

Reflections on Kurt Vonnegut's Moral Universe

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I originally intended to talk today about Kurt Vonnegut's moral message. I intended to look for consistent moral themes in the novels and short stories and essays and lectures. I do believe that there are such themes—and I hope to write about them someday—but in the course of my search, I became interested in the puzzle of *how* it is that stories convey moral messages at all, especially Vonnegut's stories.

We are accustomed to thinking of most stories—perhaps all stories—as containing moral messages of some kind. It is not just fables that tell us something important about how to live, tragedies and horrors and satires and stories of quests do too. They teach us about love and death, grief and fright, adventure and boredom. They invite us to question our own values and to ask ourselves what we would do under those circumstances.

This leads me to wonder how it is that stories come to have such an effect. Why is it that stories make us think about how we ought to live?

I work primarily in the philosophy of art, which is well suited to answer questions of this sort, so I will turn to two contemporary theories in analytic aesthetics. Both theories emphasize the singular ability of narratives to produce empathy. Sometimes called the moral emotion, empathy is our capacity to take on another's perspective. Stories, by eliciting an empathetic response, teach us how to see through someone else's eyes, and this is central to their ability to communicate moral lessons.

Then I will turn my attention to how it is that Vonnegut's stories come to contain moral messages by thinking about his 1961 novel *Mother Night*. In his 1966 introduction to that book, Vonnegut writes, "This is the only story of mine whose moral I know. I don't think it is a marvelous moral; I simply happen to know what it is: We are what we pretend to be, so we must

be careful about what we pretend to be.” Taken at face value, *Mother Night* is more like a simple fable than Vonnegut’s other novels are. But Susan Farrell has proposed a reading of *Mother Night* that sees the novel as anything but simple and straightforward.

More on that later.

What makes a story? The philosopher Noel Carroll has proposed that, in order to constitute a narrative, a series of events must be presented such that their causal or probabilistic relation to one another is clear. For example, it is not enough to say that Howard W. Campbell wrote some plays, then talked to an American agent, then embarked on a career as a Nazi propagandist. This presentation of events is insufficient because it does not show what Carroll calls the “narrative connection” between these events. In the novel *Mother Night* it is clear that the fact that Campbell was a well-known playwright is the very reason that Major Frank Wirtanen approaches Campbell rather than someone else. Similarly, Campbell’s public support of the Nazi agenda stems from seeds planted by Wirtanen. In short, each event in a narrative is a contributing factor for future events.

Seen in this way, narratives inherently contain moral messages. Typical fables—those of the “Boy Who Cried Wolf” variety—work precisely because of the narrative connection. The boy repeatedly cries for help, so concerned citizens repeatedly come to his aid. Soon they realize that there never has been any danger and conclude that the boy has been lying. For this reason, no one comes to the boy’s aid when he legitimately needs it. From this narrative, which is practically a syllogism, we can deduce the intended moral: liars won’t be trusted even when they tell the truth.

When events are presented such that the narrative connection is clearly perceptible, readers can easily empathize with characters. This is because, by virtue of the narrative

connection, we readers have what amounts to direct access to characters' motivations, intentions, and even their emotional states. We can empathize with the villagers who, fed up with the boy's attention-seeking antics, essentially allowed him to be eaten by a wolf. To that end, by virtue of the narrative connection we can even come to empathize with characters whose actions we despise. I suspect that no one but the most callous sort of you-get-what-you-deserve libertarian could see the boy's death as just. Nevertheless, it is hard to find much fault with the inattentiveness of the villagers. In similar circumstances, perhaps many of us would have the same reaction.

By eliciting our empathy in this way, narratives allow us to imaginatively put ourselves into situations we've never experienced first-hand. They invite us to rehearse our reactions to such situations and to think them through without feeling the incumbent pressures and stresses full force.

Another way in which moral lessons can be derived from narratives is by virtue of their role as props in games of make-believe. The philosopher Kendall Walton conceives of works of art in precisely this way. In his book *Mimesis as Make-Believe*, Walton likens our experiences of works of art to childhood games of make-believe. To that end, just as children might—under the conditions of their game—think of a glob of mud as being a pie, artworks similarly serve as props. Works of literature, then, are essentially instruction manuals for somewhat more mature instances of make-believe. When Vonnegut writes in the voice of Howard W. Campbell, he is, in a sense, asking us to pretend with him that there was an American-born German playwright-turned-Nazi. To use one of Vonnegut's *Deadeye Dick* metaphors, a novel is something like a peephole, through which we can look into another world.

