

ON THE SEEMING INCOMPATIBILITY BETWEEN POETRY AND PHILOSOPHY

KAREN SIMECEK

Poetry as a mode of philosophizing can reasonably be considered a failure when making the following moves: from the experientially particular to general content (by means of abstract thought); from ordinary pre-reflective thinking (a contingent thought someone happened to have) to philosophically rigorous thought (which is rationally grounded); from domestic conceptions (connections of thought made by individual readers) to public conceptions (why these connections are relevant to our general, collective understanding). These problems arise when trying to meet the three main requirements of philosophical inquiry: generality, rationality, and justification. In order to show that the thinking involved in reading a poem is akin to the thinking involved in philosophical inquiry, poetry must make the right kind of moves in thought and meet these fundamental philosophical demands. In this article, the author offers a defence of the view that poetry can make a significant and valuable contribution to philosophical inquiry when faced with these three problems.

I. INTRODUCTION

A reason often given for rejecting the view that poetry can make a valuable and significant contribution to philosophical inquiry is that poetry fails to meet the fundamental demands of generality, rationality, and justification.¹

This worry about an alleged shortcoming of poetry is motivated by a particular view of philosophical inquiry, such as that offered by Anthony Quinton: 'Philosophy is rationally critical thinking, of a more or less systematic kind about the general nature of the world (metaphysics or theory of existence), the justification of belief

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¹ My argument in this article is related to the debate about literary cognitivism, the view that we can gain non-trivial knowledge from reading literature. For good arguments for literary cognitivism, see Noël Carroll, 'The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature, and Moral Knowledge', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 60 (2002): 3–26; Gordon Graham, 'Aesthetic Cognitivism and the Literary Arts', *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 30 (1996): 1–17; Eileen John, 'Reading Fiction and Conceptual Knowledge: Philosophical Thought in Literary Context', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 56 (1998): 331–48; and David Novitz, *Knowledge, Fiction and Imagination* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987). My focus on poetry seeks to contribute to a much neglected perspective on this debate by focusing on the formal features of the poem and the reading experience. For examples of the recent discussion on poetry, see Peter A. French, Ernest LePore, and Howard K. Wettstein, eds., 'Philosophy and Poetry', special issue, *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 33 (2009), especially John Koethe's essay 'Poetry and Truth', 53–60, in which he discusses the cognitive value of poetry. Koethe's approach is, however, very different from my own, for he considers the question from the point of view of the poet rather than what is going on the reading experience.

(epistemology or theory of knowledge), and the conduct of life (ethics or theory of value).² On a standard model, philosophical inquiry is taken to be primarily concerned with abstract thought (about ideas) as opposed to concrete thought (about things) in order to achieve its project of establishing general truths about the nature of the world and human life by means of articulating general propositions, critical thinking, rationality, and justification. Poetry, on the other hand, is often characterized as being the product of an 'overflow of feeling', both expressing subjective experience and giving rise to a subjective experience for the reader as he or she responds to the content together with the mode of presentation. The heightened sensory experience of the reader is achieved by the use of images and aesthetic features of the poem to express feelings. On this view, the experience of reading poetry does not offer the appropriate quality of thought for philosophical inquiry. Poetry seems more concerned with fineness of detail invoking our imaginative and emotional faculties, thus supposedly moving us further away from general, reasoned, and justified thought. Lamarque comments: 'Meaning in poetry is fine-grained and context-sensitive to a degree that is not exhibited or demanded elsewhere.'³

In this article, I will discuss three challenges faced by those who would argue that poetry can contribute to philosophical inquiry, and will seek to show how these issues arise from the philosophical demands of generality, rationality, and justification. Only by clarifying the problem can we hope to find a positive account of poetry as philosophy.

