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## Human Action in Philosophy and Poetry

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DANIEL P. MAHER

## Human Action in Philosophy and Poetry

THE PHILOSOPHICAL EFFORT to see and say the truth about human agents and human action seems very different from the poetic effort to delight us with actors who only pretend to do what we see them do. These two modes of thinking present action differently, and I approach this difference through pedagogical considerations associated with teaching ethics in philosophy classes. Students rightly sense a difference between the philosophical appreciation of human beings as practical and the character of real human action as acted. In this paper, I argue that part of this distance can be bridged by considering the poetic imitation of action. Obviously, the imitation of action is artificial and therefore also stands at some distance from real action as acted. Nevertheless, I argue, philosophical reflection can benefit from the support of poetic display. My claim is not merely pedagogical, but philosophical: poetic imitation and presentation of action brings human action to full intelligibility, which would otherwise remain dormant.

In the first part of this article, I make some general remarks about the metaphysical warrant for supplementing philosophical ethics with artistic presentation of action, that is to say, *poiêsis* in the Aristotelian

sense. By drawing on some familiar Aristotelian distinctions, I show how literary depictions of action can carry philosophical weight. In the second, I consider, as one instance of philosophically insightful, poetic treatment of action, a short story by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn entitled “The New Generation.”

### I.

There are no trolley cars in my ethics class. There are no lifeboats or desert islands where we face arresting dilemmas. These fashionable thought experiments eliminate all the ephemeral accidents of ordinary reality and place anyone and everyone at the heart of a constructed situation calling urgently for decision. They can be captivating because they feel like a puzzle or a riddle, and this helps overcome the natural tendency to evade serious thinking about how we choose. Such problems crystallize and make plain the logic we embrace in making one decision rather than another, and they help us examine how we necessarily endorse principles embedded in our actions. Still, there are no trolley cars in my ethics class. Instead, there are stories.

I have two things to say in defense of this practice. The first requires a little metaphysics, for which I appropriate and adapt a thesis recently expressed by Robert Sokolowski: “Each accidental predication specifies a property.”<sup>1</sup> For example, saying “The window is broken” insinuates a property—*frangibility* or something similar—that belongs to windows. Mentioning the one determination (broken) invokes a property lying dormant in any window, which might be actualized variously, as in a window that is cracked or shattered or creaking. Accidents reveal properties and properties, in turn, specify essences. So a transient accidental feature, like a smile, is one of many possible manifestations of a property, traditionally called *risibility*, which is found in all human beings and only human beings and which is therefore revelatory of the human essence.<sup>2</sup> Risibility is a power or potency that might be actualized in a knowing grin, a childish giggle,

or a mocking laugh, as well as countless variants. The accident, which does not have to be there and is hardly a real being at all, signifies the property, which reveals one aspect of an essence. To mention a smile is to appeal implicitly to human nature. The Cheshire Cat, with its grin inhering in nothing, makes this point by way of nonsense.

Accidents, like smiles, mediate otherwise hidden natures. Even risibility is inaccessible to us; we know it only through its several actualizations—this polite chuckle, that impish grin, and so on. What is first for us is not first in itself, and no matter what progress we make toward understanding essences, we can never replace or dispense with our starting point, namely, the superficial and evanescent accidents. And the accident is intelligible only as a temporary and non-necessary determination of what is permanent “beneath” it, namely, the property immediately and the essence ultimately. In Aristotle’s language, accidents imply properties and essence as their matter, like *snub* implies *nose* and *nose* implies *animal*.<sup>3</sup>

Sokolowski shows how this metaphysical structure enables a good artist to evoke and intimate the human essence with the display of a simple accident. Even when the accident is instantaneous and almost without context, it has this power: Mona Lisa’s smile or Churchill’s scowl in Yousuf Karsh’s iconic portrait. By depicting a smile, a sigh, a promise, a hesitation, a blink, and other singular incidents in circumstances where someone or some particular character might act that way, the poet manifests the properties attached to human nature. The surface manifestations are simple and obvious, but the potencies underlying them are obscure. It is often difficult to name these properties, but the principle is undeniable: human beings are such that they can do these things; these acts are the blossoms of the interior nature. Accidents hint, and poets use accidents to suggest what lies within. When a character in a story makes a promise, we have before us human nature in one of its essential possibilities. What are we that we can and do make promises? While in the determinate present, we declare what the uncertain future shall hold or, at least, what it shall receive from us. In acting this way, what do we take ourselves to be,

such that we think we can bind ourselves today to act in specific ways tomorrow? And what do we do when it proves difficult to be a being that makes promises or when the promise we make conflicts with the nature we have?

