

FILM REALISM AND THE POSSIBILITY OF USING CINEMATIC CHARACTERS AS  
MORAL EXAMPLES

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One way in which we might develop our moral sensibilities is through a consideration of exemplary lives. In the tradition of Aristotelean virtue ethics (but certainly not contained to that particular theory), we learn about what constitutes a moral person by looking at concrete examples, as we do when we are inspired by friends and relatives or historical figures like Gandhi or Martin Luther King, Jr. Can fictional characters in film also provide such examples?

On the surface, it seems that film, like literature, can offer the sort of particular description of persons and their situations that can indeed deliver moral insights. But it's important that such depictions offer *realistic* possibilities for how to live, and there are credible concerns about whether film narratives are sufficiently realistic. Specifically, narrative comprehension requires a significant amount of viewer activity, employing learned schemata that reflect conventions established by other films and cultural stereotypes. Films, according to this line of criticism, are more likely to reflect conventions and expectations than they are to portray what actually happens or what people are really like.

The purpose of this essay is to address this problem by proposing that the sort of realism we should be concerned with is that which accurately describes the way in which we experience the world, as opposed to an external or objective approach to realism. I suggest we make use of existing theories of narrative identity for this purpose. If we construe our own lives in narrative terms, then the fact that a film is a convention-bound narrative construct is a strong point of similarity between how we experience our own lives and how we experience fictional characters. Not only does this solve the concern with realism presented here, but linking identity and film viewing through narrative strengthens the case that cinematic characters can enhance our understanding of ethical life.

I. CINEMATIC CHARACTERS AS MORAL EXAMPLES: PRELIMINARY  
OBSERVATIONS

The philosophical discussion about whether we might learn how to live a moral life from fictional characters was already well established before the emergence of the philosophy of film. Perhaps the most well-known source for this topic stems from the resurgence of Aristotle's virtue theory, which many ethicists see as an alternative or complement to the

dominant principle-based approaches to morality. For Aristotle, the question of how to live is answered primarily in terms of what sort of person one should be—the sort of character traits one should strive to instill through the cultivation of appropriate habits. More recently, Bernard Mayo championed Aristotelean virtue theory, which he refers to as “the philosophy of being,” over the more popular principle-based approaches, “the philosophy of doing,” for several reasons; but largely because virtue ethics offers concrete examples of moral persons.

<sup>1</sup> As opposed to the abstraction of principles, the focus on character offers relatable examples of how one should live. “And we can say in answer to our morally perplexed questioner, not only ‘Be this’ and ‘Be that,’ but also ‘Be like So-and-So’— where So-and-So is either an ideal type of character, or else an actual person taken as a representative of the ideal.”<sup>2</sup> And Mayo suggests that the “the heroes of epic writers and novelists” can serve as moral examples as well as actual saints and heroes.

Martha Nussbaum has explored the use of fictional characters for moral instruction to a much greater degree. Her views are also based partly on Aristotle, but for her the value of the Aristotelian approach lies in its focus on asking the fundamental question: “How should one live?” Nussbaum sees Aristotle as open to a broader range of possible answers than contemporary philosophers generally assume.<sup>3</sup> Literature, for example, can play an important role in answering Aristotle’s basic question because it is rooted in contextualized, concrete situations; and for that reason it often gets overlooked by philosophers accustomed to the abstraction of the philosophical essay. But often that very abstraction is what limits its ability to express significant aspects of ethical thought, since the particulars of a situation often yield essential moral insights. Literary works, whether histories, biographies, or novels, are “written in a style that gives sufficient attention to particularity and emotion,” and “they involve their readers in relevant activities of searching and feeling, especially feeling concerning their own possibilities as well as those of the characters.”<sup>4</sup> Nussbaum sees novels as offering especially powerful means of exploring ethical thinking. They “characterize life more richly and truly—indeed, more precisely—than an example lacking those features ever could; and they engender in the reader a type of ethical work more appropriate for life.”<sup>5</sup> (That said, Nussbaum is not claiming that traditional abstract essays have nothing to say, or are of less importance than these fictional sources. The point is that narrative fictions can complement traditional analyses, and in fact both forms can inform one another.<sup>6</sup>)