II. MOVING FROM ABSTRACT THOUGHT TO PHILOSOPHICALLY GENERAL CONTENT

The first problem is that poetry does not appear to involve a suitable level of abstract thought. Where philosophy seeks to establish truths or knowledge about the general nature of *x* by thinking abstractly about *x*, poetry seems instead to focus on the experientially particular features of an *x*, asking the reader to imagine some *x* and consider that *x* in a particular way. Consider the following poem:

'How to Kill'

Under the parabola of a ball,
a child turning into a man,
I looked into the air too long.
The ball fell in my hand, it sang

² Anthony Quinton, 'Philosophy', in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd ed., ed. Ted Honderich (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 702.

³ Peter Lamarque, 'The Elusiveness of Poetic Meaning', *Ratio* 22 (2009): 415.

in the closed fist: *Open Open*
Behold a gift designed to kill.

Now in my dial of glass appears
 the soldier who is going to die.
 He smiles, and moves about in ways
 his mother knows, habits of his.
 The wires touch his face: I cry
 NOW. Death, like a familiar, hears

and look, has made a man of dust
 of a man of flesh. This sorcery
 I do. Being damned, I am amused
 to see the centre of love diffused
 and the wave of love travel into vacancy.
 How easy it is to make a ghost.

The weightless mosquito touches
 her tiny shadow on the stone,
 and with how like, how infinite
 a lightness, man and shadow meet.
 They fuse. A shadow is a man
 when the mosquito death approaches.⁴

Here we are presented with a sniper shooting a soldier and are asked to consider this sniper's response to the killing of that soldier, focusing on his experiences and how he perceives the killing. The poem seems to require us to imagine the shooting of the soldier from the perspective of the sniper and to consider the features of this image as described. Consider in particular the final stanza which asks us to see the soldier he shoots in a particular way: Here we are being asked to see the death of the soldier as the fusion of a man with a bullet, which serves to affect how we are to perceive the killing. We are also responding to the mode of presentation of the poem, how the poetic features (such as rhyme, rhythm, and metre) make us feel and the associations this suggests to us. The quality of thought involved in reading the poem is sensory, experientially rich, and perspectival.

Mark Rowe sums up the problem as follows: 'The reason most commonly adduced for supposing that poetry cannot deal with abstractions is the belief that

⁴ Keith Douglas, *The Complete Poems*, ed. Desmond Graham (London: Faber, 2000), 119.

poetry should summon up mental images of the things it describes. As abstract thought is, by its very nature, unimageable, it cannot therefore have a place in poetry.⁵ And, equally, summoning the emotions seems bound to subjective experience, since one responds emotionally to the way the poem strikes one.

There appears to be something essentially non-abstract in reading poetry because attention to, and appreciation of, the mode of presentation is involved in our engagement with the poem. Poetry seems therefore to offer a different quality of thought from the abstract thinking required by philosophical inquiry. To put it another way, the worry is that the poetic experience encourages us to dwell on particulars, especially sensory particulars (for example, images of particular things) and this seems to be in tension with the kind of abstract thinking required for philosophical inquiry. Lamarque states: 'In each case abstract thought is associated with the opposite of the items [involved in reading poetry]: not sensuous and emotional but cerebral and rational; not personal and subjective but impersonal and universal; not imagistic and metaphorical but intellectual and literal; not particular and concrete but general and abstract.'⁶ If this is right, then it seems that poetry is not akin to philosophical inquiry.

Of course, it would be a mischaracterization of both philosophy and poetry to say that philosophy deals only in abstract thinking to establish some general content and that poetry does not involve any abstract thinking at all. But when we talk of philosophical inquiry being concerned with generality and abstractions we do not mean this in a trivial way; as Lamarque notes, every description involves general content: 'There can be no description without generality and no poetry without description. So poetry, like any discursive writing, cannot avoid the general even in its search for the particular.'⁷ The crucial difference for Lamarque is of degree and focus; philosophical inquiry is focused on establishing some general truth although it may appeal to particulars in its project, whereas poetry appears focused on the particular and uses abstract thought to enhance our way of perceiving that thing, which does not appear to offer any insight into the nature of that x. He wants to show that although general content is involved in the poem, it is not functioning in a fully abstract way: priority is given to the particular. We are asked to perceive the sniper's shooting of the soldier in a particular way, but does that offer us an insight into the nature of killing? Even if it does offer us some insight, Lamarque would maintain that the poem functions to describe some experience and the general thoughts that emerge enhance this experience. There

⁵ M. W. Rowe, 'Poetry and Abstraction', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36 (1996): 1.

