The Cosmopolitan Foundations of Ethical Criticism: Perspectives from the “East” and the “West”

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ABSTRACT

Since the late 20th century, Literature education has entered an ethical turn in response to hyper-globalization, the intensification of digital technology, the dangers of post-truth and rising instances of intolerance worldwide. Consequently, influential scholars have rekindled the age-old connection between Literature and ethics. After discussing this turn to ethics and highlighting the pedagogical cosmopolitanization of ethical criticism, this article uncovers the ways in which cosmopolitan ethics grounds recent conceptualizations of ethical criticism and its various strands—relational, analytical, and historical. This paper examines these strands drawing from both “Eastern” and “Western” philosophical traditions. It then offers responses to criticisms of cosmopolitan ethical criticism, namely, arguments concerning moral reductiveness and moral determinism. It demonstrates how these arguments paradoxically reinforce subjectivity to the exclusion of intersubjective accountability and further justify cosmopolitan ethical criticism as tied to its teleological and plurivocal purposes respectively. Cosmopolitan ethical criticism provides the critical tools needed to counter parochial meta-narratives which are essential for human flourishing via societies characterized by hospitality, empathy and inclusivity.

Keywords: Literature education, ethical criticism, cosmopolitanism, alterity, Confucian cosmopolitanism
Literature educators have often been compelled to defend and justify their discipline, unlike those teaching in the fields of Science, Technology, Engineering or Mathematics (STEM). Across the history of Literature education, various arguments have been given for its significance including the cultivation of taste as a mark of civility, the acquisition of critical and close reading skills, among others. More recently since the late 20th century, scholars and teachers of Literature once again find themselves having to justify its relevance. In this paper, I focus on English Literature (though some key ideas may apply to Literature education in other languages). I capitalize the word “literature” when referring to it as an academic subject while the non-capitalized form refers to literary texts or general literary activity.

One obvious reason is the alarming decline in Literature’s enrollment numbers in schools and colleges. Take for example courses in English Literature. Across several campuses in the United States, the number of English majors has decreased by about 30% to 50% over the last decade mirroring falling enrollments in the humanities globally (Heller “End of the English Major” para. 6). In countries previously colonized by the British where English Literature was once a core subject in the curriculum, enrollment in the subject at the high school level has fallen, with consequences on college enrollment. In Malaysia, despite the earlier popularity of the subject, there was a sharp drop from the 1970s when the medium of instruction in schools changed from English to Malay (Too “Positioning Approaches” 104). In Singapore, while 48% of the secondary school graduating cohort enrolled in the literature in English high-stakes national examination in 1992, this dropped to 9% by 2012 (Choo “Hospitable Imagination” 401). This may be partly attributed to a broader phenomenon concerning the decline in reading. The Ministry of Education has recently reported findings from the Progress in International Reading Literacy study in 2021 which show that even though Singapore students demonstrate good reading skills, there is a marked decline in the enjoyment of reading and more effort is needed to promote the love for reading (para. 9). In India, Subarno Chattarji observes that English Literature “is in a state of crisis” (“English in India” 73). Although it remains widely offered across universities, academics have raised concerns about the growing instrumentalization of the discipline where language and communicative skills have become prioritized at the expense of critical thinking.

Scholars in postcolonial contexts have sought to counter the marketization of Literature in the form of pragmatic skills and have called for a shift away from a Western-centric curriculum with greater infusion of local, regional and world literatures alongside more
cosmopolitan pedagogies that encourage constructive examinations of intercultural histories and intersections. Elsewhere, numerous books and reports have been published analyzing the state of the discipline. Some scholars have provided passionate defenses of Literature’s ethical relevance in response to the perceived infiltration of neoliberalism in education such as Martha Nussbaum’s *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. Others have called for a change of focus and methods for the future of literary studies such as a greater alignment between Literature and the study of culture and cultural production (Even-Zohar et al. “End of Literature” 27).

This present age, undergoing what has been termed the fourth industrial revolution, has seen exponential social transformations driven by increasing dependency on digital technology and artificial intelligence. Alongside the rise of post-truth, designated the word of the year by Oxford Languages in 2016, the spread of disinformation has been catalyzed by social media, fueling hate speech and extremist views. Post-truth, coupled with what is being presented as an increasingly “woke” youth connected by multiple digital networks and driven to civic participation, potentially makes youths more liable to reactive forms of “cancel culture.” In such a context, Literature education performs a fundamental role in fostering critical discernment, empathetic engagements and intersubjective relationships bounded by commitments to building just and hospitable societies. While arguments about Literature education’s value may vary from its instrumental uses of equipping students with critical interpretive skills to the provision of symbolic capital, the strongest defense for Literature education today is its ethical relevance. In the first part of this essay, I survey the turn to ethics in Literature education and highlight that it is a cosmopolitan ethics that grounds the recent emergence of ethical criticism and its various strands—relational, analytical, and historical. I examine each of these strands from the perspectives of scholars located in “Eastern” and “Western” contexts. I recognize that these contexts should not be seen as culturally monolithic and the scope of this essay is limited to philosophers from American, Chinese, and European traditions. In the second part, I argue that the pedagogical cosmopolitanization of ethical criticism is its strongest justification for Literature education as it taps on literature’s essential power in cultivating dispositions needed for the flourishing of individuals and diverse others in the world. I respond to criticisms of cosmopolitan ethical criticism and demonstrate how their arguments paradoxically reinforce subjectivity to the exclusion of intersubjective accountability. Cosmopolitan ethical criticism provides the critical tools needed to counter parochial meta-narratives which are essential if we wish to build societies characterized by hospitality, empathy and inclusivity.
THE ETHICAL TURN AND THE PEDAGOGICAL COSMOPOLITANIZATION OF CRITICISM