While Nussbaum’s comments are aimed at novels, the same arguments can be made for film: they provide concrete depictions of human beings engaged in particular contexts, showing us *how* it is possible to live in various situations. Such depictions allow us to see by example how others live, and who we might *be*, as Mayo says. Stanley Cavell argues for an approach to cinema that largely overlaps Nussbaum’s approach to novels, pointing out the ability for films to engage us at a personal and emotional level in ways that abstract essays

cannot.<sup>7</sup> Of course, literature and film are different artistic forms, and analysis of how they affect us necessarily differ, but in both cases it is the concrete depictions that make the difference. That means the aesthetic qualities of film are relevant to the ethics, since it's not just what is conveyed but how it's conveyed that may matter most.<sup>8</sup> And in fact, there are several recent works which do exactly this: exploring what film can teach us about morality through an analysis of film narratives and characters, understood in terms of the unique medium of film as an art form.<sup>9</sup>

So, there is good reason to think that cinematic characters can serve as moral examples. Just as Nussbaum's careful readings of literary characters help us understand ethics as both professional philosophers and moral persons, there is an established practice of using film in the same way. And this seems, at one level, obviously true. The character of Atticus Finch in Harper Lee's novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* can provide a moral example of how to be a father and a citizen, and so can Gregory Peck's depiction of him in Robert Mulligan's film version (1962), though the aesthetic analysis may differ. Marcello Mastroianni's portrayal of Marcello Rubini in Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960) provides a different kind of moral example: a warning of squandered opportunities and lost hope. His fate at the end of the film serves as a precautionary tale that is equally as instructive as Attic Finch's edifying one. Reflecting on examples like these, one can see how the particulars of the narrative context deliver moral insights. It is the compassion that we see Atticus present to both his daughter and the black man he defends in the face of the racial prejudice of the American South that instructs us on his moral qualities. Marcello's failed struggle for authenticity is understood within the context of the pressures of journalism, the distractions of celebrity life, and the personal challenges of the loss of his friend and mentor.

But as we shall see, it is precisely this narrative element that also gives rise to a difficulty with using narrative fictions, particularly film, as a legitimate means of ethical engagement.

## II. THE REALISM CHALLENGE

If cinematic characters really can instruct us by serving as examples of how a moral life might be possible, then it must also be the case that they present real possibilities. That is, the ways of thinking and living they depict within the diegesis must be ones that we could also experience, at least to some substantive degree. Nussbaum, for example, favors the works of Henry James because "James's idea of creation (...) is thoroughly committed to the real. (...) The Jamesian artist does not feel free to create just anything at all: he imagines himself as straining to get it right, not to miss anything, to be keen rather than obtuse."<sup>10</sup> And not all artists "get it right," nor do they even try. I sometimes ask students to write on any person they think serves as a moral example, real or fictional, and I occasionally receive papers in

which students choose to use superheroes as moral examples. While it's possible for one to find instructive narratives in the currently popular superhero genre, such examples tend to suffer from the fact that the narratives are based on powers or character traits that we cannot possibly possess. These characters and narratives are simply too unrealistic to serve as moral examples.

The difference between a realistic film and an unrealistic film in terms of their ability to contribute to our moral thinking, then, is in their ability to portray ways of living and thinking that the viewers may themselves adopt. The film must portray characters reacting to situations and interacting with people in ways that we might too. Such characters may provide realistic examples of moral behavior, however, while being quite unrealistic in several other ways. The character Han Solo (Harrison Ford) in the *Star Wars* films provides a rather simple moral example but one that makes the point about realism. No one expects to regularly engage in laser gun battles, own their own space ship, or pal around with a furry alien in their actual lives. But his moral behavior might be considered realistic: while initially a self-absorbed rogue, he is able to overcome these tendencies and make personal sacrifices in order to aid his friends. That's the kind of behavior one could well expect of actual persons, and perhaps similarly self-absorbed people might even reconsider their commitment to others as a result of watching these films.

But as we examine the nature of films more closely, it may appear that we are moving too fast when we pronounce the portrayal of film characters as realistic. Yes, it may well seem that people can and do act in the ways cinema portrays them, but is our sense of "how people act" really based on a comparison to actual human behavior, or is our reaction to cinematic characters based more on learned expectations, many of which may be contrived? As we shall see, the more we consider the nature of narrative, and film narrative in particular, the more unlikely it may seem that film characters are indeed realistic, despite our initial judgment that they are.