⁶ Peter Lamarque, 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', in French, LePore, and Wettstein, 'Philosophy and Poetry', 38.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

is, however, an assumption at the heart of Lamarque's argument, which is that the only route to establishing philosophically worthy content is via abstract thought. It is this point that I think can be challenged. The question is not really whether abstract thinking is involved but whether we are able to get a philosophically general content through the kind of thinking involved in reading poetry.⁸ In order to show that poetry is able to make the philosophical link between experientially particular content and general content, we must show that poetry is focused on establishing (in the right kind of way) something of suitable level of generality rather than only being concerned with enhancing our perception of things perspectively.

The poem uses non-abstract thought to get to general content in the form of themes and thematic concepts. Themes are ideas and thoughts of a general nature which organize and unify the content of the reading experience, drawing binding relations between elements of the poem. Lamarque and Olsen argue that theme is not merely a universal feature of literary works but an essential feature of any literary work.⁹ And, consequently, consideration of the importance of themes in understanding and appreciating poetry reveals how general content emerges through reading poetry.

In reading 'How to Kill', general ideas and concepts emerge concerning the nature of killing in war (as indicated by the title); this poem is telling us what is required in order to kill at war and we are trying to grasp this through the experientially particular. We are also considering the general idea of a soldier.¹⁰ When I am considering the sniper's response in the poem I am considering whether he meets my understanding of what a soldier is and whether he meets my expectations of how one ought to behave in war. So although the poem offers the reader a vivid image of the shooting of a soldier, it appears that this experience somehow enables the reader to consider the poem on a thematic level. And such themes are not merely 'contingent by-products' of the reading

⁸ This problem is suggested by John Koethe in his essay 'Poetry and the Experience of Experience' in *Poetry at One Remove: Essays* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000), in which he argues that poetry 'aims at a representation of experience' (p. 67), which he takes to be a representation of the experience of abstract thinking – linking it to the subjective experience that the poet is trying to capture and express with his poem.

⁹ See Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen, *Truth, Fiction, and Literature: A Philosophical Perspective* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), 411–17.

¹⁰ One may worry that this concept is not of the same level of generality as our other philosophical concepts but a concept such as 'soldier' has normative commitments embedded in its meaning, standards which reflect our core values concerning human life. As the concept soldier is related to concepts such as war, killing, and good, which seem to be more like the usual concern of philosophical inquiry, what we come to see in our use of the concept soldier will have a bearing on these other concepts.

experience, because these general ideas are required in order to make sense of the poem as a coherent and consistent whole.

Themes will be general in nature. Trying to sort out thematic relevance when reading poetry necessarily involves reflection on the subjective experience, on the mode of presentation and our responses (including imaginative and emotional). In this way we can see how general thoughts can emerge from non-abstract thinking. The reading experience involves coherence in the form of themes. What these general thoughts are that make sense of this poem is not stated explicitly – the reader is required to allow the emergence of general content in the way he or she makes sense of the poem. We can sometimes experience non-abstract thinking (that has a subjective quality and is perspectively anchored) but the content is perfectly general.¹¹

So the worry here, it seems, is not whether poetry deals in abstractions but how a poem establishes the connection between the experientially particular and general content (its themes). Is this move sufficiently reasoned and rational? This brings us to the second problem.

III. MOVING BEYOND ORDINARY THINKING TO PHILOSOPHICALLY RIGOROUS THOUGHT

Philosophical inquiry demands rational and rigorous thought. But poetry seems to involve ordinary thinking, appealing to our everyday pre-reflective concepts in our understanding of the poem (and grasping its themes) and appears to be affected by how the content of the poem strikes us through the reading experience.