Concerns about declining enrollments in Literature have been counterbalanced by wide-ranging research into its connection to ethics. In the 1980s, literary studies entered what scholars have termed as an “ethical turn.” Two prominent American scholars who were catalysts to this were Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum. In many ways, their arguments caught on the wave of interest in the Reader Response Movement which gained momentum in the 1970s. Louise Rosenblatt, a key figure of the movement, has highlighted the insufficient attention paid to the reader’s active transactions with the text. Through literature, Rosenblatt argues, the reader comes into contact with diverse views about human society and partakes in conversations leading to “literary recreation” (Literature as Exploration 268) encompassing new imaginative experiences, envisioning alternative ways of life and moral choices, and new understandings of self and others. Rosenblatt emphasizes the important role that teachers play in the ethical development of students, arguing that teaching literature leads individuals to reflect self-critically on the interpretive process (The Reader 174). The intersubjective connection that literature makes with readers has been elaborated further by Wayne Booth and Martha Nussbaum. Both contribute to what I term relational ethical criticism, insofar as engagements with literature enact ethical relationships among readers, authors, fictional characters, and their real-world referents.

As the Greek etymology of “ethics” reminds us—ethikos (customary, habitual) and ethos (character)—a person’s internal character dispositions and external conduct are inseparable (Heimbach “Ethics” para. 2). To engage with ethics is thus to engage both in moral evaluations of a person’s behavior and also to connect with the person’s ethos, his/her way of being, character orientation and values. Scholars of relational ethical criticism perceive the literary text as playing a mediating role bridging relationships among author, reader, and the community of readers. Booth describes ethical criticism as encompassing “the encounters of a story-teller’s ethos with that of the reader or listener” (Company 8). Using the metaphor of books as friends, Booth compares stories to “would-be friends we meet in real life” (Way 8) by offering companionship through the sharing of experiences and by patterning our desires and gratifications. In response, readers have an ethical responsibility to stories and storytellers occurring at two levels. On one level, readers must honor “an author’s offering” (Company 136) referring to the textual lifeworld, its complexities and moral worldview, as communicated aesthetically through form and style. On another level, readers should take
a distanced, critical stance in evaluating the text for its assertions, errors, values, and ethical justifications.

Likewise, Nussbaum highlights the kind of communal connections that literature functions to serve. In *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum bases her arguments on the Aristotelian view that human beings are fundamentally social and that ethics is centered on the question “How should one live?” (23). On one level, literature is an indispensable source of insight into this question. As a cultural construct, it constitutes readers as social beings and “uses the language of community” (166) by enjoining readers with both characters and authors in bonds of community. Ethical criticism, in Nussbaum’s view, is normatively cosmopolitan in its aims. Specifically, literature and criticism cultivate the “narrative imagination” (*Cultivating Humanity* 10) that allows readers to vicariously think and perceive from the standpoint of someone else. This is essential preparation for moral interaction through instilling habits of empathy, compassion, and concern for the fate of another. On another level, readers are also drawn into a cosmopolitan civic space by inhabiting a condition of exile from their parochial views so as to see themselves as bound up with the lives of others.