The poet, rather than addressing these questions analytically or systematically, raises them by constructing a world where the human essence and its properties are on display in and through specific determinations. We see a promise made, and the ensuing action illuminates our nature. We do not get the whole of the property in question, but the whole property is there in potency because one particular actualization is on display. The dog that does not bark has its meaning from what it means to be a dog. The promise that is made and the action that unfolds belong to a human being, for whom action has an end, by nature, independent of particular choices. Aristotle says, "All human happiness or misery takes the form of action; the end for which we live is a certain kind of activity, not a quality. Character gives us qualities, but it is in our actions—what we do—that we are happy or the reverse."<sup>4</sup> The accidents illustrate our nature, not simply for structural display, but against the backdrop of the end of human action. Whatever may be lost in universality or comprehensiveness is, in the hands of the skillful artist, more than compensated for by the definiteness of actuality. This claim presupposes that the poet's grasp of the relevant subject matter is not confused or distorted. Because it often is distorted, however, there has arisen "an old quarrel between philosophy and poetry" (*Republic* 607b). The quarrel is not with poetry as such but with the limited or mistaken understanding a poet might possess, as Plato's own writing demonstrates.<sup>5</sup> In good poetic hands, the actions we see intimate natures we do not. This character smiles rather than laughs, or one character laughs when no one else does. Two characters in situations that are the same or similar act differently, or the same character acts now in one way and now in another, and yet a single property or character trait might be shown to be the principle of both actions. Not every accident that might be mentioned can be, and so

the selection of accidents is not accidental but integral to the story. The blush of Thrasymachus belongs to the argument of Plato's *Republic*. Furthermore, one human property is the capacity to change and thereby reform or deform oneself. Nevertheless, we cannot see the degree to which we can and cannot change our spots—and whether doing so is loss or gain—except through examining particular cases where people do or do not become other. A good poet chooses one manifestation of a property in preference to others in the artfully constructed situation, thereby conveying not only character, but a determinate and fixed appearance of human nature syntactically connected to the other elements in the narrative whole, with happiness and misery on the table.

Obviously, this does not amount to a complete literary theory. I have described a philosophical use of literature or a way to read at least some literature with philosophical concerns in mind. Some works permit this type of reading, and yet that does not mean literature is reduced to philosophy by other means. Some poets portray moral distinctions with great precision, and these can be philosophically illuminating, even if the poet pursues other things simultaneously.

I turn now to the second point in defense of stories in teaching ethics. The well-crafted story presents human action in the mode that most permits its intelligibility to appear. Ethics is concerned with real actions and real choices, but real human action has limited intelligibility. Its inescapable particularity precludes the universality needed for understanding, and its diffusion into accidental circumstances inhibits our efforts to identify independent wholes. Nevertheless, human intelligence finds at least three ways to deal with action. One dimension of intelligibility is achieved or appreciated by those with practical wisdom and missed by, for example, the incontinent and the vicious. This is practical intelligence engaged in making choices, where particular circumstances require great attention. Another form of the intelligibility of action is the philosophical sort achieved by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* and missed by those who do not see, for example, how ends structure choices and how

moral characters provide some determinacy to those choices. In this case, the near-constancy of character predominates over and gives intelligibility to particular choices, and one seeks to understand, say, the nature of friendship rather than to make friends. A third form of intelligibility arises only through poetry, which both exploits particularity and overcomes the inherently disjointed, episodic, and indefinite character of our actions.<sup>6</sup>

In real life, a single, deliberate action intersects with countless other lines of causality in essentially meaningless ways. While grading papers in my office, I am also drawing on the power grid, providing a market for office-supply companies and a burden for the trash collector, serving as a distraction for my colleague who drops by to chat, and so on. Again, the action of grading, as a human transaction with my students, is also a step in a process with indefinitely many beginning points: when I first began teaching or when I was hired at this job or when these students enrolled in my class or when their several educations first began. Moreover, despite the fact that my grading is very likely never to cause a ripple in the fabric of the universe—it might. It could have any number of effects on a particular student, and at no point can that action be said certainly to be finished. Real action has no clear beginning or end, in the sense that no first moment stands isolated from what came before and no last stage terminates all consequences, after which there is nothing. Real action is coterminous or coincident with indefinitely many prior, posterior, and simultaneous matters, to which it is nevertheless completely unrelated, except by happenstance. Most important, the anticipations of the future begun in the past and at work in the present, both in natural motions and deliberate choices, give way to a future that is not fixed; the lines of causality are subject to interference—unintelligible chance—such that some of what will come to be tomorrow is not genuinely in the process of coming to be today.