The poem does not involve logically valid reasoning in order to establish its themes. We do not infer or deduce something about the nature of killing at war from the description of the sniper. No logical relation is established nor argument offered in such description. The worry is that this general content emerges in virtue of the reader trying to make sense of the poem; the reader is not trying to make sense of the nature of killing in war but of the meaning of the poem.

¹¹ This idea is suggested by Aristotle: 'A universal is the sort of thing that a certain kind of person may well say or do in accordance with probability or necessity – this is what poetry aims at, although it assigns names [to the people]. A particular is what Alcibiades did or what he suffered.' Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. Richard Janko (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1987), 1451b8–12. See also David Davies, who interprets Aristotle as saying that something general can be gained from reading works of literature while employing non-abstract thinking, by engaging with the characters in a work of fiction: 'Literary fiction may be viewed as providing readers with an understanding of general principles. The narrated events may explicitly or implicitly exemplify and make salient to the reader general principles – moral, metaphysical, psychological, for example – which govern the unfolding of events in the real world.' David Davies, *Aesthetics and Literature* (London: Continuum, 2007), 145.

So the relationship between the experientially particular and the theme does not appear to be the kind of relationship established in rigorous philosophical inquiry. Lamarque expresses this worry as follows:

Poetry doesn't characteristically defend its philosophical themes by argument. If we think of the themes as philosophical propositions inviting truth-appraisal then the process by which they are arrived at can readily come to seem insidious. They emerge out of particularities giving shape to subject detail but the particularities are images and fictions of an essentially perspectival nature.¹²

We might concede, however, that the connection between the experientially particular and general is not logically valid but this does not mean that we have to give up on thinking it is rational. Zamir takes this kind of line, arguing that some questions of philosophy can only be investigated using rational but nonvalid means. He writes:

Drawing an inference from an example is not valid in the traditional sense: the impossibility of accepting a conjunction of the premises coupled with a negation of the conclusion. Accepting the need for nonvalid yet rational argumentation of this kind stems from the recognition that many of the beliefs relevant to philosophical reasoning are, for the most part, contingent.¹³

Zamir argues that you cannot validly infer a general conclusion from an example and they cannot therefore be used to form valid arguments. Since you cannot conclude everything from an example, it is a matter of judgement what is the most significant, relevant, and rational aspect to draw on: 'Literature's capacity to trigger the imagination and/or the emotions creates sensitive judgments and an enhanced sense of what matters.'¹⁴

The philosophical questions Zamir has in mind are those concerned with understanding aspects of human experience, such as questions concerning morality, where he emphasizes our everyday moral reasoning and moral education. Zamir gives the examples of love and parenting, which he argues 'do not lend themselves to rigorous justification',¹⁵ yet there are more and less rational ways of investigating the nature of love and parenting. These examples suggest that rationality cannot be reduced to logical validity.

Some of our concepts are value-laden; they have standards embedded in them which have been established by the community of language users who have

¹² Lamarque, 'Poetry and Abstract Thought', 51.

¹³ Tzachi Zamir, *Double Vision: Moral Philosophy and Shakespearean Drama* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 8–9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 11.

agreed a standard which determines firstly when it is appropriate to apply such a concept and secondly, once applied, whether x has met these expectations. The concept 'soldier' is value-laden in the sense that in order for someone to count as a soldier he or she has to meet certain standards, standards we appeal to in applying the concept to someone and assessing the appropriateness of their behaviour, actions, beliefs, and commitments as a soldier.

The claim I wish to make is that when reading certain works of poetry we are given access to the structures of our concepts and the standards embedded in them.¹⁶ Only then are we in a position to assess those standards which guide our moral judgements, for we cannot assess what is not explicit.

The primary philosophical function of the reading experience is to reveal the underlying structures of our thoughts including the standards and values embedded in our concepts. Charles Taylor argues that some concepts 'can be explicated only by reference to a subject who experiences his world in a certain way';¹⁷ that is, as a person for whom things matter. 'How to Kill' helps us to explicate the concept of a soldier, which can only be explicated by reference to a subject who endorses standards implicit in the meaning of that concept. It is for these concepts, that the experience of reading poetry can facilitate such explication of the norms implicit in them, because the values embedded are only meaningful in reference to how that thing figures in our lives as people.

