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Platonic Perfectionism in John Williams' *Stoner*

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Abstract: I argue that given a plausible reading of John Williams's *Stoner* (2012 [1965]) the novel throws light on the demands and costs of pursuing a strategy for self-realisation along Platonic lines which seeks unification through the adoption of a single exclusive end in a manner that emulates the Socratic maieutic teacher. The novel does not explicitly argue either for or against such a strategy but rather vividly depicts its difficulties, appeal, and limitations, thus leaving the ultimate evaluation up to the reader.

Keywords: John Williams, *Stoner*, Philosophy and Literature, Aristotle, Plato

1 Introduction

The philosophical insight to be gathered from literature is often thought of as somewhat opaque, or at least unsystematic, in character since it is usually suggested that the primary virtue of fiction lies in its attention to the particular (on this see Goldberg 1993; Hämäläinen 2016a; Nussbaum 1990; Winch 1972, 1987), its highlighting of the interplay between form and content (e.g., Nussbaum 1990: 3–53), or in its ability to go beyond conventional philosophical prose and argumentative techniques (cf. e.g., Diamond 1993; Hämäläinen 2016b; Moyal-Sharrock 2016; Wittgenstein 1922: 6.421; Winch 1972, 1987). Sometimes, however, it seems that literary works present us with easily identifiable philosophical arguments (on this see Green 2010, 2016). A third way in which literary texts can provide insight in a way that is neither opaque nor strictly argumentative is by scrutinizing philosophical positions in a manner that elucidates or poses problems for the position(s)

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in question that “may stimulate a philosophical perception which otherwise might have been missed” (Raphael 1983: 1).

In what follows, I argue that John William’s *Stoner* (1965) can be read in a way that makes it come out as an example of the latter kind.¹ In particular, I argue that the novel investigates the costs, demands, and benefits of a particular strategy – most famously articulated in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* Bk. 10 but having an important antecedent in Plato’s tripartite division of the soul (most notably in the *Timaeus*, the *Phaedrus* and the *Republic*; cf. esp. *Pl. Rep.* 434d–441c) – for unifying one’s life that relies on making the single activity of contemplation paramount.² In accounting for the Platonic elements that permeate the novel, I rely on the interpretation of central Platonic myths provided by Iris Murdoch (1970), since this interpretation appears to lie particularly close to Williams’ portrayal.

2 Our Life as a Whole

The opening paragraph of *Stoner* presents a summary of the book’s plot, which constitutes an obituary of sorts of its protagonist William Stoner, and makes it, I think, abundantly clear that we, as readers and interpreters, are meant to evaluate this life (cf. e.g., Doherty 2015: 69; Livatino 2010: 421–422)³:

William Stoner entered the University of Missouri as a freshman in the year 1910, at the age of nineteen. Eight years later, during the height of World War I, he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree and accepted an instructorship at the same University, where he taught until his death in 1956. He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses. When he died his colleagues made a memorial contribution of a medieval manuscript to the University library. This manuscript may still be found in the Rare Books Collection, bearing the inscription: ‘Presented to the Library of the University of Missouri, in memory of William Stoner, Department of English. By his colleagues’.

An occasional student who comes upon the name may wonder idly who William Stoner was, but he seldom pursues his curiosity beyond a casual question. Stoner’s colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a

¹ Henceforth, page references to *Stoner* are given parenthetically in the text.

² The soul’s tripartite structure is also, I take it, discussed in the *Laws* and hinted at (or anticipated) in the descriptions of the different virtues in the *Gorgias* (cf. *Pl. Gorg.* 493b1–3, 505b). Cf. *Arist. de An.* 432^b6.

³ On the novel’s rather fascinating reception history, see e.g., Mewshaw 2015; Doherty 2015; Habash 2013; Maughan 2014; Livatino 2010; Reicher and Haslam 2013.

sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers (1).

This suggests an interpretative strategy in line with ancient moral philosophy's stressing of the importance of the whole life for an accurate appraisal of an individual's fate (cf. e.g., Arist. *NE*1100^a10–1100^b22; Hdt. 1.30–32). Diana Martin argues that Stoner's evocative moment – a direct inquiry in front of his classmates from his teacher and later mentor Archer Sloane concerning the meaning of Shakespeare's seventy-third sonnet, "That Time of Year Thou Mayest in Me Behold," which leaves Stoner in a baffled focused daze – hints at the key to the "excitement that sweeps us forward," namely "the gathering certainty, conveyed by the clarity and conviction of the writing, that there is some pattern to be revealed, some meaning to the story that we can only dimly perceive" (Martin 2010: 1537).