The poetic presentation of action brings action to intelligibility by isolating and connecting. Everything unrelated, improbable, and irrational is left out, and connections are established between what,

in real action, would be accidental or unintelligible.<sup>7</sup> Nothing merely happens “next” without happening because of what came before and for the sake of what comes after. *Plot* is the artificial form, analogous to substantial form, introduced by the poet into an indefinite subject matter, and the result is a likeness or imitation of real action, superior in its intelligibility precisely because it reproduces the incidental and eliminates it at the same time.<sup>8</sup> Aristotle’s *Ethics* focuses on character, and his *Poetics* focuses on action because only poetry fits action for contemplation. Real human action in its virtually infinite variety is too indefinite for comprehension. Character provides the unity and stability in an individual’s many actions necessary for Aristotle’s consideration of the good life in his *Ethics*, but we should not demand more precision than that subject matter permits and should recognize that a single life is not sufficiently unified for one story.<sup>9</sup> “Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete in itself” (7.1450b24–25). The imitation begins at a point artificially without antecedent, and it ends at a point artificially without consequence. Plot unites the sequential events, and the resultant whole approximates organic necessity, “with its several incidents so closely connected that the transposition or withdrawal of any one of them will disjoin and dislocate the whole. For that which makes no perceptible difference by its presence or absence is no real part of the whole” (8.1451a32–35).

“Poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history” (9.1451b5–6) because it evokes the universal; poetry’s accidents are not merely accidents, and in fact they are not accidents at all; they are intelligibly necessary to the imitation. History, in the sense of the things that have happened, untouched even by a historian’s art of selection, is stupid, and bad historians are ignorant of their own principles of selection.<sup>10</sup> The excellent poet imitates action by artificially isolating and connecting what really cannot be isolated and definitely connected. Countless elements that would be necessary in real life are simply ignored and denied, like whatever lies beyond the frame of a portrait. And the artificial form sinks into



the events on display and is not seen directly, much as the soul operates invisibly in a living being. Plot transforms the elements of the story while remaining itself transparent, and in this way we become convinced that the imitation is action. Verisimilitude is needed for plausibility, but this is a subordinate concern, and deliberate falsifications can enhance the work (*Poetics* chap. 25), provided they aid in rendering action fit for contemplation.

The most controversial thesis I want to entertain here is endorsed by Thomas Pruffer. He claims that real action is better understood by means of its imitation, despite the artificiality and occasional falsity of that imitation. We do not exactly look away from real action when we look at its imitation. Pruffer's thesis: "The original is enriched, not distorted, by its image. The imitated action is heightened and sharpened by the imitation into being more truly itself than it would be if it were not imitated and thus made available for contemplation in and through the transforming imitation."<sup>11</sup> This suggests that poetic form—that is, the plot of a story of, say, betrayal—is set within the accidents and incidents and characters that serve as matter for this form, and, by means of discerning that plot, we understand real acts of betrayal better. It is almost as if the poetic form takes the place of the Platonic form, and the particular act of betrayal exists by way of participation in the pure form constructed by the poet. That form is what our action would be if not depleted, eroded, and blurred at the edges by circumstances. The poet removes any reality that would create friction and blunt the edges of the form he wishes to present.

Poetic plot makes action intelligible, without necessarily being morally didactic or edifying. Aristotle says there is not the same kind of correctness in poetry as in politics (25.1460b13–14). Politics aims to instill virtue, and the best poetry does not have that standard for correctness. Poetry may falsify in various ways that are compatible with fitting action for contemplation; it need not aim at moral improvement. Similarly, the end of classroom instruction cannot be the inculcation of virtue. Teaching can help students think, but teaching cannot make them good. At least, it cannot aim to do so.

## II.

Not all dramatic works can be expected to articulate moral phenomena with the same clarity. Solzhenitsyn's sensitivity to moral distinctions lends his characters and their actions a moral precision other authors might not convey. Because there is no reality to characters and their actions other than what the author puts in the story, we can comprehend them in their actions better than we can comprehend real moral agents and their actions.<sup>12</sup> Excellent fictional characters display realism and complexity and avoid being flat or cartoonish. The poet includes in some fashion everything necessary for understanding their action, and whatever is not conveyed is unnecessary. Real agents and real choices (even our own) never reduce to full intelligibility. Their origins, their consequences, and their significance always elude our understanding to some degree or other. A good poetic whole is not episodic; there is a beginning, which has nothing necessary before it, and an end, which follows naturally after what precedes without being followed by anything else (7.145ob26–34). Solzhenitsyn is famous for writing on an epic scale, but he also writes stories of smaller proportion.

