequence, part of what it is to be an expert dancer is that you lose yourself or get into the flow of the movement. There is, we might say, a *dynamism* in the relation to number that takes place in dancing. The patterns and number sequences are felt by the body, are lived. Señor Robles' approach to maths education exemplified intellectualised or cognitive modes of abstraction. There is something fixed and static in this. Does the *dynamis* of the Dance Academy recover something important that is lost or exorcised in Robles' approach? Are there implications in this for educational thinking – about the teaching and learning of maths, and beyond?

A Standard Reading of Plato

Where is Plato in relation to this? In a recent paper on *The Childhood of Jesus* (the prequel to *The Schooldays of Jesus*), Stephen Mulhall has claimed that the presence of Plato is 'hard to miss' (2017, p. 114). In particular, Mulhall notes how Coetzee's novel embeds in the novel certain arguments put forward in Plato's *Republic*. Now, in *Republic* Socrates sets forth in words a vision of the *polis* and the ideal city. *Kallipolis* will have the education of members of the city as chief among its concerns, not for 'the special welfare of any particular class ... but ... the society as a whole' (Plato, 2012, 519e). Appropriate structures and models of education are thus a central and recurring theme within this text. In light of this, it is not too far-fetched to suppose that *The Schooldays of Jesus* may itself continue to engage with Platonic ideas – and we might even envisage *prima facie* how these underpin the different models of maths education we have been considering hitherto. Note, for example, how in being 'dedicated to guiding the souls of our students' towards 'the realm of the numbers themselves', the Dance Academy appears to gesture towards one of the most famous educational images found in *Republic*: the theory of Forms. But let us approach such claims a little more slowly.

Part of the reason for exercising caution here is that, in my view, there are two versions of Plato (and the theory of Forms) at work in *The Schooldays of Jesus*. Coetzee is in effect inviting consideration of differing interpretations. One kind of interpretation, for example, is the kind we get when reading the theory of Forms in connection with another famous educational image presented in *Republic*: the Divided Line. Let us briefly see how this works. Socrates introduces the image of the Divided Line in *Republic* as an account of the process of education (Plato, 2012, 509d-511e). The Line works like a diagram, which separates four different cognitive stages and the objects of knowledge that correspond to them. Yet these are not developmental stages *à la Piaget*. Whereas Piaget's stages are ways of thinking that the child passes through and overcomes, the Divided Line also provides a more static categorial delineation of the different kinds of knowledge that are available to human beings. At the bottom segment of the diagram drawn by the Line is illusion (*eikos*) and representation, which corresponds to our knowledge of objects in the sensible world. These are positioned lower for Plato by virtue of the way what we are experiencing with our senses is changing and perspectival. Higher up the Line is mathematical thinking (*logismon*), which involves detached and abstract thinking about formulae, rules, shapes, and numbers. The image of the Line, in this way, renders a hierarchy of ways of knowing the world, in which abstract and detached categories are seen as more 'true' and valuable than knowledge of particular, lived reality.

On the basis of this interpretation, we might go back and consider how the Divided Line could be seen as informing Señor Robles' conception of maths education. For Robles, as we have seen, learning maths involves training the mind to abstract and detach from particular instantiations of given objects – it is a matter of accessing general ideas by means of the intellect and reason. Moreover, as we have also seen, Robles accords such abstract rationality *priority* over other ways of thinking – he savours it, and takes it to be 'foundational' to the human being. On a standard reading of Plato, he too espouses a narrow and intellectualistic conception of education – and of the human being more generally – wherein cognitive ratiocination is prioritised over other ways of thinking and knowing. Is it merely incidental, then, the world in which the characters of *The Schooldays of Jesus* live is one in which 'human desires are firmly under the control of reason'; it is 'a world in which storms of passion have been exiled' (Mulhall, 2017, p. 115)? Perhaps the

world Coetzee creates – as well as characters such as Robles – serve to caricature Plato’s image of *Kallipolis*, where the just society and human life is seen to be the life presided over by reason. It *is* supposedly the life of reason.