This concern arises from the long-standing debate on film realism within both film theory and the philosophy of film. While the meaning of "realism" is contested, the most straight forward approach is that we deem a film realistic when we let the camera directly show us what people are like, with as little human contrivance as possible. This was the sort of realism championed by André Bazin, who thought that certain styles of filmmaking could deliver realism more than others. For example, the deep focus and long takes popularized by Welles and Renoir in the mid twentieth century "brings the spectator into a relation with the image closer to that which he enjoys with reality."<sup>11</sup> Bazin also pointed to the Italian neorealist use of location shooting and amateur actors as examples of film realism. In short, realism for him was about moving away from the stylistic conventions engrained in the studio system (especially Hollywood) and letting the camera reveal the world as it is.

Today, Bazin's notion of realism is commonly considered naïve, particularly the notion that we can create cinematic narratives where the human element is somehow minimalized to produce a degree of objectivity. In *Aesthetics of Film*, authors Aumont, Bergala, Marie, and Vernet provide a critique of realism that I will be using as the central concern with whether cinematic characters really can offer realistic examples of how to live.<sup>12</sup> We can begin to appreciate their view through their critique of Bazin: they argue that his recommendations for a more "realistic" filmmaking style do not do much to reduce the amount of human artifice in the filmmaking process. So-called realistic films still require a variety of contrivances, from film stock to lens choice to editing styles. Deep focus, for example, is just a different type of style, not the absence of it. In short, Bazin's denunciation of conventions as a means of achieving more reality "goes hand in hand with the installation of a *new* system of conventions."<sup>13</sup>

And it is precisely this use of convention that presents a challenge for film realism, because the nature of film narrative relies very heavily on conventions. David Bordwell's analysis of viewer activity in constructing film narratives explains why. Viewers are not passive receivers of information, according to Bordwell. They are involved in several complicated activities that are part of the more general activity of perception. We impose various types of schemata ("organized clusters of knowledge") on the data of our perception to make sense of what we see and hear. When it comes to comprehending narratives, viewers require more complex layers of schemata.

In comprehending a narrative film, the spectator seeks to grasp the filmic continuum as a set of events occurring in defined settings and unified by principles of temporality and causation. (...) Thus any schemata for events, locations, time and cause/effect may become pertinent to making sense of a narrative film.<sup>14</sup>

One particular type of schemata is "prototype schemata," used to identify individual agents, actions, locations, etc.<sup>15</sup> In a Western, for example, there are prototypes of the outlaw, the sheriff, the saloon, the show down, etc. We expect these persons, places and events to look a certain way and causally interact in certain ways. The narrative need only present elements that cue these schemata, and viewers then bring to the film the information that will make meaningful narrative connections.

On a larger level, various structural schemata are in place that help us determine how to sort detail, arrange events in proper order, make causal connections, etc. These templates are particularly important when we summarize a story: picking the pertinent details to remember and connect in ways that provides a unifying meaning to the various events witnessed. For example, the "canonical story format" of film creates expectations for how narratives are

expected to unfold: “settings plus characters—goals—attempts—outcome—resolution.”<sup>16</sup> Guided by these schemata, on both small and large scales, viewers make hypotheses about what the story means and revise them as they are confirmed or denied by unfolding events.

Where do these schemata come from? We get them from a variety of sources. We may develop prototype schemata from our own experiences of people or places, for example, but a major source of schemata are other texts, particularly other stories, which teach us how to cluster information together in various ways. The canonical story format is learned from experiencing the same story pattern repeatedly, for instance. By telling stories we teach schemata, then; and in fact different cultures may develop different canonical story formats, in which case the narratives might be experienced differently.<sup>17</sup> Given that we learn through repetition, the genre effect amplifies the creation of these schemata, since it offers an opportunity to reinforce prototypes and templates.

Though Bordwell doesn't directly intend to challenge the notion of film realism with this account of viewer activity, we can use these views to make a preliminary case that film characters are unrealistic to a large degree. Characters are shaped by conventions and stereotypes, because filmmakers intuitively understand that appealing to what we know and expect is necessary in order for us to quickly disseminate and make sense of what we're seeing on the screen. Only so much can be directly displayed or conveyed in a dialogue; the rest of the diegesis must be supplied by the viewer. So characters and the narratives they inhabit are far more likely to be the result of previously established conventions, with all that that entails, whether or not they reflect the world objectively. (This is of no surprise to those who analyze the often unconscious racial or gender biases that are commonly propagated through film: those biases are reinforced and normalized through repetition.<sup>18</sup>)