Below, I first summarize the action of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "The New Generation," with special attention to how the accidents display essential properties, and second, I illustrate some of the ways this text can help us think philosophically about action.

"The New Generation" has a literary form Solzhenitsyn called the *binary tale*.<sup>13</sup> Each story has two parts, and the form admits great variety in how the two relate to one another. In the two parts of this story, we see the same two characters interacting in vastly different circumstances: first in 1926, where Vozdvizhensky is an engineering professor administering an exam to students, one of whom is Konoplyov, and then in late 1930 or 1931 when Vozdvizhensky has landed in prison on wholly specious charges of sabotaging the revolution, and his interrogator turns out to be Konoplyov. This might seem like a clumsy reversal, lacking in subtlety, where the wheel

of fortune turns and the questioner becomes the questioned.<sup>14</sup> That is superficial, for the essential action of the story is not reversal but recognition. Vozdvizhensky is on trial each time, and only at the end does he see himself as he is. "The New Generation" is a tragedy after Aristotle's taste.

The story opens with Vozdvizhensky's administering a civil engineering exam on strength of materials. One student, Konoplyov, displays that distress immediately recognizable to every teacher and every student. Gradually, others complete the exam, and Konoplyov is the only student remaining. Vozdvizhensky speaks to him "firmly but not crossly." Konoplyov knows nothing of what he should know, and he does not pretend. His efforts have been sincere, but, as he puts it, "I'm out of place here." He is a tinsmith, moved to engineering school in preference to those who come from nonproletarian origins, in keeping with Soviet education policy. Seeing the effectively blank exam, Vozdvizhensky sympathizes and twice reaches for moral principle in the form of saying, "There's nothing I can do." Nevertheless, he recalls that the administration has given "unambiguous instructions to make allowances" for such students. And then Vozdvizhensky thinks the thought that, in one form or another, has entered the head not only of every teacher, but of everyone who has served any organization: "If the authorities have such a strict policy and are fully aware of the absurdities it creates, then why should I care more than they do?" (61). This passing thought evokes (among others) the property of institutions enabling them to adopt purposes that are incompatible with their ends and thereby to squeeze conscientious subordinates between their responsibility to pursue those ends and their obligation to obey instructions. As he has this deadly thought, he proceeds to give Konoplyov a fig-leaf lecture about study habits, patently irrelevant because both know effort is not the problem, and he passes Konoplyov, who jubilantly announces, "I'll never forget this" (62). An exhortation to virtue may be appropriate even when one strongly suspects it will be ignored, but exhorting someone you know cannot do what you urge bespeaks a different

kind of failure, and the relevant vice is in the speaker. Vozdvizhensky pretends to be serious about his responsibilities as he betrays them. More precisely and more damningly, he pretends to himself.

In the remainder of the first part of the story, we see Vozdvizhensky go home to his family, and we see Konoplyov attend a political rally for young people. As the professor makes his way home on the train, Solzhenitsyn uses the clothing of the passengers to tell the story of political transformation. Vozdvizhensky “dressed in a modest and well-worn suit but still kept his white collar and tie.” Other professors are more “in keeping with the spirit of the times.” We meet Lyolka, the professor’s daughter, about fourteen, busy welcoming her father home. “Their square oak table was already set and had a sprig of lilac at its center.” The sparseness of such details empowers this one to set a whole scene. Lyolka is interested in engineering school, but she is likely to be excluded for the same reason Konoplyov has been admitted. Moreover, she will not be one of those students recommended on the basis of “political reliability” (62). Her hair is unfashionably long. Her father seems to admire her *and* fear for her because she speaks her mind “so precisely and simply” (63).

While still troubled about Konoplyov, Vozdvizhensky urges his daughter to join the Communist Union of Youth or “Komsomol” because “you simply can’t avoid swimming along in this stream.” He says and genuinely believes, “This new generation of young people really does have something, some truth that we can’t fully understand. They certainly must have something.” He does not speak as a father who knows best. He has no judgment of his own, and he urges her to conform as well. For her part, not even to serve her academic aspirations will she join. We do not know her reasons, but she is emphatic: “I don’t want to. . . . The Komsomol is disgusting.” In response, her father “sighed once more” (64). The sigh is a momentary expression of resignation, an acceptance of failure. When did he sigh before? At the end of his exchange with Konoplyov, he gave the self-serving lecture, and then, “He heaved a deep sigh. Slowly and deliberately, he wrote in ‘pass’ ” (61). Solzhenitsyn connects the fecklessness of

the professor with respect to the student and the father with respect to the daughter. In different ways we see Vozdvizhensky unable to sustain a thought or to judge for himself. He acquiesces to vague forces he explicitly admits he does not understand: "They certainly must have something." Vozdvizhensky is decent, but that is all, and he trusts his decency, though he should not.