Mark Jonas (2016) has recently argued that Plato’s philosophy seems ‘unattractive’ to modern educational thinkers. He contrasts this with positive attention that Aristotle’s philosophy, and particular his virtue ethics, has received in Anglophone philosophy of education and moral education. Jonas suggests that one of the main problems educational thinking today is precisely to do with Plato’s apparent centralisation of reason and the intellect.^v In addition to this, Jonas also argues that there are further reasons why Plato’s philosophy seems unattractive to modern educators. This picks up on a further aspect of the Divided Line we have not yet considered. For maths is not, in fact, the highest segment of the diagram. Rather, it is ‘intelligence’, wherein the mind contemplates ‘the Forms’. On a standard reading, the Forms are eternal, unchanging, perfect models for all that exists in the sensible world. The Forms, read in this way, present a metaphysics of a truer, purer world, ‘elsewhere’ to the sensible world we inhabit, and accessible only through the intellect. For Jonas, this bizarre apparent metaphysical commitment serves to make Plato’s philosophy ‘preposterous’ to the modern reader concerned with education, and understandably so. I noted at the outset of this section that the philosophy of the Dance Academy appears to invoke the theory of Forms. If this is right, and if the standard reading of Plato is correct, then it would seem there are some problems with my claim that Plato’s philosophy can help to give critical substance to a positive picture of what is happening in Coetzee’s academy. For does Plato’s philosophy not serve to make the practices of the Dance Academy sound all the more mysterious? But this depends upon our accepting the standard reading of Plato and the Forms. Should we accept it? Or might we – via Coetzee – come to approach another interpretation of Plato?

Another Reading of Plato

To answer these questions, let us introduce a further image of education outlined in *Republic* – and perhaps the most well-known and influential of those we have considered so far: the Cave allegory (Plato, 2012, 541a-521b). [The allegory proceeds like this: imagine a group of prisoners](#) who have since childhood been bound in a cave-like dwelling, bound and positioned so that they can only look ahead of them

and cannot turn their heads round: all they see are the shadows on the back wall. Behind them (they cannot see it) is a fire. In front of the fire some people manipulate puppets and other manufactured figures. All that the prisoners can see are the shadows these figures cast on the wall in front of them. The prisoners think this is all there is. They naturally take the shadows of the manufactured objects for truth. Now imagine what it would be like if one prisoners was set free and was suddenly forced to stand up, twist their neck, try to walk, and look towards the source of the light. The prisoner is in pain, confused by the puppets. He is dazzled by the light of the fire and wants to go back to the shadows and the things he can see. But imagine that this person is then taken up the steep slope, 'suffering and complaining as he was dragged along' (516a). He ascends upwards, past the puppeteers, towards the world outside the cave. When he reaches the mouth of the cave his eyes are filled with beams and he cannot see a single thing. But, in time, he will come to adjust. At first he will only see shadows and reflections in the world outside the cave but, over time, he will start to be able to look at things themselves, and even at the sun itself, source of truth and goodness.

As Glaucon (one of Socrates' interlocutors in *Republic*) registers, the Cave is a strange and surreal story (515a). What does it represent? There is not just one answer. On a standard reading the Cave is to be understood as re-figuring the image of the Divided Line, and as representing education as a path upward from darkness to light, concluding in a perfect state of perception and comprehension of the Forms. Yet the standard reading is not wholly adequate. The image of the Cave also differs from what is presented by the model of the Divided Line in significant ways. For one, and as Stanley Rosen has pointed, the Cave appears to give us much more detail about the educational process for the human being than the Divided Line. The Cave portrays 'a drama of how the human soul stands with respect to education and the lack of it' (2005, p. 269). Stanley Cavell registers a similar point in highlighting how the prisoners in Plato's Cave allegory initially have to 'turn themselves around and face the fact of their bewilderment' – a revolution that Cavell aligns with 'a reorientation of thought, and one which amounts to a reorientation (if momentarily) of one's life' (2004, p. 328). Cavell hereby invites the idea that the story of the Cave gives us something more than a diagram or system of knowledge – it is concerned with something more than 'the structure of being and cognition' (Rosen, 2004, p. 269). Socrates himself appears to point us towards this – stating as he does that

