

September 2019

## Nora Hämäläinen. *Literature and Moral Theory*. Bloomsbury, 2016.

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### Recommended Citation

Dotterman, Anthony M. (2019) "Nora Hämäläinen. *Literature and Moral Theory*. Bloomsbury, 2016.," *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*: Vol. 43: Iss. 2, Article 36. <https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.2120>

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**Abstract**

Review of Nora Hämäläinen. *Literature and Moral Theory*. Bloomsbury, 2016.

**Keywords**

Book Review, Nora Hämäläinen, Literature and Moral Theory

Nora Hämmäläinen. *Literature and Moral Theory*. Bloomsbury, 2016. 242 pp.

Scholarship in moral philosophy and literature has been fragmented by “the current culture of academic specialization (and journal publishing) [which] easily normalizes critical trends and turns them into additional academic specializations” (3). As a result, scholarship in these two academic fields is often constrained by the imposed parameters of academic specialization. This is the epistemological problem Nora Hämmäläinen tries to untangle in her wide-ranging, yet erudite book, *Literature and Moral Theory*.

At its core, Hämmäläinen’s book is an interdisciplinary, not a multi-disciplinary work, examining parallel analytical and theoretical strands in philosophy and literature. Indeed, as Hämmäläinen notes, moral theorists have long employed literary narratives as a way of supporting or criticizing particular theories. She argues that moral theorists should study literary texts as autonomous texts, not merely examples of various moral theories or critical approaches because “literary works have their own ways of developing moral and theoretical generalizations that need to be taken into account when considering the moral impact of a literary work” (134). While Hämmäläinen advocates for studying narrative literature separate from any one moral claim or theory, she avers that literature is a path to a more liberating “academic moral philosophy” (3). Her strategy, therefore, “is to emphasize commonalities and . . . uniting features” (3) between different academic fields and approaches as a kind of elixir to contemporary trends in specialization.

Hämmäläinen’s methodology, summarized above, makes it somewhat difficult to define her work in terms of genre and audience. The author is impressively well-versed in both the critical trends in moral philosophy and literary theory beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century. She traces everything from Neo-Aristotelianism, particularism, and normative ethics to the New Critics, Reader Response theory, as well as Marxist and Feminist approaches to literature and philosophy. Indeed, this reader marvels at how expertly the author completed the Herculean task of clearly synthesizing the various academic scholarship, schools, and analytical movements of moral philosophy and literary analysis. One could envision her work being published at a time when English PhD students studied Aristotle and Plato next to Henry James and Joseph Conrad rather than following a specialized research path.

If Hämmäläinen’s synthesis of philosophical and literary academic scholarship makes her book somewhat difficult to categorize, she provides a loose roadmap for how the “literary turn”—studying narrative literature as “a way of throwing light on moral judgment and the moral demands of particular situations” (55)—can improve the practice of moral philosophy. While some canonical authors come up again and again—Henry James is one notable example—no one writer or

literary text dominates this work. Similarly, although Martha Nussbaum (for her pioneering work on Greek tragedy and moral philosophy) and Iris Murdoch are central intellectual figures in the author's analysis, these scholars essentially serve as grounding points for the literary and philosophical practices Hämäläinen synthesizes. Quite simply put, this is not a work for someone who wishes to do a "deep dive" into a particular literary approach—to say, Charles Dickens's *Hard Times* or Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*—or philosophical theory. As the author herself notes, her work is about "meta-level issues" and does not endorse any particular kinds of readings of literature or kind of philosophy (12).

The book finds one of its major strengths in its analysis of the competing trends of particularism and normative ethics in moral philosophy. In her introduction, she explains how, traditionally, "analytical philosophy sees itself as ahistorical while the humanities is concerned with historical awareness" (1). Neo-Aristotelianism, however, holds a "particularist" position on morality, as concepts like virtue are properly defined by the "requirements that [specific] situations impose on one's behavior" (58) as opposed to deontological ethics, which hold that actions are right or wrong, moral or immoral according to a set of universalizing rules. Hämäläinen astutely argues that narrative literature bridges these internal philosophical animosities. It illuminates "thick moral concepts," evaluative judgments that express a "union of fact and value" (103) through its aesthetic approach. In other words, narrative literature represents the particular (specific persons, times, cultures, and moral dilemmas) and general (how these situations and questions are common to all of us) in ways that are organic to the genre and the reader.

The book's first chapter is the most thought-provoking and accessible part of Hämäläinen's work. Outlining the reasons why philosophers are drawn to specific literary works, which may be different from what the philosopher "needs . . . from literature" (22), Hämäläinen skillfully provides a thematic review of the elements of contemporary philosophical thought and how these features have been discussed in relation to literature. While the chapter succeeds in the less glamorous work of providing the scholar or graduate student not saturated in the history of philosophical thought with the necessary concepts and terminology to follow the author's claims, this section of the book also functions as a reflective or meta-cognitive exercise for the more seasoned or versed academic in literature and moral theory. Indeed, ideas and academic approaches take on a "living quality" in this section, such as when Hämäläinen demonstrates how explicitly political texts like *1984* may move beyond their original authorial and historical context to make us consider new and different moral questions and perspectives. Rather than providing an argument for another type of philosophy or specific analytical approach, the author's study of the existing moral concepts in narrative literature presents an

academic approach that is both dynamic and liberating, neither completely rule-bound nor haphazard in its methodology.

I am of more than one mind regarding the author's choice not to provide her own analysis of a literary text, as such an approach may have provided a nice bookend to her work, an avenue for application, and greater reader accessibility. Still, even at the most theoretical and abstract parts of Hämäläinen's work, she successfully impels the reader to question ill-considered binaries of philosophical thought and approach.

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