Aumont et al make similar points, but they use these observations to challenge the notion of realism directly. They suggest that what audiences typically refer to as realism is really “plausibility,” and what is plausible is shaped largely by public opinion and “established standards of behavior.”<sup>19</sup> The final shootout of a Western, for example, is supposed to occur according to specific rules governing the role and expected behavior of the characters and the “proper” procedure. It seems realistic not because that's the way events actually occurred, but because we have come to expect such behavior based on the schemata we have internalized. “As a result, the plausible constitutes a *form of censorship* since it restrains the number of narrative possibilities and imaginable diegetic situations, all in the name of preserving the rules.”<sup>20</sup>

As expectations change, so does what seems plausible, which is further evidence that “plausible” cannot be understood in the objective sense of realism that Aumont et al are comparing it to. What seemed realistic fifty years ago no longer does, and that will be largely due to the fact that the rules evolve. “Within the evolution of the plausible, the new system

only appears ‘real’ because the old one is declared out of date and hence denounced as conventional, even though the new system is obviously just as conventional.”<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, what seems plausible within one genre is implausible in another, which shouldn’t be the case if plausibility referred to what actually happens in the world. Romantic comedies often involve some massive misunderstanding that keeps the couple apart for much of the movie, and as unlikely as that misunderstanding is to occur in real life, it seems plausible in the context of this genre. The same sort of misunderstanding occurring in, say, a science fiction movie, would seem implausible, since it isn’t common in the plots for that genre. In short, the demands of narrative yield depictions of characters and events not according to what actually happens, but according to learned expectations. Is Han Solo’s selflessness realistic in the sense that it exemplifies how persons act, for example, or because expectations established by film conventions make us expect this sort of behavior as the result of having internalized the prototype schema of the rogue-hero character? If that’s the case, maybe Han Solo’s moral example isn’t that realistic after all.

So according to this line of thinking, using cinematic characters as examples of how we might live, and live morally, may be problematic, since such characters are largely based on convention and stereotype rather than attempts to adhere to the conditions that apply to the real world—that is, they are not realistic in the sense that they do not convey neutral and accurate descriptions of what the world is like. Furthermore, as Aumont et al point out, the conventions that shape our sense of the plausible also form a kind of censorship, limiting the range of narrative possibilities and promoting conformity to standing conventions. What is worse, such conventions will often reflect widespread assumptions about what we think people are like, including inaccurate or degrading assumptions regarding gender or ethnicity, which is clearly detrimental to ethical thinking. What, then, can be said in defense of cinematic characters and the narratives that shape them?

### III. NARRATIVE IDENTITY

The concern proposed in the last section begins to dissipate when we approach realism from another angle. The sort of realism Aumont et al object to is based on Bazin’s view—that the camera and filmmaking techniques should be free to capture the world as it is and not according to established filmmaking conventions. If that’s what we mean by “realism” then Aumont et al are surely right to deny that fiction films can achieve this. But in this section I argue that this is not the appropriate sense of realism we want when considering the use of cinematic characters as moral examples. Specifically, I contend that what is most helpful is an account of how we actually experience the world. Since we approach life from a first person, subjective perspective, a depiction of life from a similar perspective will do much more to

capture the nature of ethical thinking than an objective, detached view (even if such a view were possible).

In short, we need a perspective that captures the inner experience of ethical subjects. This, too, is recognized by Nussbaum. As mentioned, she insists that novels must provide a sort of realism, but she is careful to qualify that claim. “The objectivity in question is ‘internal’ and human. It does not even attempt to approach the world as it might be in itself, uninterrupted, unhumanized. Its raw material is the history of human social experience, which is already an interpretation and a measure.”<sup>22</sup> We are socialized beings who are historically situated, and fictional narratives can more or less accurately reflect these aspects of who we are, Nussbaum suggests, but they do so from the inside.