education as it is shown in the Cave is not to be understood as the process of ‘putting sight into an eye that is blind’, but is rather like ‘an eye that cannot be turned from the dark towards the bright unless the whole body turns with it; it must be turned round, together with the whole soul’ (*Republic*, 516a).

To take these thoughts further, we might consider another key difference between the Cave and the Divided Line: that the Cave story does not present a *static* image. As well as figuring an initial moment of being turned, as Cavell recognises, there is also the subsequent movement upwards and, eventually, the return or descent back down into the Cave. This last point reminds us that the summary of the Cave story I offered above was only the first half of the story. For, after he has outlined the image of the prisoner exiting the cave, Socrates then raises the possibility that the emancipated person goes back ‘and sat down once more in his old seat’ (516e). Due to this, it is difficult to adequately read the Cave story as a straightforward and ‘once and for all’ journey from ignorance to enlightenment. As Stanley Cavell puts it, ‘the repetitive call to release ourselves from fixated images does not describe a continuous direction (as demanded by Plato’s myth of the Divided Line, the companion image to the Allegory of the Cave)’ (2004, p. 328). The Cave, put otherwise, does not give us the image of a path to a *concluding* state. Rather, what is suggested is a picture of the prisoner as perpetually moving between shadows and light. This is a picture of the trajectory of human life as one of oscillations and tensions – we might say, as being internally *dynamic*.

This dynamism contrasts with the image presented by the standard reading of the Forms – in which these are taken to be static terms that exist above us in some eternal realm. At this point, however, we might well ask: is the standard reading wholly accurate? In his recent discussion, Mark Jonas works through different discussions of the Forms located within certain Platonic dialogues (*Republic*, *Phaedo*, *Phaedrus*, *Symposium* and the *Timaeus*). He convincingly argues, on the basis of this, that the standard reading which takes Plato as actually espousing the existence of some other world is overly simplistic. This is because, at the very least, the standard reading depends on the highly questionable assumption that Socrates is merely a mouthpiece for Plato’s own views. Moreover, and connected to this, the standard reading is apt to ignore what Jonas calls the ‘dramatic character of the dialogues’ – that is, it overlooks how the narrative context and embedding frame somewhat

undercut the idea that what is being put forward is being intended literally. Jonas therefore charges the standard reading with being '*overly* literal' (2016, p. 315). His own suggestion, by contrast, is that we see the Forms as embodying a kind of 'regulative ideal.' This draws on readings of Plato offered by Iris Murdoch and John McDowell, which suggest that, rather than portraying some 'literal elsewhere attained through disembodied contemplation', Plato's discussion of the Forms works as a 'metaphysical metaphor that aims to transform the reader' (Murdoch quoted in Jonas, 2016, p. 317).

I am in some sympathy with Jonas' alternative conception of the Forms. But I should also like to suggest here that we might take this picture a little further. More specifically, I would argue that the Cave allegory can change our understanding of the Forms, and can thus help to bring us towards an alternative sense of Plato. To see this, note how the Forms can be understood as being like the image of the sun in the Cave allegory. Yet the sun is not merely a static, abstract object. This can be partly understood by the fact that it is not possible to look at the sun directly. We can only feel its presence and want to turn towards its warmth. And we can only benefit from the illumination it provides insofar as there are also shadows. In this sense, the sun is less an object for our direct contemplation, than something that draws us, something we are inclined towards, but that we can never reach in itself. In a similar way, we might read the Forms, not as being static ideals that actually somehow exist and that we are trying to get to, but rather as things we live *in relation to*. The Forms, we might say, are what we are always *on the way* towards.