Booth and Nussbaum’s contributions to ethical criticism have been supplemented by a range of books and edited volumes from the early 2000s. In particular, two edited volumes, *The Turn to Ethics* (Garber et al.) and *Mapping the Ethical Turn* (Davis and Womack), make visible the ethical turn to literature. Within the academy, a more skeptical strand of ethical criticism has emerged, which I term analytical ethical criticism. From this period, major literary scholars, predominantly affiliated with poststructuralism, have explored literature’s connections to various domains of ethics. Some examples include Jacques Derrida’s questions about cosmopolitan ethics and hospitality in his later works; Judith Butler’s analysis of the hermeneutics of violence and non-violence in relation to political-ethical conundrums following her ground-breaking work on gender; Gayatri Spivak’s reimagining of a radical alterity beyond political systems, discursive dichotomies of nation and globe, scientific rationality and myth. Many of these influential scholars were inspired by Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy of alterity. Levinas’ well-cited slogan “ethics as first philosophy” (*Ethics* 86) seeks to overturn Western philosophy’s attention to the phenomenology of being through the work of Husserl and Heidegger to the question of how being justifies itself. Specifically, being’s consciousness is not enclosed by self-awareness; rather it is primordially responsive and responsible to the other which preexists self-consciousness. “When I speak of first philosophy” (*Alterity* 97), explains Levinas, “I am referring to a philosophy of dialogue that
cannot not be an ethics. Even the philosophy that questions the meaning of being does so on the basis of the encounter with the other” (97). What Levinas proposes is a “metaethics” (Eaglestone *Ethical Criticism* 4) where alterity or a consciousness of one’s responsibility to others becomes the grounds for all other philosophical inquiries. Thus, aesthetic pleasure is not directed towards the affirmation of the ego but emerges through encounters with the other that become the determining point for literary inquiry and dialogue. In this sense, analytical ethical criticism is driven by a cosmopolitan ethical impulse where analysis arises from a concern about the propensity for discourse to perform hermeneutical violence and objectifications of the other.

Such a move is aligned with Levinas’ skepticism towards art, including literature, which for him can serve as instruments of ontology perpetuating “a philosophy of power... a philosophy of injustice” (*Totality and Infinity* 46). Yet, cosmopolitan ethics expressed as ethical responsibility to the other fundamentally recognizes the irreducibility of the other to the I. Levinas highlights the importance of “philosophical exegesis” (*Reality* 142), akin to analytical ethical criticism, where the task of interpretation is to interrupt signifying systems that make claims to knowledge and fossilize interpretations of the other. Analytical ethical criticism takes up this task of critical interruption through poststructuralist strategies that may include identifying gaps, contradictions, biased representations and underlying ideologies in discourses. Some have questioned the purpose of poststructuralism and its associated methods of deconstruction for perpetuating an anti-foundational skepticism towards all forms of truth claims potentially leading to disillusionment at best and nihilism at worst. However, in *The Ethics of Deconstruction*, Simon Critchley defends the textual practice of deconstructive reading as an ethical demand (1).

Based on the principles of Levinasian ethics, this ethical demand is not to an adherence of ethical principles; rather, it is to the otherness of the other to which the I is called to perform justice and to justify oneself. Analytical ethical criticism, in this light, would critique some of the assumptions of relational ethical criticism. One example is relational ethical criticism’s emphasis on establishing relations with the other through literature (e.g. Booth’s metaphor of books as friends or Nussbaum’s narrative imagination). Analytical ethical criticism problematizes the question of affiliation, namely, what are the texts that one selects and how does this choice condition whom one finds affinity with and whom one may exclude. Likewise, the empathetic imagination that literature potentially facilitates also needs to be critically questioned. To what extent does this perpetuate what Spivak terms
“epistemic violence” (Subaltern 24), occurring when authors and fictional narrators impose their representations of marginalized groups and their issues thereby discounting inherent ideological narratives and reifying the subjugation of these groups as a result? Whose ethical vision are readers drawn to empathize with and what ideologies undergird this to the silencing of other voices? Analytical ethical criticism pushes readers to be critically reflexive about whom they empathize with and, by implication, whom they do not, and consequently, how are moral feelings of inclusion and exclusion implicated in ethical-political dynamics of power and violence. Despite its difference with relational ethical criticism, analytical ethical criticism shares a similar other-centric impulse in which criticality is grounded on a cosmopolitan call for justice that recognizes the full dignity and humanity of the other.

In the early 2000s, a third strand of ethical criticism has emerged among Chinese literary scholars who termed it Chinese ethical literary criticism as a way for them to distinguish it from “Western” ethical criticism. To move beyond such nationalistic binaries, I prefer to describe this approach as historical ethical criticism, which is substantially closer to the ideas they have proposed. Founded and led by Nie Zhenzhao, a professor from Zhejiang University, historical ethical criticism is a movement that is becoming increasingly influential within China and beyond. Scholars behind historical ethical criticism argue that relational ethical criticism can problematically lead to the imposition of one’s cultural values in the act of relating to another, while analytical ethical criticism can render literary criticism a form of ideological criticism in the service of feminist, postcolonial, Marxist, and other systems of thought. In both these approaches, the literary text becomes secondary and functions as a mere instrument for affirming the ego (in the case of relational ethical criticism) and political agendas of groups (in the case of analytical ethical criticism). Nie contends that the starting point of ethical criticism should center on the ethics of the text and its aim is “to uncover ethical factors that bring literature into existence and the ethical elements that affect characters and events in literary works” (“Ethical Literary Criticism” 84). Nie then distinguishes ethical criticism from moral criticism. Whereas moral criticism is deductive in that it evaluates literature from the perspective of today’s moral principles or the moral concepts of philosophers, ethical criticism is inductive since it grounds itself on the historical context and ethical environment of the text. Nie reiterates that, in contrast to traditional approaches, “ethical literary criticism proposed here represents a particularly strong call for objectivity and historicism” (85). Essentially, historical ethical criticism positions the reader as one who seeks to honor the ethics of the text and its various dimensions which Nie describes as including the ethical environment (historical context), ethical taboos (moral
norms of the author and that of his/her culture), ethical dilemmas and choices, ethical tensions, and critique of communities and systems (Wen Xue 9).