Films deliver this internal perspective as well, despite the fact that the camera is in some sense an objective recorder of images. This is a point that psychologist Hugo Münsterberg articulated in 1916. He noted that despite the realistic aspects of the photographic medium, we are immediately presented with two-dimensional pictures, abruptly transforming from scene to scene (e.g. shot reverse shot editing) that on the surface is decidedly not how we experience the world. But Münsterberg’s point is that the mind creates an aesthetically satisfying unity from the jumbled images that appear on the screen. Anticipating the sort of constructivist account that Bordwell and others would give decades later, Münsterberg explains: “We do not see the objective reality, but a product of our own mind which binds the pictures together.”<sup>23</sup> Specifically, it is the mind’s “processes of attention, of memory, of imagination, of suggestion, of division of interest and of emotion” that are brought to bear on our experience of a film. Framing and close-ups, for example, recreate the process of attention, through which we sort out the data of our senses to focus on what is relevant to us. Münsterberg draws his observations on the aesthetics and psychology of film into a unified principle: “the photoplay tells us the human story by overcoming the forms of the outer world, namely, space, time, and causality, and by adjusting the events to the forms of the inner world, namely, attention, memory, imagination, and emotion.”<sup>24</sup>

We can make this connection between filmic representations and the “inner world” of the spectator clearer and more explicit with a theory of narrative identity. If we recount our own life in narrative terms, then narrative constructions even of fictional characters become analogous to our own experience. It provides a more precise account of the sort of cognitive processing Münsterberg describes; and as I shall argue, such an account shows that cinematic characters do indeed deliver realistic depictions of how human beings understand themselves and their world.

Theories of narrative identity became popular a few decades ago but have seen a recent resurgence in popularity, both in philosophy and psychology.<sup>25</sup> For purposes of this essay, I adopt a rather straightforward view: for the most part, we make sense of our lives by relating



various events in terms of a story. Specifically, we select particular events as relevant, ignore others as irrelevant, and relate them all in terms of causal connections according to meaningful conceptions of the self.

This is a view that was put forward by Paul Ricoeur's *Time and Narrative* in his attempt to reconcile a world of fact with the interpreted world of subjective experience.<sup>26</sup> David Carr provides a similar view, emphasizing the manner in which we organize the telling of our life story by temporal and causal organization. As Carr explains, "The narrator (...) in virtue of his retrospective view, picks out the most important events, traces the causal motivational connections among them, and give us an organized, coherent story."<sup>27</sup> It is, in fact, necessary that we recount our life this way. Even in the course of a day, there are far too many events to be related. We require a selection process that tells us why certain events matters and others don't. Carr distinguishes between a chronicle and a narrative to make this point: a chronicle is a description of events in a neutral way, one after the other, while a narrative involves a temporal/causal selection process.<sup>28</sup> For example, I am asked how my day is going, and I pronounce that I'm having a "bad day." If asked to explain, I would not begin by pointing out that the alarm went off, I brushed my teeth, I picked out such-and-such clothes to wear, put on first my left sock, then my right, etc. That would be a chronicle, which no one cares to hear. Most of those events, even though they did occur, do not explain why I chose to describe the day as "bad." Instead, I select the pertinent events—the ones that causally explain the "bad day" description: traffic was heavy and I was late getting to the office, which made me miss an important meeting that angered my colleagues; later I discovered I brought the wrong notes to a lecture, resulting in a disorganized and disappointing classroom experience, etc. Those events are the ones I select to assert meaningfully that I had a bad day. The same process occurs on a larger scale when we relate why we've become the kind of person that we are: we select and interpret events according to concepts that describe our sense of self.

While these sort of observations make a theory of narrative identity sound convincing, the notion has come under heavy critical scrutiny in recent years. The strongest criticisms are directed at attempts to make narrative identity provide solutions to some perennial philosophical issues surrounding continuity and identity. Some theorists reject narrative identity precisely because they think that some of us do not have a narrative unity that links my current narrating self with past selves.<sup>29</sup> And some point out that, in fact, we have multiple accounts of ourselves, not just in different phases in our life but with different people and in different situations, so that there is no single narrative that captures who we are.<sup>30</sup>

Rather than engaging these debates, I will attempt to side step these issues by remaining agnostic about them, since I don't think they impact the role of narrative identity for present concerns. When I claim that we relate our life in narrative terms, I do not insist that we use the same narrative in every situation. Neither do I claim that I must identify with a past self

who shares my current narrative. For some people, it may be the case that we do consolidate the events of our lives around a single unifying narrative, but for others, it may well be that our experience of life is episodic or fractured. Maybe we juggle several narratives. Maybe our narratives are not always honest accounts. My point is that, for better or worse, we do recount the events of our life in narrative terms both to ourselves and others. We do not give neutral chronicles, to use Carr's term, but must engage in the process of selection according to causal and temporal demands of meaning and coherence. Story-telling is an effective way to describe this selection process, despite whatever may be the case about identity construction. From her own research in psychology, Jennifer Pals explains why thinking of our life as a story is in fact consistent with more complex notions of self:

One of the advantages of thinking of the formation of causal connections as an interpretive strategy for creating coherence within the life story is that it shifts our conceptualization of coherence toward the idea that it is something we continually try to do as we construct our life stories—an interpretive act of self-making—and away from the idea that coherence is a static characteristic that the life story as a whole does or does not possess.<sup>31</sup>

In sum, I am suggesting that, for current purposes, we adopt a view of narrative identity as a description of how we understand and relate our life's events, while remaining indifferent to the scope and depth of those narratives and what a narrative account implies regarding other philosophical matters of selfhood.

Let's next take a closer look at how this narration works in terms that will allow us to understand its similarity to cinematic narratives. Our narratives are constructed partly from our own narrative decisions and partly from the cultural resources available to us. For example, I have adopted the identity of a philosopher as a significant aspect of my life. I have a certain idea of what an academic philosopher is, which provides a schema by which I can measure events as counting as philosophical activities or as causally related to the those activities. I can then tell you the story of how I became a philosopher and how my professional life can be understood in those terms. Of course, I have to know what a philosopher is in order to do that, which gets us to another element of narrative identity: the social component.

The schemata that most of us use to construct our sense of self are obtained from the society that shapes us. I didn't invent the concept of a philosopher, nor do accountants or construction workers invent their career identities. The same is true with other schemata that are often vital to a person's identity, like ethnicity, gender, and aspects of our sexuality. Kwame Anthony Appiah refers to these as "life-scripts," and describes how in constructing

even our personalized, authentic identities, we nevertheless rely on these socially-constituted life-scripts.<sup>32</sup> In fact, if we want to ensure that people are treated with dignity, Appiah claims, it is important to understand the restrictive or demeaning elements these scripts sometimes embody. For example, when it comes to the negative stereotypes surrounding women, persons of color, or homosexuals, who rely on these scripts in order to construct their own identity, we have to be mindful of how we collectively define these groups. “Because there was no good reason to treat people of these sorts badly, and because the culture continues to provide degrading images of them nevertheless, they demand that we do cultural work to resist the stereotypes, to challenge the insults, to lift the restrictions.”<sup>33</sup>

This point is important because it suggests that the narratives we construct as persons are dependent on schemata that are not a reflection of some neutral, objective description of people, but are based on socially evolving concepts. This, in turn, establishes an important connection between the portrayal of cinematic characters and our own lives. Film narratives are realistic because they portray life as we actually experience it: as a narrative construction based on a variety of pre-existing, socially-influenced concepts. Yes, film narratives do lean heavily on conventions, but so do life narratives. Film narratives reflect the same sort of character-making activity that we engage in when we select the events of our life and provide coherence according to organizing concepts, or schemata. Note also that life narratives, like film narratives, are based on life-scripts that may contain biases and false beliefs, being the product of social forces that they are, but they largely form the basis of our identities nevertheless. (Of course, that doesn’t relieve us of the responsibility of critically challenging them, whatever their source.)

Our lives are narrative constructions, then, just as the lives of cinematic characters are. The use of schemata to organize and give coherence to film narratives and characters closely resembles the use of life-scripts and learned concepts by which we make sense of our own lives. Films *are* realistic in the sense that the way they depict the world conforms to the inner world, as Münsterberg explains—the world as we experience it.

In the previous section, I mentioned that films can be realistic in some ways but not others. Science fiction films like those in the *Star Wars* series may be decidedly unrealistic in various ways, yet realistic in the way they represent character relationships and ethical interactions. We can now see that films in general are realistic in the sense that characters can provide realistic representations of ethical conduct: in both cases they make use of the same narrative schemata that we make use of in giving an account of our own lives. The realism requirement I established earlier demands that narrative structures can sever as genuine possibilities for how we might live. Films surely offer these, drawing as they do from a pool of narrative options established through both historical and fictional sources.

Let's return to the Han Solo example to illustrate this point. Can this character serve as a moral example? The narrative element that matters here is the depiction of a largely narcissistic character being altered by his relationship with others to the point that he is willing to put their interests ahead of his own. If this turns out to be a narrative construct that only makes sense in the film's Sci-Fi/Western genre, then the character is not realistic in the sense I'm proposing here. But if we determine that this narrative is one we can relate to as a real possibility for ourselves, then it is realistic for that reason *even if* its inclusion in the film was originally motivated by other narrative strategies and not modeled after actual persons.

