

10-1-2015

# On Alan Goldman's "Philosophy And The Novel"

Richard Thomas Eldridge

*Swarthmore College*, [reldrid1@swarthmore.edu](mailto:reldrid1@swarthmore.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Richard Thomas Eldridge. (2015). "On Alan Goldman's "Philosophy And The Novel"". *Philosophy And Literature*. Volume 39, Issue 2. 564-571.

<http://works.swarthmore.edu/fac-philosophy/441>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy at Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in Philosophy Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Works. For more information, please contact [myworks@swarthmore.edu](mailto:myworks@swarthmore.edu).



PROJECT MUSE®

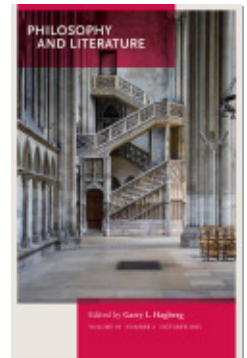
---

## On Alan Goldman's Philosophy and the Novel

Richard Eldridge

Philosophy and Literature, Volume 39, Number 2, October 2015, pp. 564-571  
(Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press  
DOI: [10.1353/phl.2015.0049](https://doi.org/10.1353/phl.2015.0049)



➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/615260>

## ON ALAN GOLDMAN'S *PHILOSOPHY AND THE NOVEL*

by RICHARD ELDRIDGE

IT IS WORTH AT least a moment to note and praise Alan Goldman's methodological stance in *Philosophy and the Novel*.<sup>1</sup> Goldman reflects appreciatively on the achievements of specific novels in order to arrive at philosophically interesting results about interpretation and moral understanding. In his appreciative reflections, Goldman is aware of, but by no means bound by, recent work in experimental moral psychology (for example, arguments against the existence of character) and metaethics (for example, standard realism/antirealism debates). The result is a powerful demonstration not only of the human, cognitive, and ethical interest of the novel but also of the ability of the novel to inform and transform our thinking about psychology and ethics.

Part I, titled "Philosophy of Novels," argues for claims about interpretation. Two main theses are prominent:

- 1) "Interpreting novels aims at appreciating their value" (p. 21).
- 2) A work distinctively possesses aesthetic value when, and only when, it invites and sustains "the full and interactive exercise of our . . . perceptual, imaginative, emotional, and cognitive . . . capacities" (p. 3).

In developing this second thesis, Goldman draws on his earlier account of aesthetic value in his 1995 book, *Aesthetic Value*. Goldman's general view about value is broadly Aristotelian: distinctive values attach to distinctive kinds of activity that we enjoy. In reading novels in particular, or at least clearly successful ones, we engage with and enjoy their "perfect union[s] of form and content, grasped through imagination, feeling,

and thought operating together” (p. 6). As these mentions of form, content, imagination, feeling, and thought indicate, Kant, Dewey, and Beardsley are also among this book’s pantheon of heroes in considering literary art.

Interpreting novels, then, is not simply a matter of semantic decoding. Nor is interpretation directed exclusively or primarily either to authorial intention “behind” the work or to formal properties detached from expressive or semantic significance. Any “thematic theses” must, if a work is “to be of literary value, . . . be embodied or woven into [its] narrative, characterization, and even setting, formal structure, and prose style” (p. 7). Both authors and readers know this, and their manners of production and reception are attuned to this requirement, at least in cases of successful writing and reading.

The interpretation of novels as works of literary art functions, then, as a kind of reverse engineering of what has been successfully achieved within the work, in analytically distinguishing the elements through which the job of embodying literary value has been done. Interpretation selects properties and guides attention to the appreciation of value (p. 23). It “aims at understanding and appreciation” (p. 24). As a kind of “inference to the best explanation” of how the task of producing a valuable, appreciable literary object has been carried out, interpretation stands between description—e.g., paraphrase of individual sentences, where meanings are readily enough agreed upon—and appreciation or felt engagement with values (p. 29). For example, in interpreting, “we must judge whether the characters in *The Sun Also Rises* morally develop by explaining for maximal appreciation the descriptions of their actions and thoughts in the text, whatever interpretation of their descriptions along these lines (if any) was intended by Hemingway” (p. 33).