On this view, the empathetic response elicited by narratives is somewhat different in character than those that arise merely because of the narrative connection. Rather than being

outsiders who gain an essentially syllogistic understanding of characters' intentions and motivations and internal states by virtue of the narrative connection, readers who engage in make-believe prompted by a story are, in a sense, participants who enter the world of the fiction. On this view, the empathy evinced by stories is direct and unmediated.

The difference can be helpfully illustrated with two questions about *Hamlet*. On the narrative connection view, the question we ask ourselves is something like this: "What would I do if my father died under mysterious circumstances?" The philosopher Ted Cohen holds that this is insufficient for empathy. On his view, the question we must ask instead is this: "What if I were Hamlet?" Though it may seem small, the difference is actually rather profound. According to Cohen, empathy is not simply plopping myself—quirks and all—into someone else's circumstances. Instead, to truly empathize, I must respect—and therefore adopt—someone else's perspective. Hamlet is troubled by his father's death, presumably because they loved one another. Someone else, call him Charles, may not love his father; he may, in fact, hate his father and rejoice at the very thought of his father's death. Strictly speaking, Charles would not empathize with Hamlet if he simply imagined his own reaction to his father's death. Charles's reaction would be roughly the opposite of Hamlet's. To truly empathize, Charles must first make-believe that he is someone who loves his father.

By virtue of the narrative connection, stories invite readers to imagine what it would be like if they themselves were placed in a situation similar to the one represented in the story: What would I do if I were in Hamlet's shoes? On the view that sees stories as instructions for make-believe, stories invite readers to imagine that they are participants in the events that unfold: What if I were Hamlet?

Interestingly, these two views are not contradictory, and both seem to contain a nugget of truth. Simple stories such as "The Boy Who Cried Wolf" do convey simple moral lessons by

virtue of the narrative connection. Other stories, because they are complex enough to sustain being treated as props for our make-believe, can convey subtler and more complex moral messages. One question that we might ask, then, is which model provides a better account of the nature of such messages in Vonnegut's fiction.

In his introduction to *While Mortals Sleep* (the third posthumous collection of Vonnegut's previously unpublished work), Dave Eggers calls Vonnegut a *moralist*. He's not the only one. Jay McInerney once wrote that Vonnegut was a "moralist with a whoopee cushion." And, of course, there's no shortage of critics who cast Vonnegut as a fabulist.

I must admit that I bristle at that word *moralist*. I recoil at this usage because fables and morality tales so often take the form of simple narratives that work only at the level of the narrative connection. The events are engineered—perhaps even coercively—to illustrate a given absolute moral: Boy lies about wolf, and, for this reason is not trusted even when the danger is real. Therefore you should never lie because known liars are never believed.

Such simple narrative—stories that achieve their effect by virtue of narrative connection alone—are not the sort that constitute Vonnegut's masterpieces.

Slaughterhouse Five, for example, is, in Vonnegut's words, "jumbled and jangled" precisely because "there is nothing intelligent to say about a massacre." No typical narrative can express the complexity—the unspeakableness—of such an atrocity. The Tralfamadorian manner in which it is told is a formal attempt to defy such limitations.

Similarly, in *Breakfast of Champions*, Vonnegut again rebels against the limits of simple narrative, which creates the false impression that some people matter more than others, that in life as in stories, some people are heroes and others are mere bit-part players. He does this, again, through formal means, by placing himself, the author of the novel, into the story and by

identifying as the “spiritual climax” of the book a moment in which he empathizes and learns something from one of his own characters.

In these two novels, Vonnegut explicitly resists the simple narrative connection model, which is both coercive and too simplistic to capture the vagaries of real life. He does so by means of innovative formal devices, devices that invite readers to engage in a game of make-believe with the text. So it is the more difficult and more complex model of empathizing through make-believe that we associate with Vonnegut’s mature works.

What, then, of *Mother Night*?