#### IV. CINEMATIC CHARACTERS AS MORAL EXAMPLES: CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

In part one I pointed out that fictional narratives, whether in literature or film, can answer the question "How ought one live?" by providing concrete depictions that can serve as a valuable resource for moral growth. We then raised the concern that fictional accounts, particularly in film, may be so convention-laden that they are not realistic. An account of narrative identity, however, allows us to recast the question of realism in a way that removes that concern. In this concluding section, I will establish how the notion of narrative identity makes clearer the way that cinematic characters can serve as moral examples described in the first section. With an understanding of narrative identity in mind, then, let us ask the fundamental question, "How do cinematic characters help us to grow as moral persons?" I see three main ways to answer this question.

1) *Cinematic characters demonstrate new possibilities for how we might live.* As we saw with Appiah, we make use of life-scripts in constructing our identity. Of course, a major source of those scripts are the persons and institutions through which we are encultured, but it is equally true that there are more possibilities than we are aware of or take seriously as a possibility for ourselves. Cinema can be a source of new scripts—new options for how we might live. Just as it is one thing to research the purchase of a new car by reading about it, quite another to test drive it, so it is much easier to understand the appeal of ethical ways of life when seeing them depicted in concrete terms. This is the point emphasized by Nussbaum with regard to literature and by Cavell when he claims that film can further the Emersonian project of self-perfection.<sup>34</sup> All of this becomes clearer when we understand that we are at least partial narrators of our own life stories. In watching the kinds of film that depict possible ways of living and interacting with others, then, we see how we might alter our story.

Recasting realism in terms of the similarity between our own narrative identity and the narrative constructions of film characters helps us recognize which films offer fruitful examples and which ones do not. Fruitful depictions are those that offer a narrative that we

might actually adopt: they fit our circumstances and offer us a way to make sense of our own past and future possibilities. They tell us how I might tell my own story, or change it, to be the kind of person I think I ought to be. This is why I am more likely to learn something from *To Kill a Mockingbird* than from *Superman*, no matter how noble I find the character of Clark Kent.

2) *Understanding the origin of the narrative elements of cinematic characters emphasizes the social nature of our narrative ideals and the need to address them critically.* I just noted that we are partial narrators of our own lives, “partial” because the scripts we learn are socially cultivated, even if we have the ability, more or less, to choose between them. For better or worse, we cannot help but be shaped by the possibilities presented to us by our society. It’s also easy to take these possibilities for granted or as givens, so the realization that life-scripts are social products which we have some control over is instructive. It not only reminds us that those scripts are contingent, but it encourages us to view them with a critical eye—to do “cultural work” at resisting the negative stereotypes, as Appiah says. As spectators, we can reflect on the appropriateness of various character traits that we observe in film characters. Nussbaum makes the same point while explaining how the works of Samuel Beckett teach us emotional reactions to situations that in turn inform our values: “the issue of social origin must be squarely faced with emotions as with beliefs. (...) The project, in short, must look at social history, and not without a critical eye.”<sup>35</sup> An obvious example of how spectators might reflect critically on a narrative element is how modern audiences are likely to respond to W. D. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation* (1915). While popular in its day, the negative stereotypes of African Americans and the depiction of the Ku Klux Klan as heroes reveal its racist assumptions in vivid terms to today’s audiences.

Films can also intentionally point out how certain life-scripts ought to be challenged. They help us do that cultural work. Take for example the films directed by Spike Lee, who helped make contemporary audiences conscious of racist attitudes they might have been previously unaware of.

The point is that social conventions, which are often reflected in film, are often flawed, but those flaws can be uncovered and the life-scripts which they support improved. Seeing ourselves as involved in narrative construction allows us to acknowledge the role we have in both changing how we tell our own story and how we contribute to the social pool whereby others tell theirs. Critical film viewers and challenging films can aid in this process.