Given the further assumptions that “artworks can be appreciated in different ways” and may “have potential values that cannot be realized simultaneously” (p. 38), then a third thesis immediately follows from this picture of interpretation:

- 3) “There will be incompatible interpretations or explanations [of the achievement of literary aesthetic value in a work] that appeal to different tastes or preferences for different aesthetic values” (p. 38).

Notably, Goldman treats aesthetic value *not* as a function of any more or less immediately discernible single property but rather as a complex configurational feature of works. A novel possesses aesthetic value and

displays that value to readers when and only when readers are absorbed in their attentions to a considerable range of complex interrelated semantic, formal, thematic, historical, and intertextual features, among others, in following what is going on.

This general picture of appreciation and interpretation that is developed in part 1 of *Philosophy and the Novel* strikes me as quite right-minded; in particular it strikes me as apt and useful in casting light on the importance of close reading that is fully attentive to the complexities of novels in order to engage with their value. I do, however, want to raise two questions about this picture—one about intention, and one about the object of appreciation—that might complicate it somewhat by pointing to how authors and readers alike do their work in writing and reading as agents within a complex historico-semantic field.

In general, it is well to remember both that actions are typically overdetermined by multiple intentions and that an intention is best regarded as a plan in execution, quite frequently one that is attributed retrospectively in cases in which an action has failed to come off well. To illustrate each of these points: What are my intentions in producing and presenting this set of comments? There are many: to do justice to a significant book, to advance my own thinking about the issues it considers, to forward my own reputation, to convey enough material of interest so that some will want to have a beer after the session to talk about it further, and so on.

Some of these intentions may be explicitly formulated in my consciousness; some may not be. Most are such that I would be able to acknowledge them if they were formulated and put to me, but not necessarily all are. I might be so vain about my modesty that I am unable to recognize my own vanity in speaking. Second, we are particularly likely to make claims about what was intended in cases in which something has gone wrong. For example: "Eldridge completely misunderstood the book, but he was intending to get it right."

Both these points—the overdetermination of action by intention and the frequent role of intention formulations in retrospective explanations of misfire—suggest that having and acting on intentions in general is not simply a matter of having some single and simple plan formulated in mind either prior to or after action. Goldman is right to criticize forms of intentionalism about interpretation such as that of E. D. Hirsch, for whom the meaning of a literary work pretty much is the sum of a number of explicitly formulated writer intentions that determine each of its sentences one by one, with the meaning of the work then being

nothing more than their concatenation. But it also seems to me right to say that the novel is itself a quite complexly intended object; when we are interpreting it we are redescribing it as the result of a complex plan that it both makes sense to attribute to the author and that is worked out in detail in the work. So there is a sense in which whenever we are interpreting a work we *are* attending to its author's embodied intentions, though we are of course not at all obliged to take authors' prior or subsequent obiter dicta about what they were doing in their works as dispositive.

I note that Garry Hagberg made this point elegantly in his insightful review of *Philosophy and the Novel* in citing Ornette Coleman to the effect that no matter what anyone was or was not consciously verbalizing in improvising in a jazz performance, what comes out pretty clearly falls "within the range of the idea." I am not sure that Goldman disagrees with any of this in criticizing the Hirschian form of intentionalism that he rightly rejects, but it seems worthwhile to note that, given the nature of intention, there is a reasonable picture of what we do in interpreting that might be called plausible reconstructionism about not necessarily explicit or acknowledged actualized intentionalism.

In a way, the question I want to raise about appreciation is similar. Goldman observes that "the fundamental purpose of interpretation itself [is] to guide perception toward maximal appreciation and therefore fair evaluation of a work" (p. 41). In one sense this is surely right: close reading that endeavors to track what is accomplished (or bungled) in the detailed construction of the work is a central moment of critical understanding. But there is, I think, an issue about what is inside the work and what is outside it. That is, the boundaries are not always so clear.