This way of reading the Forms and the Cave connects it to the notion of what Stanley Cavell calls 'moral perfectionism' – a sensibility that Cavell perceives in philosophers such as Emerson, Nietzsche and Wittgenstein. Cavell himself entertains the idea that there is 'an earmark of a perfectionist ambition' in Plato (Cavell, 2004, p. 317). Perfectionism is not the idea that you can reach some perfect state. Rather, it is the idea that in whatever you are doing, there is some way in which what you are doing could be improved or done better. This should be taken as a thought that has a bearing on one's life as whole, and not just on specific moments. It is not just a matter of giving yourself a hard time or self-policing, and not a recipe for neurosis: on the contrary, it is psychologically healthy and robust. Central to the notion of perfectionism is of life lived as a kind of reaching towards or being drawn

on by something. And, equally centrally, this is a recognition of the necessary *dynamism* in this – for if we were to become too fixated on or transfixed by a particular fantasy of perfection, then this would be a barrier to striving to live your life better here and now. False ideals and necessities are thus a barrier to Emerson’s call to ‘improve the hour.’ In a similar way to what is figured in the story of the Cave, the trajectory here is not of a single upward journey to a final state, but is rather a matter of oscillation – where there will always be some light and some shadow. This is the world we are living in and negotiating with, and giving ourselves to, at each moment. Reification of the Forms as some abstract ideal, such as we find in standard interpretations of Plato, obscures this. It obscures the more important image of education that Plato, like moral perfectionism, opens – as the personal struggle for something better in the light of something you cannot quite reach and understand.

Can we return to the Dance Academy, in light of these thoughts? As we initially noted, Coetzee might well be tempting us to recall the problematic senses associated with the Forms via the apparent mysticism at work in the Academy’s image of maths education. Yet, at the same time, Coetzee’s Academy also invokes the alternative version of the Forms and Plato from the one that has just been unfolding. For dancing, as we noted above, is a dynamic (rather than static and primarily cognitive) realisation of a relation to number. As the master of the Academy puts it, in dancing ‘the soul ... follows the rhythm; each step instinct with the next step and the next’ (Coetzee, 2016, p. 97). It is worth pausing over the unusual use of ‘instinct’ here – where a term more familiarly used as a noun is used as an adjective. This reminds us that an instinct is more than merely a blind or impulsive animal reaction.

Etymologically, ‘instinct’ stems from *in-stinguere*, where ‘in’ means something like *being towards*, and ‘stinguere’ means to prick. The word is also akin to *instigare* (to instigate). As an adjective, ‘instinct’ means ‘profoundly imbued’ and ‘infused.’ In this way, the Academy itself embodies the idea of being *in relation to* and *drawn by* something. This is a notion further brought out by Ana Magdalena’s claim that in dance we ‘surrender’ to numbers – ‘and while we dance, by their grace, they live among us.’ Figured here is a sense of passivity and receptiveness (indeed, the classical notion of grace is of a blessing or gift that is received without being sought or willed). This is something quite different to a relation to numbers that construes them as static, abstract objects.^{vi}

We might approach this point in another way – viz. by saying that learning in the Dance Academy has more to do with *habituation* into matters of *value*, rather than with abstract concepts that are there to be grasped in a manner that is primarily if not purely intellectual. This helps to show how we can make sense of the idea that, in dance, numbers ‘manifest themselves in our midst.’ At this point, it is worth recalling how, in *Republic*, Socrates comes to suggest that music and gymnastics are the best means of habituating the young child towards *to kalon* (that is, the good, the beautiful, the noble). Plato is here talking about the way the young child comes to learn and be disposed towards ideas that matter most in a human life, such as justice, love, and truth. Can what happens in the Dance Academy be thus seen as a model for *other* areas of education and the curriculum? In the final section of this paper, I should like to take these thoughts a little further.