At the Lenin Regional Soviet House of Culture, Konoplyov attends a rally involving both Komsomol members like himself and younger nonmembers. Konoplyov senses he belongs among this crowd of six hundred. He feels power, but not personally. He feels it in the anonymity of the group and their swell of emotion: "There was something in this grand ceremony of coming together that just seemed to draw you in. . . . It hit you like some great battle cry, like making a solemn promise under oath" (65). This parallels Vozdvizhensky's hollow admiration for the new generation. Konoplyov identifies vaguely with and feels swept up in the "something" Vozdvizhensky sees incomprehensibly only from the outside. At the same time, the comfortable manner in which Konoplyov fits in with this group contrasts with two other instances where the human potential for belonging to a group is at issue. First, when personal knowledge is at stake in the classroom, Konoplyov cannot "fit in." His desperate helplessness isolates him, but nothing prevents him from dreamy absorption in the new generation. Second, Vozdvizhensky feels a different estrangement from the school due to the administrative policy at odds with his responsibility. He fits in by denying the legitimacy of his station as a professor. His uneasy conscience shows ambivalence toward this action and thus some remaining independent judgment. At the rally, Konoplyov endorses what he hears, but he is a follower, not a leader. "One comment hit home for Konoplyov: 'It's easy to say, "Achieve a whole decade of development in two years," but working at that pace might well kill you'" (68). Konoplyov, then, is no ideological fanatic; he preserves a sense of self-interest even as he carries out his duties within the Party.<sup>15</sup>

The second half of the story, then, begins approximately five years

later. In the intervening years, engineers in particular have been targeted for “wrecking” or sabotaging the interests of the people, who are inflamed with immoderate cries for their enemies to be “crushed” or “wiped from the face of the earth” (68). Vozdvizhensky feels “helpless” and unable to express his fears, except in confidence with his friend, Friedrich Werner, about whom we know nothing else. And then Vozdvizhensky finds himself arrested and held with others, who are interrogated, beaten, tortured, and otherwise mistreated. No one touches or even questions Vozdvizhensky until he has lost count of how many days he has been imprisoned. When finally asked about his role in sabotage, he denies it categorically, and in his innocence he can only think, “How can an *engineer* spoil anything?” This simple thought reveals one aspect of his extensive lack of self-knowledge. He does not recall having betrayed his professional responsibility by passing Konoplyov. Furthermore, he takes for granted that engineering knowledge is used for good and that the good is clear to all.

Soon his interrogator says, “I know very well that you weren’t involved in wrecking. But even you have to understand that *from here* no one leaves with an acquittal. It’s either a bullet in the back of the neck or a term in the camps” (71). Konoplyov speaks this threat in a kindly voice, and then Vozdvizhensky recognizes him. The Komsomol, we learn, pulled Konoplyov out of the engineering institute, and he has been an interrogator for three years. Because there is nothing to confess to, Vozdvizhensky is given the opportunity to make up an accusation against someone else. He will not do that. Several more interviews follow. Konoplyov treats him decently and allows him some privileges, all the while trying to persuade him. Vozdvizhensky clings to moral principle: “How could he dishonor himself, his very soul?” And then, using words that blend him into the Party, Konoplyov reveals his plan or, rather, *our* plan: “There’s a way you can be let out; just sign a promise to supply us with the information we need.” Vozdvizhensky has no idea what he could offer them. And Konoplyov explains, “About some of your acquaintances, Friedrich Werner, for instance. And there’s others on the list.” There

is a list. Admirably, Vozdvizhensky declares, "That I can *never* do!" Konoplyov plays his final card. "So—is it the camps? Just keep in mind: your daughter will also get kicked out of her last year as a class alien. And maybe your possessions and your apartment will be confiscated. I'm doing you a big favor." Vozdvizhensky drops his head and sobs, as he realizes finally the kind of man he is. The betrayal is terrible, but the tragedy occurs in the recognition of collapse inside the professor. Solzhenitsyn has the delicacy not to name this or describe it; he lets it appear in the silence preceding the sobs. Only one sentence remains in the story: "A week later he was set free" (73).