Consider Wordsworth's attitude toward his sister Dorothy at the end of "Tintern Abbey." He treats her there as frozen, as it were, in nature and immaturity, and as thereby able to confirm for him, in her enthusiasm for his work, his own sanity and continuing connection to nature, despite the potentially apocalyptic and world-denying power of his poetic imagination. His attitude toward Dorothy is there in the poem. It is an aspect of Wordsworth's actualized range of complex intentions. But is it only in Wordsworth? Or is it also one version of an attitude toward women and their proper role in life that was in general circulation in English culture around 1800? I think the answer has to be that it is in both Wordsworth and the general culture. So when we read Wordsworth, we are also frequently reading the preoccupations of the culture as filtered through his complex agency.

Likewise, of course, for novels. Consider Hemingway's attitudes toward masculinity. In fact, nowadays, for a variety of reasons having to do with suspicion of the very ideas of aesthetic value and literary achievement, working literary scholars are on the whole more likely to dwell on expressed cultural attitudes than on configurations that support absorbed, enchanted reading. I think it is arguable that contemporary literary scholarship goes too far in this and that it scants too much the imagination and creative power of the author to see and render things anew. But Goldman's talk of appreciation sometimes seems to me to go too far the other way, in relying on a conception of aesthetic value as determined by complex configurations that invite and sustain the full involvement of individual readers, without noting sufficiently that both readers and writers are *also* occupying stances—sometimes complacently, sometimes critically—within wider fields of attitudes in circulation in a culture.

As with the first point, I am also not sure quite how much we disagree about this. I, too, think that complex configurations that invite and sustain absorbed engagement are central to literary art and that we need to distinguish between configurations that heighten our attentions to a work's subject matters and those that are, on the other hand, clichéd or merely typical within a culture. But it seems to me that the configurations that we can and should in some sense appreciate are wider and more complex than involving elements simply inside the work, and that our stance in alert interpretation may often rightly mix appreciation and suspicion. To join this to my first question: perhaps the real focus of our interest in interpreting is not the work and its configurations alone, but the work's configurations *as* embodiments of the author's complex working through of frequently shared ambivalences in attitude, understanding, and feeling in relation to the subject matter of the work.

Part 2 of the book, titled "Philosophy in Novels," focuses on various phenomena of moral development as these phenomena are presented in novels. The central cases are *Pride and Prejudice*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Cider House Rules*, and *Nostromo*. Perhaps the most important idea is that mature moral judgment and action require all of reason-guided perception, volitional commitment, and emotional involvement (p. 112). Hence, reading a person or a situation is like reading a novel in inviting and requiring complex engagement that is all at once cognitive, perceptual, imaginative, and emotional.

Jane Austen understood all that, and she presents Darcy and Elizabeth as arriving at moral maturity through complex mechanisms

of development that involve each dimension of engagement (p. 133). Having myself written on moral development in *Pride and Prejudice* at length—work that Goldman generously footnotes—and in particular focusing on the parallel between apt reading of novels and apt reading of character that is developed within the novel, I find nothing at all to disagree with in this line of thought. We should reject a priorism in moral theory, and we should take seriously the picture of development in moral understanding from initial immaturity, egoism, and errancy to moral maturity, as Jane Austen presents it in all its dimensions.

*Huckleberry Finn* presents a trickier case. Here Goldman's main point with respect to standard moral theory is that moral motivation is not a requirement of rationality (p. 138). This has, and I think it is intended by Goldman to have, an anti-Kantian ring. The argument for this claim is that Huck *is* rational (he thinks clearly and argues things out, understands situations, and so forth) but *is not* motivated by the moral requirement to turn Jim in to the authorities. So rationality without moral motivation is possible. Here I found myself objecting that turning in Jim is not a genuine moral requirement, but rather a corrupt and bogus requirement that was generally (but not universally) held within a slave-holding society. Goldman considers this objection, and he replies to it by claiming that Huck fully accepts this corrupt social morality but is rational, so we have, again, a case of rationality without moral motivation.