Moral Education and Literature

Our discussion of the Dance Academy has just led us towards notions of justice, love and truth. Yet these are concepts that would more usually be taken to be the legitimate subject matter of what is called ‘moral philosophy’ – surely this is an area quite distinct from maths education that has been the focus of this paper hitherto? Certainly, the increasing specialisation of educational and philosophical research encourages us to think in terms of such separations and demarcations – hence the educational researcher concerned with, say, maths anxiety is likely to see their concerns as quite distinct and different in kind from those of the person concerned with the moral education. But note that such specialisation and division itself depends on *a certain understanding* of ‘morals’, ‘moral philosophy’, and ‘moral education.’ That is, it depends on taking such notions to represent a demarcated domain and field, defined and designated by reference to a system of distinctively moral concepts, moral questions, and, perhaps, a distinctive logic (which seeks to achieve consistency and uniformity in the landscape of our moral lives). But morals and morality do not have to be understood in this narrow, technical sense. There is a broader sense of morality, according to which we can see this not as a distinguishable region or strand but rather as a *pervasive dimension of life*, with value understood as going ‘all the way down.’^{vii} In this way, we can start to see how there can indeed be a moral dimension to the learning of maths (this is, after all a practice that human beings take to be of value). Moreover, we come to see, more broadly,

how the dancing to the numbers described in Coetzee's novel can be taken as a metonym for *another* kind of moral education.

What I am suggesting here is something different to the more standard arguments for the connection between literature and moral philosophy and moral education. It may be instructive at this point to acknowledge the ways that narrower conceptions of moral philosophy and moral education have turned their attention towards literature and its educative value in recent years. Two predominant arguments have emerged: (1) that literature can offer examples to illustrate cases of moral reasoning that are more vivid and more engaging than the artificial thought experiments of philosophers; (2) that engaging with literature is a way of developing forms of sympathy, empathy and attention, by encouraging learners to attend to the specificity of a particular case. There is not space here to enter further into a discussion of these positions.^{viii} Yet it is worth reflecting how far the Coetzee novel we have been considering in this paper can, at least on the face of it, fit with such arguments. For Coetzee's novel is odd. It is odd even before we have even opened the book. It is called *The Schooldays of Jesus* but there is no character called Jesus, and the central child does not seem particularly remarkable or admirable, even though he has some unusual qualities. The plot itself is only half-formed, as are the individual characters, and they do not hold great interest because they are not very easy to recognise in terms of people we might know. It is hard to say, then, that this work is offering us rich exemplars or is appealing to our sympathies. Are there, then, no lessons from literature?

Not at all. Yet the relation between literature and education needs to be conceived differently. Coetzee's novel brings to light questions about knowledge and receptivity, and what it is to be. It is a kind of fable, but it raises questions about education and the substance of learning and teaching. These thoughts could not easily be articulated in a purely prosaic way, that is, in a conventional academic paper. Coetzee's novel is not a mere representation or reflection of predefined concepts and theories. It does not serve 'as a reminder of what we already know only too well' (Attridge, 2004, p. 43). The style raises questions about thinking, and about education.

Such thoughts may be extended, as we have done previously in this paper, by juxtaposing our discussion of Coetzee with a consideration of Plato. Indeed, it may