The norms implicit in some of our concepts and the resulting expectations which we use to form our moral judgements are contingent; they have these

¹⁶ There are others who have made a similar claim about the cognitive value of literature, making the connection between reading literature and our conceptual understanding. Catherine Wilson suggests that the way we should think of how we can learn from literature is to view this learning as the 'modification of a person's concepts, which is in turn capable of altering his thoughts or conduct, and not primarily to an increased disposition to utter factually correct statements or to display technical prowess [in knowing what or knowing how]'. Catherine Wilson, 'Literature and Knowledge', *Philosophy* 58 (1983): 495. Bernard Harrison also draws on the idea of standards embedded in our everyday concepts, focusing in particular on the concept of measure and how this can be morally significant. He develops a very interesting account of how literature can facilitate richer conceptual understanding. See his 'Realism', in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Literature*, ed. Richard Eldridge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), accessed December 4, 2012, doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195182637.003.0011. Eileen John argues that our experience of reading fictional literature can give us access to conceptual knowledge. John's view is closer to my own than Wilson's (and, perhaps, also Harrison's), because she believes it is the reader who 'generates the interesting results'. See John, 'Reading Fiction', 333. For a similar account, see Richard Eldridge, *Literature, Life, and Modernity* (Chichester, UK: Columbia University Press, 2008). Although I am arguing that poetry can give us knowledge about our concepts, my account seeks to go deeper into how poetry achieves this in a way distinct from how this may be achieved by means of reading other forms of literature.

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 53.

values because of the way those things figure in our lives, we could have different norms implicit in these concepts if our lives had evolved in different conditions with different needs. Bringing these norms into focus and assessing them is not something that we can do through valid reasoning because of the contingency of the relevant beliefs. We cannot use such beliefs as universal premises, so we cannot form valid arguments.

Also, misunderstandings or failing to notice incompatibilities resulting from the standards embedded in our concepts may be compatible with having made the right connections but not appreciating their significance and implications when applied to the world and real-life situations. For example, I may have an adequate grasp of the concept 'soldier', having made the connections with war, killing, attack, and defence. But without applying the concept myself to a situation and having an experiential grip on the beliefs and moral commitments involved, I may not be aware of the significance of what I expect of a soldier.

In order to illustrate how the poem helps us to forge explicit awareness of the standards embedded in our soldier concept, I will focus on the use of enjambment of 'I cry / NOW'. We read and understand the words 'I cry' and respond instantly, forming an interpretation. These words alone suggest that his 'cry' is expressing distress and indicating a degree of compassion for the soldier whom he is about to shoot. This interpretation is reinforced by the very human description 'He smiles, and moves about in ways / his mother knows, habits of his' and the tenderness evoked by the touching of the wires against his face.

Yet when we read 'NOW' on the next line, the words 'I cry' become extended to 'I cry NOW', changing the meaning of 'cry' from distress to a command with urgency, removing what we took to be an expression of emotion. This change in meaning negates the reading of the previous line, leaving us, the readers, feeling confused and our expectations of behaviour exposed. The response to the words 'I cry' sets up an expectation of compassion, focusing our attention on the human aspect of the soldier who is about to be shot and therefore expecting the sniper to respond in a similar way. But these expectations are not met when we read on to the word 'NOW'. This causes emotional recoil, making us aware that our expectations of how one ought to respond to the killing have not been met.¹⁸

¹⁸ It may be useful to think of Gibson's discussion of acknowledgement, a notion he develops from Stanley Cavell, in John Gibson, *Fiction and the Weave of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). Gibson argues that complete knowledge of a concept will involve appropriate response, in other words, expressing acknowledgement of the value, significance, and meaning of that concept. And it would seem that the sniper in the poem, by responding to the killing in this way, would count on Gibson's discussion as failing to 'acknowledge [...] the knowledge [he] shares with us' (ibid, 107). The soldier he shoots is also a human being and therefore deserving of compassion, or at least this is what our emotional response seems to suggest.