There is no violence, and yet this is brutal. As Aristotle prefers, the violence is kept off stage and presented through the action rather than by means of spectacle (14.1453b4–6). The brutality here—the soul-crushing use of Vozdvizhensky's love for his daughter to implicate him in political oppression—would be obscured had it involved physical violence. Konoplyov never touches the man because he knows he does not have to. When Konoplyov proved unable to write anything on the exam, Vozdvizhensky took it upon himself to solve the problem at the price of his own integrity. Konoplyov knows his strength of materials after all, and, as he promised, he did not forget what Vozdvizhensky did for him. This must have been Konoplyov's interrogation plan all along, not something improvised along the way. Having an engineer who informs is an asset, a much greater victory than a phony confession or accusation. They own Vozdvizhensky now and can do what they want with this broken man. He notices his disintegration only in its final moment, and we see this as the completion of what has been underway in him for some time.

In the second part of the second part of this article, I draw attention to aspects of this story that make it particularly useful in the classroom. One feature depends upon the narrator's voice. The narrator is somewhat impersonal, but closely identified with Vozdvizhensky's thinking. The narrator states things that are unknown to Vozdvizhensky, but we are usually looking at the events as they appear to him. Sometimes we even hear Vozdvizhensky's thoughts (61), but

we also hear Konoplyov's thoughts on occasion (66). In each case, the narrator's voice blends with that of the character. We are thus identified with each character, or at least we are asked to utter the thinking that belongs to each character in turn, as if these were our thoughts. That possibility—thinking the thoughts that belong to another—belies the notion of moral viewpoint as simply private, individual, irrevocably unique, and tied to personal convictions. We are invited to think from multiple points of view, and we find ourselves quite able to do so. This kind of thinking is essential to moral philosophy in the classroom. We ask students to read Kant and Aristotle and others, and the point is that they learn to appraise human actions as Kant and Aristotle do. Such authors typically see more perceptively than most, and trying on their thinking expands our capacities. Students often see no point in taking the trouble. Why exert oneself when one already has a point of view without effort? They know already, of course, about the multiplicity of perspectives, and, convinced as they are that no particular perspective is better than any other, they are committed to their own as most comfortable. Literary characters help to break this learned obstacle to thinking. Literary characters, when properly drawn, help one see the limitations of a point of view and how those limitations might be overcome.

The particulars of the action in the story help raise further issues.

First, the story displays evil in the form of malice and in the form of weakness. The widespread tendency to think that all people mean well or that weakness is not really evil is challenged in the story. Students reach for this explanation, but the story precludes it.

Second, in the opening scene a student struggles with an exam, and students immediately embrace the story. They want Konoplyov to be given a break, and yet they will come to admit that it is bad to pass a student who deserves to fail. No one wants to cross a bridge built by Konoplyov; passing him signifies not kindness but injustice and corruption. This can be established on the basis of the text without ambiguity, unlike real action, where our capacity to judge is more limited.



Third, students tend not to see the way in which Vozdvizhensky compromises himself in the first scene until they have seen it in light of the end of the story. And then they understand the beginning better. In a story, the meaning of one action can be defined in relation to another; in real action, we cannot have the same unity between what comes before and what comes after. These deeds illuminate one another in a way that they could not in real life because the same two actions would be related also to an infinite number of other actions, which cast light in different directions and with different effects. Within a story, the range of possible meanings is narrowed. On the substance of the issue, Solzhenitsyn helps us see Vozdvizhensky's dereliction of duty passed off as compassion. The moment where Vozdvizhensky asks whether he will do what he knows to be right or follow the path of least resistance is a moment everyone faces more than once. At first, students might see only kindness in Vozdvizhensky's treatment of Konoplyov. Less defensibly, some might think that Konoplyov has returned the favor by letting Vozdvizhensky go free at the end. That reading does not withstand a moment's scrutiny. No one does you a favor by threatening your family so that you will betray your friend. Likewise, it is not kindness to pretend someone is competent in a profession on which people depend. Students want something simple here that is easy to think about, but the story cuts one off from those readings.