be said that *Republic* draws us in to similar issues. For why does Plato present his ideas in *Republic* in the form of a dialogue? Why does his text include imagery and allegory, a variety of fictive or semi-fictive characters who have their own personalities, and a narrative structure? It would be a mistake to think that this is simply to make the ideas more engaging or apparent to the reader. For these 'literary' features appear to ironically undercut a number of *literal* claims made in the text. Most notably, they serve to subvert Socrates famous 'banishment' of literature itself from *Kallipolis*, and the hierarchy ostensibly created by the Divided Line wherein philosophical practice is associated with contemplation of the ideal Forms (true knowledge), and literature is concerned with the mere representation of sensible things (and is thus '*two* removes from the truth', given that sensible things are already but copies of the true Forms). Plato's style, in this sense, raises the possibility that philosophy and literature can never entirely be kept apart. To put it more strongly, it raises the idea that, without literature, philosophy is at risk of becoming too narrowed, intellectualistic, and literal. Is it merely incidental, then, that the empty, curiously vacant, and pointedly underdescribed world that Coetzee's *Jesus* novels depict is itself one in which what is sold as 'literature' is confined to technical manuals and guidebooks: '*Teach Yourself Carpentry, The Art of Crocheting, One Hundred and One Summer Recipes*, and so forth' (Coetzee, 2013, p. 179)?

In this way, we come to see how the 'ancient quarrel' between philosophy and literature is important and significant for the conception of moral education I am trying to advance in this paper. And perhaps we can risk taking these thoughts a little further here. For it might be said that what Coetzee and Plato's invocations of the 'ancient quarrel' bring us to see is the centrality of the question of *language*. Let me explain. Traditionally, at least in some quarters, philosophy is understood as being in the business of assessing 'propositions'. The interest philosophers take in language, therefore, tends to focus on how such formulations as 'the cat is on the mat' or 'the bottle is on the table' maps onto actual states of affairs (and hence whether this formulation of words is true or false). In fact, this kind of conception of language made an appearance earlier in our discussion in this paper. Recall how Señor Robles' intellectualised view of maths was linked to a conception of language as what maps out and represents the world. Yet viewed in a propositional sense, language, like Robles' conception of maths, is timeless, abstract and non-contextual. Propositional uses of language, we might say, contrast with statements and

sentences (a statement is, after all, something made at a particular time and in a particular place). Statements and sentences can, in this sense, be understood as part of the very fabric of the human world. Literature is constituted by statements and sentences – and therefore exemplifies a *different* conception of language to what we find at work in (at least some areas or conceptions of) philosophy. It takes us towards the view, that is, that language is not a closed and static designative tool but is rather productive and generative of new meaning – as can be seen in the simple way that the meaning of a sentence I utter in everyday life can be taken up and interpreted in unexpected and unanticipated ways by others: its significance can extend beyond its literal truth to the context and timing of the utterance.

A consideration of language can thus help to reveal all the more critically the inadequacies with the view that philosophy and literature can be or should be kept entirely apart. For, in concerning themselves only with propositions, philosophers risk enclosing themselves in static, closed designations. How far do predominant conceptions of moral philosophy and moral education constrain themselves by an excessive focus on the propositional? Put more specifically, how far, do conceptions that take literature as being only *externally* related to philosophy (as an enrichment to a theoretical argument, for example) continue with the implicit assumption that philosophy is in the business of abstraction, intellectualism and hence *stasis*? Yet we can move beyond such constrictions – including those they bring to moral philosophy and moral education – by better attention to the *internal* relation between philosophy and literature. As I have suggested, this interweaving is borne out in the philosophical literature of Plato and the literary philosophy of Coetzee. Through them, we come to glimpse models of thinking and education that do not take their cue from abstraction and *stasis*, but rather from dynamic relations that are moral ‘all the way down.’

Coda

J.M. Coetzee excelled in both words and numbers throughout his early school life. He studied for a joint degree in Mathematics and English at the University of Cape Town. After moving to England, he secured a prestigious job as a computer programmer with IBM. During this time, Coetzee also wrote his PhD thesis, in which he attempted to put mathematical thinking into the service of literary

criticism in order to create a new form of textual interpretation called 'stylostatistics.' Yet the conclusion of his PhD was that such techniques were ultimately inadequate as a means of interpreting a text. One of the main reasons he gave was because reading was not a linear process. Coetzee also became increasingly disillusioned with his work with computers. In particular, he was worried by the threat that such 'toys' will 'burn either-or paths in the brains of [their] users and thus lock them irreversibly into its binary logic' (Coetzee, 2003, p. 160).