The effect of the enjambment is a switching of focus from the role of the soldier to the killing of a man. Reading on in the poem we must try to make sense of these two elements, the soldier and the killing, which the rest of the poem is concerned with bringing together.

I must make sense of this as a unified whole, which requires me as the reader to bring together my appreciation of the role of the soldier and the act of killing. But it is my emotional response that makes me unable to do this in the way the sniper does; I cannot accept his evaluative scheme and I am left disgusted at his response. This shifting focus draws together my commitments relating to how one ought to respond to killing a human being and then what I expect of the soldier in consequence of the connection between these concepts. But by means of my aesthetic engagement with the poem I come to recognize the perspective of the sniper and the demands of being a soldier at war and how he ought to respond to the killing of the 'enemy'. By connecting these concepts from both directions in this way, the poem then reveals a tension; on the one hand I think he has not responded as he ought to but on the other hand I see the necessity of his response. This tension causes me to feel dissatisfied with my concept of a soldier, since I am left unsure of how to judge his actions, including his response to the killing. Could this tension have emerged, however, by valid rational means? Considering the values embedded in the soldier concept by rational and valid means would yield wrong results (even though it correctly establishes the connections to other concepts, beliefs, and so forth), recommending that we ought to talk and think about soldiers in a way that is incompatible with commitments and beliefs that we are not in fact willing or able (meaningfully) to give up. Such inquiry will have therefore failed to interfere with how we talk and think, and failed to offer workable recommendations. So, regarding the sniper, I may be able to reflect on what I think is required of a soldier, and may establish by rational argumentative thinking that in order for a soldier to defend he must be prepared to kill and continue killing. But as we have seen through our engagement with the poem we can come to recognize a tension between standards that are embedded in the meaning of a soldier at war, a tension between how one ought to respond to the killing of another person and how one needs to respond in order to continue performing the required role in war.

'A nonvalid yet rational move is being embedded within an aesthetic context that facilitates forming beliefs regarding contingent claims – that is, claims that cannot be rigorously established through argumentative procedures alone.'¹⁹ Instead of thinking of the aesthetic context of the poem as facilitating the forming

¹⁹ Zamir, *Double Vision*, 149.

of beliefs, we can think of the aesthetic context as facilitating explicit awareness of the structures of concepts, bringing to the fore the significance of the values embedded in them. So those commitments and beliefs which are pushing our intuitions and emotions need a different treatment; these are the commitments which our moral theories try to accommodate rather than seek to change. The way the poem facilitates articulation of these standards embedded in our concepts appears to be rational yet nonvalid.

IV. MOVING FROM THE CONTEXT OF THE POEM TO AFFECTING OUR GENERAL UNDERSTANDING

So far we have seen that poetry does indeed make the move from the experientially particular to general content in a sufficiently rational way. But there is still an important piece missing from the experience of reading poetry in order for it to count as a mode of philosophizing: philosophical inquiry requires justification. Without effective justification we cannot move beyond the context of the poem and our individual subjective experience to something of importance to general public understanding, which is of universal concern. Justification is required to bridge the gap between the thoughts and interpretation of the individual reader on the one hand and public understanding (with shareable reasons) on the other.

In order to discuss justification, more needs to be said about what kind of philosophical project poetry can contribute to. I will therefore draw on Neil Cooper's work on understanding and philosophical inquiry. He writes: 'Philosophy must interfere both with the ordinary use of language and with the actual structure of our concepts and thought. For it can make recommendations about how we should structure our thought and how we should talk and think.'²⁰ In other words, the philosophical project can reasonably be thought as one which affects our general understanding. We do not merely want to interfere with how an individual thinks, because this supposes that we have already worked out the standards for our conceptual understanding; it can only be a question for the individual if we (as a community of language users) are in a position to say that they have misunderstood and not met the standards of understanding required. In such an inquiry we aim to make recommendations about what we ought to mean or how we ought to think of things in order truly to reflect on the nature of the world or our normative demands (the meanings reflect our values) or both. On this view of philosophy, we can see that general ordinary thought can be the thing we want to challenge, clarify, and provide justification for. This problem is concerned with the move from the domestic understanding

²⁰ Neil Cooper, 'The Art of Philosophy', *Philosophy* 66 (1991): 172.

of the individual (which consists of both experientially particular and abstract thought) to general public understanding.