Although not explicitly stated, a spirit of humanism located in Confucian ethics pervades historical ethical criticism and this has been central to ways in which classical and present-day intellectuals in China view the purposes of art and literature (Tian “Nie Zhenzhao” 415-416). A central Confucian virtue, ren, which has been translated as humaneness, benevolence and cosmopolitan love (Choo “Examining Models” 24) is premised on the value of human flourishing in a communitarian sense. As Confucius himself said, “A humane person [who] wishes to steady himself, and so he helps others steady themselves. Because he wishes to reach his goal, he helps others reach theirs” (Analects 96). This communitarian notion of flourishing is not limited to one’s family or nation but aims at the larger fraternity of human beings. In this worldview, the family is seen as the first moral training ground for the child, but humaneness reaches its highest virtue when it is extended to all others (Tu “Confucian Perspective” 61). It is in this cosmopolitan spirit that historical ethical criticism draws upon when it pushes the reader to take seriously the perspective of the author in relation to his/her context. When one learns to listen intently and to perceive from another’s viewpoint, this provides the training ground for one to extend relational virtues of hospitality to diverse others beyond the text. It is here that Literature education performs the crucial pedagogical task of moral expansion by pushing students to apply cognitive critical capacities as well as moral capacities of empathy, respect, responsibility initially focused on the author’s fictional world to less familiar cultures in the world. Nie explains that aesthetic appreciation is not a primary goal of engagements with literature but provides a means for readers to discover literature’s ethical purpose, namely, to understand society and human life from an ethical perspective (“Theory” 191).

In summary, the ethical turn has foregrounded rich debates and inquiry into literary-ethical connections but it is ethical criticism and its various accents—relational, analytical, historical—that provides the pedagogical strategies needed for its introduction into schools and colleges. Despite their differences, the three approaches to ethical criticism are informed by a cosmopolitan, other-centric, ethics that de-centers the interpretive privileging of textual aesthetics, readers, and implied author that has formerly been prioritized across the history of Literature education as influenced by movements such as formalism, new criticism, biographical criticism, reader-response criticism etc. This is not to suggest that these different literary actors are less important, given that literary engagement is dynamic,
holistic, and multidimensional, but that literary engagement has a teleological end oriented towards a cosmopolitan flourishing of self and others. The cosmopolitan, commonly translated from the Greek, as citizen of the world, is a porous concept that has been utilized in numerous ways. Nevertheless, one commonality is its recognition of ethical bonds among people that transcend all identity categorizations—nationality, ethnicity, class, gender etc. Several scholars have theorized cosmopolitanism not in terms of *episteme* (knowledge) and *techne* (skill) but in terms of a disposition or an orientation characterized by an “existential orientation” into “a way of being in the world” (Tagore “Cosmopolitanism” 1078), being critically reflective and open to learning from others while retaining one’s distinctive ways of being (Hansen *Teacher and World* 1), a “cosmopolitan outlook” through which we can interpret social and political realities (Beck *Cosmopolitan Vision* 24). Cosmopolitanism is metaphorically conceived as a lens through which social reality can be perceived beyond egoistic, Eurocentric, nationalistic, and other parochial ways of seeing.

In research, calls for a methodological cosmopolitanism encompasses a re-orientation of scholarly research to critique conceptual, methodological, empirical, and normative issues that have hitherto been anchored to the nation and its historical, political, and social implications (Beck and Sznaider “Unpacking Cosmopolitanism” 382). Along these lines, education also needs to seriously contend with what I term pedagogical cosmopolitanism. Broadly, this would mean considering how philosophical objectives, curricular epistemologies, and instructional practices can be more intentionally informed by a cosmopolitan orientation. In relation to Literature education, pedagogical cosmopolitanism may be employed in a variety of ways. In text selection, the curriculum can include texts that either problematize neat canonical-peripheral, colonial-post-colonial categorizations or foreground a cosmopolitan aesthetics that provokes “thinking beyond the nation but also comparing, distinguishing, and judging among different versions of transnational thought; testing moral and political norms, including the norms of critical thinking; and valuing informal as well as transient models of community” (Walkowitz *Cosmopolitan Style* 2). In terms of curriculum, this could involve organizing it less around the geographies of nations as observed in early world-literature curricula to encompassing cosmopolitan, intertextual learning. Fazal Rizvi describes this as helping students explore the “criss-crossing of transnational circuits of communication” (265) alongside “the contested politics of place making, the social constructions of power differentials and the dynamic processes relating to the formation of individual, group, national and transnational identities, and their corresponding fields of difference” (265). In relation to teaching approaches, I have
focused on how cosmopolitan ethical criticism is implicated in various strands of ethical criticism and the following are some examples of what this could look like in practice.