Fourth, most students tend immediately to exonerate Vozdvizhensky because they see him as a victim. He is to be pitied, certainly, and one must acknowledge that even a much stronger person might collapse under such inhuman cruelty. Nevertheless, students do not reason to this conclusion; they simply grab clichés that substitute for thinking about the story. They tend to say Vozdvizhensky "had no choice." They try to argue that he exercises no moral agency at all and, consequently, that he *must* choose family over his friend. The contradiction here—they say he has no choice and praise him for choosing rightly—provides occasion for pointing out the difference between force, which removes moral agency (like prison move-

ments) and threats, which leave it intact while pressing it to operate in one way rather than another. Drawing this distinction helps to show how all moral agency occurs in a context of desires and fears and pressures of various kinds. There is no context-free choice, but the attempt to push one's decisions off onto one's upbringing or society or the company or anything other than one's poor self is the original human evasion. This text does not permit students to ignore that Vozdvizhensky chooses to do what he does. Vozdvizhensky himself does not think that he has done the right thing, nor does he pretend he has not acted. In real action, it would be impossible to preclude that something other than a moral choice occurred.

Finally, Solzhenitsyn presents a subtle reflection on the relation between family and the moral good. Students think of their families as being the source of their moral understanding and see no need to question what family attachments mean. Without presuming to do more than scratch the surface of this topic, I note that students at least claim to see no problem with abandoning a friend in order to protect family. At first, they do not anticipate that Konoplyov is equally capable of asking Vozdvizhensky to inform on his daughter in order to protect his son (or on either to protect himself). They come to see that if there is something or someone you will do anything to protect, an unscrupulous person can own you.<sup>16</sup> Such attachments are weaknesses, which is not to say one should not have them, but rather that one should think about what those attachments are and mean. If students want to defend Vozdvizhensky, Solzhenitsyn's text forces them to say that a family is the sort of thing that leads us to betray our friends and that preserving family justifies betraying friends. And once we have seen that, we can raise the question of why then the family deserves to be preserved. The human potency for attachment to family suddenly does not seem to be unqualifiedly good.<sup>17</sup>

That theme is somewhat muted in this story, but it appears prominently in the final sentence of the first part. During the political rally, a young person about the age of Vozdvizhensky's daughter asks a question about the Young Pioneers, which is the organization

for those too young for the Komsomol: “And who should listen to whom: a good pioneer to a bad father, or a bad father to a good pioneer?” The question insinuates that political affiliation is the standard of moral goodness and defines a bad father as one who opposes a good pioneer. In other words, when should our moral integrity lead us to abandon our family attachments? In real life, this question leads in a thousand directions, but in the story, it points to the only person identified as a father: Vozdvizhensky. To be sure, his daughter does not take her moral standards from the Party. Nonetheless, she asserts her moral integrity against her father’s counsel; should he listen to his daughter, or should his daughter listen to him? What is the relation between virtue and family? Once it has become clear to students that family—or what one has learned from one’s family—is not necessarily good, they recognize the need to think for themselves. And this is, in fact, the best one can aim to achieve in the classroom.

Solzhenitsyn does not tell us how to think about these questions, but his story puts them before us in a definite form through which we can begin thinking about philosophical understandings of, for example, virtue. I do not claim that this is the only way to understand literary form or that all stories serve this role equally well, but some do. Nor do I claim that poetry is essentially instrumental to philosophy, but only that philosophical inquiry can draw substantively from literary works. Their philosophical importance is not merely rhetorical or protreptic. The poetic appeal to the imagination makes it easier to interest people in philosophical questions, but that is not all. We see the significance of chosen actions better in dramatic display than in philosophical reflection. Philosophical thinking finds in poetry definiteness and precision—the intelligibility that real action lacks.