At first glance, *Mother Night* looks like a simple fable. Taken at face value, the story is about a pretense: though Howard W. Campbell has no true ideological allegiance with the Nazi agenda—indeed he is fatalistically indifferent to the rise of the Nazis—he publicly pretends to be a vocal champion of that cause because, so doing, he can transmit information to the Allied forces. To that end, the succinct moral that Vonnegut gives straightaway (“We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be”) refers directly to Campbell’s pretense of anti-Semitism. After all, even if you are just pretending to be the most vocal, virulent Nazi—the one who, as Campbell’s father-in-law says, keeps ordinary Germans from thinking that their country had gone insane—you *are* a vocal, virulent Nazi.

Like all simple fables, this works by means of the narrative connection. Feeling powerless and therefore indifferent to the success of the Nazi Party, Campbell accepts the assignment from Major Wirtanen, who stipulates that the American government will neither confirm nor deny involvement in such a plot. By pretending, Campbell becomes what he was not. This pretense being his fatal flaw, Campbell is something of a tragic hero.

This face-value reading is typical, but it is not the only way of seeing the novel. I was on the panel here two years ago when Susan Farrell knocked my socks off by suggesting that Major

Frank Wirtanen was not real, that both he and Campbell's transmissions to the Allies were a figment of Campbell's imagination. As evidence of this, Farrell convincingly points to these facts: (1) no one other than Campbell ever sees Major Wirtanen, (2) Campbell's supposed code consists of such imprecise symbols as coughs, pauses, and mannerisms and it is never decoded, and (3) Vonnegut himself points us to this conclusion by suggesting in his Editor's Note that Campbell's confessions may contain lies.

Farrell sees Campbell's pretended pretense as a kind of coping mechanism that Campbell adopts in order to ease the pain of witnessing the Nazi horror show. As Farrell correctly states, this view brings *Mother Night* closer to such mature works as *Cat's Cradle* and *Slaughterhouse Five*. It does so by virtue of content, as both later novels also deal with human mechanisms for coping with the unpleasant and horrifying aspects of life.

Farrell's reading also brings *Mother Night* closer to Vonnegut's later novels—particularly *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*—in form. Like *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Breakfast of Champions*, *Mother Night*, which is presented as the edited confessions of Howard W. Campbell, makes use of a conspicuous formal device—a diary, with poems and news clippings, written by a narrator who may well be unreliable. This suggests that, like the two later novels, *Mother Night* is not a simple fable.

The face value reading is centered on the strange situation Campbell finds himself in. The questions we're likely to ask are "What if I were asked to do such a thing?" and "Could I even bring myself to do it?" The moral, then, amounts to something rather saccharine, something like: "Even if the ends justify the means, don't pretend to be something you're not." Compare this with "don't lie because liars are never trusted."

Farrell's pretend pretense reading invites different questions: What awful sort of desperation could lead a man to be so vile? What if I were Campbell? For that matter, what if I

was a German citizen, asked to spy on my neighbors, to join the army, to allow my children to become Brown Shirts? Again, Vonnegut himself asks that we think this way. In the introduction, after briefly recounting his experiences as a prisoner of war in Dresden, he writes: “If I'd been born in Germany, I suppose I would have been a Nazi, bopping Jews and gypsies and Poles around, leaving boots sticking out of snowbanks, warming myself with my secretly virtuous insides. So it goes.”

On Farrell's reading, the so-called confessions that constitute *Mother Night* are a window into Howard W. Campbell's secretly virtuous insides. As such, the novel invites us to do something that often seems impossible: empathize with Nazis. After all, as Campbell says, “They were people. Only in retrospect can I think of them as trailing slime behind. To be frank—I can't think of them doing that even now.” This is the sort of difficult, disorienting moral reflection that I'd expect Vonnegut to inspire.

When I do someday write about Vonnegut's moral views, I will undoubtedly talk about what might be called the anthropologist's perspective. Vonnegut talks of learning, in the Anthropology Department of the University of Chicago, that no one is perfectly good and no one perfectly evil. No one is a hero and more deserving of our empathy and consideration, but neither is anyone disposable and less deserving. This is an idea that cannot be conveyed by means of narrative connection alone. No simple fable could do it justice. Instead, Vonnegut's novels function as props for games of make-believe that are sometimes difficult and often enriching.