Relational ethical criticism could more explicitly cosmopolitanize hermeneutical approaches so that students can move beyond distanced, technical aesthetic analysis, commonly emphasized in Literature teaching and assessments in schools, to provide space for other-centric responses supporting dispositions of empathy, hospitality and moral affinity with others, particularly those perceived as culturally different. Analytical ethical criticism could integrate critical cosmopolitan pedagogies that interrupt essentialist narratives that claim to represent communities, provoke analysis of epistemic, spatial, discursive and other forms of violence, explore opportunities and challenges with the perpetuation of global deontological discourses such as human rights, and interrogate the politics behind hermeneutical interpretations of justice by transnational, state and other actors. Finally, historical ethical criticism could explore sociohistorical contexts of texts but also examine how these are not discrete but implicated in other histories and movements beyond a particular place and time. These are starting points for reorienting the teaching of literature so that the discipline is no longer justified by its own value—whether this is articulated as an argument for taste, beauty or reading power—but, rather, by an accountability to the other.

**COSMOPOLITAN ETHICAL CRITICISM’S TELEOLOGICAL AND PLURIVOCAL PURPOSES**

Cosmopolitan ethical criticism presents a compelling defense for Literature education in an age when global interconnectedness has intensified to the degree that it is no longer possible to speak of globalization as an external phenomenon but of glocalization, a “refraction of the global through the local” (Roudometof “Glocalization” 403). At the same time, it is not without its critics. In this part, I will discuss two common arguments against cosmopolitan ethical criticism related to the problem of moral reductiveness and moral determinism. My responses to these provide further justification for cosmopolitan ethical criticism as tied to its teleological and plurivocal purposes respectively.

The first argument against ethical criticism concerns the question of moral reductiveness. Richard Posner argues that the moral content of a work of literature is irrelevant to its value. To read literature through the lens of ethics is reductive and digressive, leading the reader to lose sight of the text’s aesthetic craft and imaginative vision ("Against Ethical Criticism:
Part Two” 398). Liam Gearon also raises the concern that, with such an approach, “Literature is made to serve direct political goals, to impact, Marxian-like to political consciousness, to assist in the struggle towards some unstated utopian future” (“Engineers” 3). He argues that this narrows literature to a political agenda and recommends reverting to Enlightenment notions of aesthetics and beauty, which convey more transcendental, unifying purposes: “Beauty serves no political or social purpose. Its presence makes our passage through this difficult to interpret worlds sometimes easier to bare, and on occasions the sense of beauty presented by the arts gives a glimpse of other worlds” (10).

One problem with this view is the assumption that aesthetics, politics and ethics are discrete categories and that one can dwell in one dimension to the exclusion of others. In fact, to say that literature has a purely aesthetic end is itself reductive, for aesthetic vision is integrally tied to an ethical vision given that writers often write with intention—to observe, reflect, critique, expose. “Art is truth setting itself to work” (Origin of the Work of Art 38), as Martin Heidegger has discussed. As he connects truth to the Greek word aletheia, referring to the unconcealedness, the uncovering of things, Heidegger suggests that the role of the artist is to un-conceal what is un-truth, which, in this case, refers to truth that has not yet been uncovered. For Terry Eagleton, literature reveals not objective truth but value-judgements embodied in social ideologies (Literary Theory 15). Others like Jean-Paul Sartre connect literature to truth-seeking motivations where writers are driven not to write merely for aesthetic reasons (though there may be some who do) but primarily to make an appeal for human freedom (What is Literature 64). In short, one cannot therefore discount the infusion of ethical intentions, thought, and emotions that inform aesthetic craft. For example, research in conceptual metaphor theory has shown how metaphors operate through concepts grounded in our experiences of the world, allowing us to map networks of associative experiences in terms of another (Lakoff and Johnson Metaphors 117). Such mappings between abstract concepts and concrete experiences are interactional in nature and inadvertently tap on the interpreter’s bank of ethical knowledge and relations.

What I believe Posner and Gearon’s concerns represent is the fear that reading ethically may over-ride aesthetic reading, a trend that worries conservative thinkers in light of the ethical turn. Should this occur, the danger is that Literature education may become subsumed as a marginal branch of sociology or philosophy. In response, a compelling justification for cosmopolitan ethical criticism is that, as a hermeneutical pedagogy, it does not discount the importance of aesthetics but seeks to activate aesthetic-political-ethical connections that
imbue texts and through which they are constructed. Ethical dilemmas and philosophical reflections are most powerfully conveyed through aesthetic language given its polysemic nature that renders it open to a plurality of interpretations and also taps on both cognitive and affective sensibilities. Louise Rosenblatt makes a distinction between “efferent” and “aesthetic” readings. Readers apply “efferent readings” (The Reader 22-47) when they read instrumentally to extract necessary knowledge, as is often the case with expository texts. Conversely, literature effects “aesthetic readings” (22-47) in which the reader’s associations, attitudes, feelings and ideas are activated so that the reader is vicariously lives through a relationship to that text. Aesthetic language has the power to evoke, but what it evokes is an ethical understanding of ourselves in relation to the world, nature, and other social beings. In this light, aesthetics is a means to ethics as an end (Choo Teaching Ethics 43). This is not to suggest that aesthetics plays a secondary, subservient role. Because understanding the human being and, hence, ethical relations with the other, transcends discourse, knowledge and epistemic methods, one cannot access ethics without aesthetic language. Thus, aesthetics is integral to ethics even though it operates teleologically by orienting one towards an ethical responsiveness.