3) *Cinematic characters have the potential to edify, providing motivation to pursue moral growth.* This was the point that Mayo emphasized in explaining the role of saints and heroes, real or fictional, in becoming virtuous. Beyond just educating us on different potentials for living and living ethically, the depiction we find in a film can inspire us. We may want to be more like that person. Seeing Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* stand up

for the rights of the disadvantaged in the face of a hostile community makes us want others to think of us as we think of him. Or, if we have exhibited cowardice in a similar circumstance, it may shame us into taking action in the future. Similarly, when we see what happens to Marcello in *La dolce vita*, we may be inspired to make a change in our own lives to avoid his fate. The sort of realism I have been arguing for here is largely what makes these films so inspiring in the first place: they offer real narrative options for us, in similar narrative contexts which we use to make sense of our own lives, but they also concretely depict the qualities that attract us to that way of living.

In sum, the common denominator linking our own lives, moral possibilities, and cinematic characters is narrative. Cinematic characters can serve as moral examples not despite the fact that they are narrative constructions, but because of it.

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<sup>1</sup> Bernard Mayo, *Ethics and the Moral Life* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1958), 208-216.

<sup>2</sup> Mayo, *Ethics*, 214.

<sup>3</sup> Martha Nussbaum, "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 25.

<sup>4</sup> Nussbaum, "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," 46.

<sup>5</sup> Nussbaum, "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," 47.

<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum, "Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature," 27.

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Cavell, *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of Moral Life* (Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Sinnerbrink provides a useful discussion of the relationship between film ethics and aesthetics. See Robert Sinnerbrink, *Cinematic Ethics: exploring Ethical Experience through Film* (London: Routledge, 2015), 4-32.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Dan Shaw, *Morality and the Movies: Readings Ethics through Film* (London and New York: Continuum, 2012); and Thomas Wartenberg, *Thinking on Screen: Film as Philosophy* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> Martha Nussbaum, "Literature and Moral Imagination", in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 163.

<sup>11</sup> André Bazin, "Cinematic Realism," in *What is Cinema?*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 39.

<sup>12</sup> Jacques Aumont, Alain Bergala, Michel Marie, and Marc Vernet, *Aesthetics of Film*, trans. Richard Neupert (Austin: University of Texas, 1999), 108-25.

<sup>13</sup> Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, 114.

<sup>14</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 34.

<sup>15</sup> Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 35.

<sup>17</sup> Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 35-7.

<sup>18</sup> The best examples are Laura Mulvey "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975): 6-18; and Manthia Diawara, "Black Spectatorship: Problems of Identification and Resistance," *Screen* 29, no. 4 (1988): 66-76.

<sup>19</sup> Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, 114.

<sup>20</sup> Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, 114.

<sup>21</sup> Aumont et al., *Aesthetics of Film*, 117.

<sup>22</sup> Nussbaum, "Literature and the Moral Imagination," 164.

<sup>23</sup> Hugo Münsterberg, *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Co., 1916), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/15383/15383-h/15383-h.htm#chapter2>.

<sup>24</sup> Münsterberg, *The Photoplay* (italics original).

<sup>25</sup> I focus more on the philosophical approach here, but for an account of the psychological approach, see Dan McAdams, *The Stories We Live by: Personal Myths and the Making of Identity* (New York: William Morrow, 1993).

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<sup>26</sup> Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative* (Book 1), trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

<sup>27</sup> David Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 59.

<sup>28</sup> Carr, *Time, Narrative, and History*, 59.

<sup>29</sup> For example, Galen Strawson distinguishes between a diachronic self and an episodic self, insisting that many people do not experience life as a continuous narrative, but instead experience life in terms of episodes which are not continuous with a past or future. Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," in *Real Materialism: and Other Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 189-208.

<sup>30</sup> Peter Raggatt explains this point. But despite the multiplicity of the self, he claims, as I do, that narrative accounts are still consistent with the way in which we recount our lives. Peter Raggatt, "Multiplicity and Conflict in the Dialogical Self: A Life-Narrative Approach," in *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, ed. Dan McAdams, Ruthelen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 15-33.

<sup>31</sup> Jennifer Pals, "Constructing the 'Springboard Effect': Causal Connections, Self-Making, and Growth Within the Life Story," in *Identity and Story: Creating Self in Narrative*, ed. Dan McAdams, Ruthelen Josselson, and Amia Lieblich (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2006), 177.

<sup>32</sup> K. Anthony Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival," in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 159-63.

<sup>33</sup> Appiah, "Identity, Authenticity, Survival," 161.

<sup>34</sup> Cavell, *Cities of Words*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> Martha Nussbaum, "Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love", in *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 310.