We cannot go too much further with biographical detail here. Yet it is worth reflecting on how the educational experiences and life trajectory of this author might itself bear out the themes being explored in this paper. Indeed, what Coetzee came to dislike about his work with computers appears precisely to be its tendency towards a narrowing and constricting of ways of thinking. His work with computers was presumably different from the experience of maths education he had had at school and at university, and it perhaps somewhat frustrated that earlier interest. And, even though he attempted to devise a system that would allow for a more systematic grasp and control of a work of literary fiction, his higher education eventually led him to recognise that such ways of thinking failed to do justice to the multi-dimensionality of the text, where language, as we saw above, goes beyond stasis and fixity. It was, notably, for his own original works of literary fiction that Coetzee eventually came to win international acclaim (he has won the Booker Prize for *Disgrace* and *The Life and Times of Michael K*, and he also received the Nobel Prize for literature in 2003). His work, in this sense, serves as a noteworthy example of the contemporary power and education of fiction. But, given what we have seen in this paper of the particular ways in which Coetzee's literature is centrally concerned with education, with refiguring the concept and remaking the practice, it is perhaps equally fitting to see it as an exemplar of the fiction of education.^{ixx}

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Redacted (2016)

Redacted (2018)

ⁱ These include, for example, Mark Jonas (2016); Yoshi Nakazawa (2017); Richard Smith, (2018).

ⁱⁱ See for example Randall Curren (2013); Kristján Kristjánsson (2005; 2014s; 2014b); Jana Noel, (1999); Suzanne Rice (2011).

ⁱⁱⁱ This is to build on recent work on Coetzee and education. For example, Michael Bell (2007) and Paul Standish (2009; 2018) discuss the educational implications of Coetzee's novels *Elizabeth Costello* and *The Lives of Animals*. Eileen John (2018) explores both *The Schooldays of Jesus* and *The Childhood of Jesus* in relation to the role of stories in ethical formation. Elsewhere, I have examined the theme of education in Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* (2018).

^{iv} See also Derek Attridge (2004) and Stephen Mulhall (2008).

^v Although I wonder how far educational thinking today really does try to think beyond this prioritisation. I discuss the predominance of 'rationalistic' conceptions of thinking in education, for example, in *Redacted* (2016).

^{vi} Elsewhere, I have explored how the theme of grace in another novel by Coetzee serves to disrupt images of the active and autonomous 'subject' who approaches and masters the world of a neutral, indifferent 'object.' A similar argument could be made here – to the effect that Plato and Coetzee's conceptions of education depend less on a hardened subject-object binary, than on a passivity that is constituted by a kind of availability to thought, and readiness for response. See Williams (2018).

^{vii} The idea of moral perfectionism, introduced earlier in this paper, would incorporate this broader sense of morality. Thus, as Cavell helps to clarify with the example of Emerson's moral philosophy:

Emersonian perfectionism does not on the whole take up front-page moral problems such as of abortion or capital punishment [rather] it informs, or is implied by, the larger portion of ways in which ordinary human beings confront and question each other's conduct and character every day, distinguishing a slap from a slug, smarting from a slight, meeting a reasonable request ungraciously ... withholding deserved praise or gratitude, withholding deserved rebuke instances of an untold number of little deaths we deliver and suffer day and night (2004, p. 317).

^{viii} An illustrative example of this would be Craig Taylor (2014). A helpful summary of the different range of arguments in this vein is provided by Nora Hämäläinen (2016).

^{ix} The word 'fiction' itself has its roots in the Latin term '*fictus*' meaning 'to form.'

^x An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain Annual Conference, New College Oxford (30th March 2019). I am grateful to the audience members for their insightful comments.