The idea of teleology is commonly attributed to Aristotle, who, in Nichomachean Ethics, asserts that “Every craft and every investigation, and likewise every action and decision, seems to aim at some good; hence the good has been well described as that which everything aims” (1). He concludes that this ultimate, teleological end is eudaimonia (which has been translated as living well or human flourishing), towards which all other moral and intellectual quests, including education, should be directed. Beyond Aristotle, the teleological aim of human activity is also found in Confucian thought. As mentioned earlier, ren, denoting cosmopolitan love, is a central virtue in Confucianism and provides the moral grounds for good governance, human relations, and self reflection. Closely associated with ren is shu or empathy. When one of his disciples asks Confucius, “Is there a single word that can serve as the guide to conduct throughout one’s life?”, Confucius replies, “It is perhaps the word shu. Do not impose on others what you yourself do not want [others to impose on you]” (Analects 259). Shu, akin to the golden rule, conveys the idea of recognizing humanity in another person no matter whether the other is familiar or distant. Rather than a decontextualized concept of morality, Confucianism espouses an “anthropocosmic” ethics (Tucker “Religious Dimensions” 7) according to which heaven is immanent in human beings who express the way of heaven by cultivating virtues of benevolence and empathy.
Similarly, the arts, including poetry and music, aim at the teleological end of cultivating virtue as Confucius explains:

My young friends, why is it that none of you learn the Odes? The Odes can give the spirit an exhortation [xing], the mind keener eyes [guan]. They can make us better adjusted in a group [qun] and more articulate when voicing a complaint [yuan]. (Analects 286)

The four Chinese characters in the quote above illustrate the fourfold purposes of learning literature: Xing illustrates how literature awakens soul so that one begins to take an interest in the world and in the lives of others. Guan concerns perception when our eyes are open to other realities and when we acquire discernment through reading. Qun emphasizes socialization e.g. through empathy and habits of dialogue via literary conversations. Yuan refers to the creative and critical capacity to formulate an informed argument. For Confucius, poetry (and literature broadly) are means to the ethical development of relational virtues involving cultural curiosity, moral awareness, empathy, and discernment.

In short, cosmopolitan ethical criticism counters the charges of moral reductiveness, by returning to the teleological basis for Literature education. In response to critics from the more conservative “aesthetic camp” who are concerned with any diminution of aesthetic privilege, the question is, what justification underlies the “art for art’s sake” argument, that is the appreciation of art as an end in itself? After critiquing ethical criticism, Posner provides two reasons to the question about the purpose of reading literature—to read better by reading more difficult texts (due to cultural difference or complexity of writing) and to express ourselves better by learning from those who are masters of expression (“Against Ethical Criticism” 19). Paradoxically, despite his stance as an aesthetic purist, these reasons do not point to aesthetics as an end; rather, they point to the self and, more specifically, self-improvement as an end. By contrast, cosmopolitan ethical criticism, while it does not discount the significance of aesthetics, posits the self’s relations and responsibility to others as a more humanistic end.

The second argument against cosmopolitan ethical criticism concerns the question of moral determinism. Firstly, there is the indeterminism that Posner points to concerning the lack of evidence that literature makes people better or more empathetic or just (“Against Ethical Criticism: Part Two” 398-400). However, the opposite may be the case. One recalls the “brutal paradox” that George Steiner observed among the Nazis and their pursuit of both art and genocide: “The spheres of Auschwitz-Birkenau and of the Beethoven recital,
of the torture-cellar and the great library, were contiguous in space and time. Men could come home from their day’s butchery and falsehood to weep over Rilke or play Schubert” (Introduction 11). Steiner proclaims in the title of his speech that “The Humanities Don’t Humanize” giving examples of how during the Holocaust, artists, writers, and academics overtly or with indifference sided with the agencies of the inhuman.