## Notes

1. Robert Sokolowski, *The Phenomenology of the Human Person* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 119. Most of what I say in the next few paragraphs is a restatement of matters expressed in his book. Kevin White has analyzed and developed Sokolowski's work on these matters in relation to the poetry of T. S. Eliot. See "Accidents and Incidents: A Phenomenologist Reads T. S. Eliot," *Logos* 17 (2014): 169–83.
2. Risibility is and frangibility is not a property in the strong Aristotelian sense of something that belongs exclusively to one kind of being. See *Topics* 1.5. The various actualizations of a property in the strong sense are more revelatory of the nature in which they are found than are accidents that might be found in other natures as well. In this paper, precision on this point is not crucial, but it is worth noting that differentiating between the strong and the looser sense of property may prove particularly important when speaking about human nature.
3. See, for example, *Metaphysics* 7.5.
4. *Poetics* 6.1450a17–20. Hereafter, otherwise unidentified references to Aristotle come from *Poetics* and will be indicated parenthetically in the body of the paper. In most cases I use the Bywater translation from *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984); Greek text: I. Bywater, ed., *De Arte Poetica*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911).
5. Sokolowski addresses the conflict and possible harmony between philosophy and poetry in "Two Questions about Philosophy: Whether It Is, and What It Is," *Proceedings of the American Catholic Philosophical Association* 54 (1980): 26–36. For more on the relation between artistic presentation and the human end, see Francis Slade, "On the Ontological Priority of Ends and Its Relevance to the Narrative Arts," *Beauty, Art, and the Polis*, ed. Alice Ramos (Mishawaka, IN: American Maritain Association, 1999), 58–69; also available online.
6. "The only form that can exhibit an action without pretending to explain it is . . . narrative." David Burrell and Stanley Hauerwas, "From System to Story: An Alternative Pattern for Rationality in Ethics" in *Knowledge Value and Belief*, vol. 2 of *The Foundations of Ethics and Its Relationship to Science*, ed. H. Tristram Engelhardt, Jr., and Daniel Callahan (Hastings-on-Hudson, New York: The Hastings Center Institute of Society, Ethics and the Life Sciences, 1977), 132. The three senses of intelligibility are identified by Thomas Pruffer in "Providence and Imitation: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* and Aristotle's *Poetics*," in *Recapitulations: Essays in Philosophy* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 16, n. 12.
7. "A likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility. Stories (*logous*) should never be made up of improbable incidents; there should be nothing improbable" (24.1460a26–29; translation slightly modified); "Even in the *Odyssey* the improbabilities in the setting-ashore of Ulysses would be clearly intolerable in the hands of an inferior poet. As it is, the poet conceals them, his other excellences veiling their absurdity (*hēdunōn to atopon*)" (24.1460a35–b2). The last phrase literally

- says “sweetening that which is out of place.” “Improbable” translates *alogon*, which might also be rendered “irrational.”
8. “Plot is the principle and, as it were, soul of the tragedy” (6.1450a38; my translation).
  9. See *Nicomachean Ethics* 1.3.1094b12–28. It should be added that whatever unity comes from character or from a single life is still less unity than is found in a single work of art. See *Poetics* chapter 8.
  10. See Nietzsche’s *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing, 1980).
  11. Pruffer, “Providence and Imitation,” 19.
  12. On the centrality of action, see John Lahr’s interview with David Mamet, “David Mamet, The Art of Theater No. 11” in *The Paris Review*, no. 142 (Spring 1997). Asked what he thinks a character is, Mamet replies:
 

It’s action, as Aristotle said. That’s all it is—exactly what the person does. It’s not what they “think,” because we don’t know what they think. It’s not what they say. It’s what they do, what they’re physically trying to accomplish on the stage. Which is exactly the same way we understand a person’s character in life—not by what they say, but by what they do. Say someone came up to you and said, I’m glad to be your neighbor because I’m a very honest man. That’s my character. I’m honest, I like to do things, I’m forthright, I like to be clear about everything, I like to be concise. Well, you really don’t know anything about that guy’s character. Or the person is onstage, and the playwright has him or her make those same claims in several subtle or not-so-subtle ways, the audience will say, Oh yes, I understand their character now; now I understand that they are a character. But in fact you don’t understand anything. You just understand that they’re jabbering to try to convince you of something.
  13. Nine such tales are collected in this volume: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Apricot Jam and Other Stories*, trans. Kenneth Lantz and Stephan Solzhenitsyn (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 2011). “The New Generation” appears on 59–73. Hereafter, page numbers cited parenthetically in the text refer to this story.
  14. See Elif Batuman, “Fascinating Solzhenitsyn Story Makes English Debut,” (19 August 2011) (Internet, accessed 25 June 2016).
  15. In *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn describes the interrogators who are known as Bluecaps:
 

Their branch of service does not require them to be educated people of broad culture and broad views—and they are not. Their branch of service does not require them to think logically—and they do not. Their branch of service requires only that they carry out orders exactly and be impervious to suffering—that is what they do and who they are. . . . Excluded by the nature of their work and by deliberate choice from the higher sphere of human existence, the servitors of the Blue Institution lived in their lower sphere with all the greater intensity and avidity. And they were possessed and directed by the two strongest instincts of the lower sphere, other than hunger and sex: greed for power and greed for gain.

See *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918–1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, 3 vols., trans. Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), vol. 1, 144–78, especially 145–47.

16. Solzhenitsyn describes how liberated are those prisoners who decide that they will not aim to survive at any price; such prisoners are more free than their guards. See, for example, “The Ascent” in *Gulag Archipelago*, vol. 2, 597–617.
17. In other writings, Solzhenitsyn shows how strong familial bonds are in fact the wedge used by the Soviets to undermine the moral integrity of people. See, for example, “Ego” in *Apricot Jam*.