But this reply misses, I think, the force of the objection. Those who do hold that moral motivation is a requirement of rationality—most prominently, many Kantians—hold that the requirement is a normative one, not a matter of factual necessity. That is, one is, according to Kant, rationally required in virtue of a command of pure practical reason to have certain normative commitments and motivations, no matter what the corrupt ways of the world may be. In fact, as Goldman also sees, Huck's various emotions about Jim and the authorities evince a less-than-wholehearted acceptance of that corrupt social morality, so that Huck is in part responding via his emotional life to a genuine, noncorrupt, moral requirement of respect for the humanity of another. Therefore the novel contains at least a thread of the idea of a general normative requirement of respect for persons along Kantian lines.

Against this thought, Goldman argues, further, that Huck is not practically irrational, where practical irrationality is understood as requiring self-defeat or a breakdown of any sustainable sense of what one is doing and ought to do (p. 152). Huck, while incoherent in



professing support for the official corrupt morality and yet feeling as he does, does not suffer from self-defeat or a complete breakdown. So he is, again, practically rational enough, but not consistently morally motivated either way. Here I think it would be better to say that Huck is *not* fully practically rational, in particular that he is not consistently practically rational in all his thoughts and pronouncements according to the normative standard of full practical rationality that is set by the categorical imperative. So Goldman's argument fails, I think, to touch the sense in which Kantians hold that moral motivation is a normative requirement of consistent practical rationality.

Both the chapter on *The Cider House Rules* and the chapter on *Nostromo* focus on the topic of "what is generally necessary for sustaining a strong moral identity [and moral] motivation" (p. 158). The core thought is that "the health and very survival of the self [are] subject to factors beyond one's control" (p. 182). This is because "an integrated self is necessary for a sense of meaning in life, meaning deriving from the coherence over time of events under one's control" (p. 185). One possesses such an integrated self when and only when "action seems self-directed, expressive of one's character, and under one's control, achieving the values pursued, and leading to fresh intentions and plans" (p. 158).

But whether all that is the case depends on what others do and find intelligible or unintelligible within one's shared social space. If things are as they are in *Nostromo* in particular, where "all [are] victims of circumstantial moral luck, [where] they betray society as society betrays them" (p. 197), and where "all personal relations among these characters fail: none is open, intimate, and successful [and] none has his identity confirmed in another" (p. 198), then the very possibilities of moral identity and integrated selfhood are corrupted and no longer accessible.

There can be little doubt, I think, that Conrad's depiction of a social world in South America under the thumb of imperialism is unremittingly bleak and that the consequences of this bleakness are exactly what Goldman says they are. To return, however, to a thought about the author, I nonetheless wonder whether *Nostromo* is best read in its social realism as entirely a counsel of despair. In particular, are we not also aware of Conrad's own fullness of attention to the social phenomena he describes, and do we not ourselves identify with that heightened authorial attentiveness? Conrad's formal and thematic achievement function, I suggest, despite the bleakness of its subject matter and plot, as themselves a kind of symbol of and placeholder for life otherwise.

In turn this suggests—as, among others, Joshua Landy has recently argued (in *How to Do Things with Fictions*, 2012)—a role in the formation of character for the reading experience itself. No doubt its role is not so great as to overcome on its own the forces of corrupt social circumstances of reading, let alone of forces due to the presence in one's life of actual others, especially parents and friends. But then it is not nothing, either.

To pull my three critical thoughts together, perhaps there is yet more to be said in favor of the importance of authorial stances, involving mixtures of heightened attentiveness and horror, achieved through and embodied in densely textured webs of words, as themselves objects of readerly engagement, and for mixtures of appreciation and suspicion within interpretation, than is quite said in this eminently humane, right-minded, careful, and imaginative book.

SWARTHMORE COLLEGE

1. Alan H. Goldman, *Philosophy and the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); hereafter cited by page numbers.