The brutal paradox may be an extreme case but it serves as a warning about the danger of an abstract, decontextualized approach to Literature. Steiner explains that complete immersion in the aesthetics of text can lead to a disconnect from real instances of suffering. Indeed, literature and art were also used by the Nazis as instruments for nationalism. In schools, Hitler made changes to the curriculum introducing topics on race and heredity. In language classes, students were taught stories that promoted German national identity and the supremacy of the Aryan race (Pine Education in Nazi Germany 56-60). At a Nazi rally, Hitler proclaimed: “We shall discover and encourage the artists who are able to impress upon the State of the German people the cultural stamp of the Germanic race” (Blamires and Jackson “World Fascism” para. 3). Essentially, the Nazi’s elitist, class-oriented pursuit of high art and literature disconnected these creative pursuits from the real effects of oppression. Artistic creation became nationalistic and self-centered, abstracted from real life and morally empty (Karier “Humanizing the Humanities” 56).

The ways that totalitarian regimes have utilized literature to perpetuate nationalistic ideologies provides a compelling justification for cosmopolitanizing Literature pedagogy. The problem, however, is whether this can lead to ideological determinism. In countering the dangers of totalitarianism, imperialism, nationalism, is cosmopolitanism in danger of becoming another imposed dogma? Concurring with Gearon, Phillip Mitchell views the “closed system of ethical cosmopolitanism” (808) as promoting a “dogmatism that suggests cultural realities demand specific readings of texts” (808). Citing the philosopher William Desmond, he argues that literature should invite teachers and students into a “hermeneutical metaxu” (808) recognizing the inability to grasp the mystery of being while allowing for thinking about being (808). Ironically, this very notion of a “hermeneutical metaxu” is precisely what cosmopolitan ethics points towards, most notably in its strategies of ethical interruption that resists fossilized interpretations of texts.

“Cosmopolitanism” is itself an aporetic term that defies a single definition. Today, there are varied uses of the term from “rooted cosmopolitanism” (Appiah “Cosmopolitan Patriots”
618) to “everyday cosmopolitanism” (Noble “Everyday Cosmopolitanism” 46) along with “Muslim Cosmopolitanisms” (Hassim “Muslim cosmopolitanisms” 10) and “Confucian cosmopolitanism” (Ivanhoe “Confucian Cosmopolitanism” 34), among others. While all this can suggest that cosmopolitanism has become an overly used, vague concept, its porosity points to the underlying view of humanity as complex and transcending signifying systems. The ambiguity of the concept paradoxically allows for plurivocal rather than univocal responses in the Literature classroom. Mitchell claims that univocal readings prompted by cosmopolitan ethical criticism constrain the other as determined by ethnicity, religion, class, or other markers of identity (810). In actuality, one of cosmopolitan ethical criticism’s significant pedagogical moves is to problematize such identity markers. Its analytical aim is akin to the distinction Levinas makes between the “saying” and “said” (Otherwise Than Being 48-51). The said refers to that which has been culturally determined through language, signifying and symbolic systems including literature, while the saying refers to that which is subjected to the rules of cultural discourse but which resists this subjection at the same time. The saying occurs when being “is turned to another” (49) and involves a “de-situating of the ego” (50). The saying is what cosmopolitan ethical criticism aims at without the possibility of arrival. That is, hermeneutics becomes a continual project where responsibility to other is expressed in multiple ways—as a quest to understand and advocate for the other, as entailing critical self-reflexivity of one’s ideological impositions in the interpretive process, and as recognizing the limitations of discourse in engaging with the mystery of the other mirroring the incompleteness of the self. Mitchell claims that “if helping students to develop empathy for the other is the only aim of the teacher, the teacher has embraced the idea of literature’s univocity and, therefore, short-changed the other possibilities that engaging with a text offers” (Literature Unbound 810). Conversely, I suggest that empathy is what provides the possibility of plurivocality in the first place and it is the lack of empathy that constraints hermeneutics to the psychology of the reader’s ego. I will illustrate my point using the example Mitchell has provided of his own American Literature class discussing Raymond Carver’s short story “Cathedral.”

Mitchell’s first question asks, “How does this story speak to your own experience with your friends or family?” and subsequent questions similarly ask, “How did you react...,” “Were you moved...,” “Why do you think...,” “What do you think...” along with other questions asking students to respond to the significance of various events (Literature Unbound 815). These typify the kinds of aesthetic and reader-centric questions that dominate Literature teaching. They center on appreciating the aesthetics of the text but the dominant point of reference
is the students’ experiences through which response is drawn from. Absent from these questions is any critical self-reflexivity that would push students to become conscious of the implicit values they apply when they evaluate events and characters in the text. Nor are there other-centric kinds of questions that encourage students to consider how processes of othering in the text may reference similar instances in their society and the world. How does the fictional other invite us to think about referent others that may perhaps be a mirage, a figure we recognize undergoing similar forms of marginalization? How does the text reveal the kinds of moral and social systems that result in othering and how does it invite readers to bear witness to fictional injustices that can extend to thinking about similar injustices in the world? Mitchell’s last question, “What are the different kinds of ‘seeing’ in the story? Is one better than the other?” (815), encourages students to explore seeing in literal, aesthetic, ethical ways in the story but students and their class community are the final arbiters deciding which way of seeing is best. None of Mitchell’s questions provoke students to critically examine how their own way of seeing and interpreting is formed or the value system informing their judgments of others. Having engaged in a lively discussion about disability, alienation, among other topics through the text, students can leave feeling validated for their capacity to rationalize and interpret convincingly while remaining detached from any considerations of the text’s connections to problems in the world. Without activating literature as that bridge between fiction and reality, an opportunity to explore the text’s ethical invitations to understand self and others is lost. More importantly, when questions are predominantly reader-centric, response is univocally constrained within the reader’s own limited frame of reference or that of his/her community. This becomes particularly problematic in classrooms where the majority of students come from a similar ethnic, socioeconomic or other cultural background. Responses may then affirm cultural superiority particularly concerning evaluations of the foreign.