The issue for poetry is that it seems the connection between the experientially particular and the theme is restricted to the way the content of the poem strikes us during the reading experience. Although established by means of rational and self-critical thinking, the relevant connections are only forged because of the structure of the poem (as we saw in the use of enjambment in 'How to Kill') and it seems not to extend beyond the experience of reading the poem (and therefore affecting the structure of our thoughts). For example, I might read 'How to Kill' and see a connection between the killing described in the poem and the general nature of killing in war but I see this connection because of the experiential network on offer in the poem. But this connection from the experientially particular to the theme of killing in war only holds in the poem; my responses are responses to the way this theme is presented in the poem. So one might think the problem with poetry is that it does not establish suitable justification for the connections made and therefore cannot interfere with general public understanding.

I will now briefly sketch a solution to the problem, suggesting how the experience of reading does indeed provide suitable justification. For philosophical understanding, we must have a robust grasp of concepts, in other words, we must establish a deep enough grasp that we (as a community of language users) use the concept consistently and coherently with full appreciation of the values involved.²¹ In order to assess whether we do in fact have such robust grasp, we must reflect on whether we are individually satisfied with the public concept. This may seem primarily like a private project but it still has implications for the public conception because it provides us with the explicit awareness of the structure of the public concept. This awareness causes the domestic problem, giving us the terms and resources with which to assess the public conception.

Reading the poem 'How to Kill' causes me to feel dissatisfied with the concept of a soldier, since I am left unsure of how to judge the sniper's actions, particularly his response to the killing; if he meets the requirements of a soldier, he fails to meet the standard in terms of his response to the killing.

This represents dissatisfaction not just with my own concept but also with the public concept that I use to make sense of the poem. The tension in my conceptual networks represents a tension not between beliefs that I alone hold

²¹ John Gibson makes a similar point, arguing: 'Genuine understanding is never value neutral, [it] is never *merely* conceptual, at least not when it concerns human reality. To count as possessing full understanding of something, we must reveal not only that we have the relevant concepts and representational capacities. We must also show that we are *alive* to those patterns of value, significance, and meaning that are woven into the aspects of the world we otherwise merely know.' Gibson, 'Literature and Knowledge', 14.

but with those publicly held beliefs that connect the soldier concept with killing. So the domestic problem becomes a problem for the public concept because we must satisfy ourselves with the meaning of such concepts. We cannot rely on an expert to resolve this tension because the norms embedded in the concept have been established by the community of language users of which we, individually, are a part of. The burden then falls on us as individuals to acknowledge this tension at the heart of our public use of soldier.²²

What we are aiming at in order to achieve such satisfaction is explicit awareness of the structures of our understandings of aspects of human life. Having explicit awareness of the structures of our individual conceptions puts us in an epistemically privileged position because once the structures that shape our concepts are made explicit we are then in a position to assess the structures and norms embedded in our concepts.

Karen Simecek
Department of Philosophy, University of Warwick,
Coventry, CV4 7AL, United Kingdom
K.D.Simecek@warwick.ac.uk

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²² The idea of the literary experience placing pressure on our concepts is also suggested by Richard Eldridge who notes: 'Pressure is placed on our concepts, stances, and attitudes as they stand by perplexities – in large cases by traumas – that those concepts, stances, and attitudes do not readily accommodate. By taking up literary work as either a writer or reader, one may respond fruitfully to such pressure in a variety of ways.' Eldridge, *Literature, Life, and Modernity*, 18.

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