What cosmopolitan ethical criticism offers for Literature education is that it challenges us to shift the locus of interpretation by de-centering the reader and the interpretive community’s egotistical impulses to claim knowledge of the other. It is only then that a multiplicity of views beyond any monolithic cultural, ideological, identity perspective becomes possible.

**RECLAIMING LITERATURE EDUCATION’S ETHICAL PURPOSIVENESS**

To conclude, I wish to return to Levinas’ caution: “The formula [art for art’s sake] is false inasmuch as it situates art above reality and recognizes no master for it, and it is immoral
inasmuch as it liberates the artist from his duties as a man and assures him of a pretentious and facile nobility” (*Reality* 131). While Levinas’ charge concerns the privileging of aesthetics over ethics, a similar point can be made when we valorize the reader over the other in Literature’s hermeneutical pedagogies. At the same time, the prioritization of ethics does not mean the displacement of aesthetics or the autonomy of the reader’s judgement. Perhaps the tradition of Confucian cosmopolitanism can clarify this. In classical Chinese thought, there is less of a discrete distinction between literature and moral life compared to contemporary views among American and European philosophers. Historically in China, literature did not refer to specific genres such as poetry, prose, drama with which one may be familiar in present day Literature courses. As Nie explains, what defined literature was not its form or adherence to a generic convention but its intention conveyed through narrativity and philosophical propositions (*Theory* 197). To engage with literature and literary criticism was to engage with narratives, historical and philosophical documents along with the ways these connected one to daily life and offered an opportunity to reflect on how to cultivate virtuous conduct and harmonious relations with others, beginning with one’s family and community and then extending this to the world. Mencius, whose work is an important part of the Confucian canon, has elaborated at length on the extension of moral feeling from those near to far. He perceives humans as innately carrying seeds of benevolence but moral cultivation is necessary for its potential to be realized. One popular exercise he engages his interlocutors with is analogical thinking in which a present situation is associated with other correlates (Tan “Mencius’ Extension” 72).

An oft cited example from Mencius is that of a king concerned about the impending slaughter of an ox for ritualistic purposes, whom Mencius encourages to extend this same sense of compassion to the common people (Mencius 9-11). Through their discussion, the king becomes aware of his instinctual compassion but Mencius pushes him to widen the scope of his moral feelings of benevolence to serving others. At the end, Mencius employs parallelism to demonstrate how virtue should extend from the familiar to humanity at large:

> Treat the aged of your own family in a manner befitting their venerable age and extend this treatment to the aged of other families; treat your own young in a manner befitting their tender age and extend this to the young of other families and you can roll the Empire on your palm” (11).
Analogical thinking occurs when the moral agent judges one case to be comparable to another, despite differences. It is non-argumentative and serves as a metaphorical model for a way of thinking (Chong “Analogical and Metaphorical Thinking” 353-357). It is also not equivalent to simplistic applications of abstract principles from one case to another butrecognizes that the development of cosmopolitan moral affinity develops over time through consistent reflection and action (McRae “Mengzhi’s Method” 598-600). In the same way, literature invites us to participate in analogical thinking which activates our instinctive, rational, and emotional capacities through the text. The Literature classroom should allow for a multiplicity of responses from the personal, aesthetic, political, ethical, and transcendental. But it is often the case that literary engagements remain stuck at aesthetic and reader-centric responses. What cosmopolitan ethical criticism proposes is to extend transactions between text and reader so that moral reasoning and feeling integrate text-reader-other relations.

In the Confucian worldview, the cultivation of virtue is a social rather than merely private mission in which education plays a fundamental role. The individual is part of a community of fellow travelers on a lifelong journey of pursuing dao or the way of heaven by cultivating social relations on earth (Tu “Confucian Perspective” 62-63). Likewise, the teacher in the Literature class is a fellow sojourner who, like Mencius’ pedagogical move, affirms students’ responses from where they are at the beginning but gently encourages them to extend and expand their worldviews over time. In this spirit, our challenge is how to envision the interpretive community of our Literature class as a liberatory space characterized by hermeneutical porosity, open to multiple ways of seeing and feeling, while also guided by ethical purposiveness and commitment to supporting the flourishing of others in the world.

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