Martin takes sonnet 73's main theme to be the "heightened perception that the imminence of death can give" (Martin 2010: 1538) and connects this to Stoner's attempt at an evaluation of his own life on his deathbed toward the very end of the novel (284–288):

When we come to the last section of the novel, which describes Stoner's terminal illness, we seem to rise with him to just such a higher plane of perception. Through his eyes, we see every nuance of color and shadow in the room where he lies, and with him, in this new, clear light, we begin to understand the inner trajectory of his outwardly unsuccessful life. The intensity and flow of the writing at the end of the book breaks on the reader with the same sense of profound insight that Shakespeare's sonnet brought to Stoner 40 years before. In this transcendent light, we finally recognize what we have been witnessing all along: a life of passion and integrity (Martin 2010: 1538).

This compelling analysis highlights two important Platonic (e.g., *Pl. Rep.* 520c; *Plt.* 294–296; cf. e.g., Arist. *NE*1104^a7–8; Broackes 2012: 9n24) metaphors: those of light and perception that we shall return to in what follows. The sonnet's final two lines, repeated for emphasis by Archer Sloane (11), highlight the perceptual element and introduce the further theme of love:

This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,

To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

What this suggests, I take it, is that we, as readers, are to evaluate William Stoner's life in its totality with special adherence to the role played by love and the way it colors his perception. Focusing on the totality of Stoner's life means that we must also evaluate the benefits, costs, and limitations of the strategy for self-realization adopted by the protagonist.

3 The Platonic Image of the Soul

During a weekly gathering at a saloon in central Columbia, David Masters, one of Stoner's two only friends – all of whom are doctoral students at the English department, teaching as a means to fund their studies – gives a heated analysis of the three friends and their respective views of “the true nature of the University” (28):

Stoner, here, I imagine, sees it as a great repository, like a library or a warehouse, where men come of their free will and select that which will complete them, where we all work together like little bees in a common hive. The True, the Good, the Beautiful.⁴ They're just around the corner, in the next corridor; they're in the next book, the one you haven't read, or in the next stack, the one you haven't got to (28).

Masters goes on to describe the third member of the circle of friends, Gordon Finch's instrumental view of the institution:

To you, the institution is an instrument of good – to the world at large, of course, and just incidentally to yourself. You see it as a kind of spiritual sulphur-and-molasses that you administer every fall to get the little bastards through another winter; and you're the kindly old doctor who benignly pats their heads and pockets their fees (28–29).

Finally, Masters gives his own cynic view of the matter⁵:

It is an asylum or – what do they call them now? – a rest home, for the infirm, the aged, the discontent, and the otherwise incompetent. Look at the three of us – we are the University. The stranger would not know that we have so much in common, but we know, don't we? We know well. [...] It's for us that the University exists, for the dispossessed of the world; not for the students, not for the selfless pursuit of knowledge, not for any of the reasons that you hear. We give out the reasons, and we let a few of the ordinary ones in, those that would do in the world; but that's just protective coloration. [...] [W]e have our pretenses in order to survive. And we shall survive – because we have to (29–31).

⁴ Note how, with these notions, all the main components of the higher tier of Platonic metaphysics are introduced.

⁵ Masters' ironic malevolence (30) mirrors the portrayal of the proponents of the three kinds of lives from Pl. *Rep.* 581c-e; esp. 581d. Note also how Stoner's fate can be read as gentle mockery of the conclusion of Plato's argument: that the philosopher wins by his use of arguments and since he has, by necessity, tasted the pleasures of the competing modes of life since childhood (Pl. *Rep.* 582b-e). Alternatively, the final pages of *Stoner* can be read as a corroboration of Plato's point as Stoner considers and rejects, in turn, the pleasures of youth and fame only to conclude that “[i]t hardly mattered to him that the book was forgotten and that it served no use; and the question of its worth at any time seemed almost trivial” (288).

Masters alludes to Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Act 3, Scene 4) in order to portray the three friends as in desperate need of protection both from inner and outer turmoil ("we're all poor Toms, and we're a-cold" (30)), and the discussion haunts the remainder of the novel (e.g., 172, 214, 254, 273, 283; cf. Livatino 2010: 418).

[F]or years afterward, at odd moments, Stoner remembered what Masters had said; and though it brought him no vision of the University to which he had committed himself, it did reveal to him something about his relationship to the two men, and it gave him a glimpse of the corrosive and unspoiled bitterness of youth (31).

While an important theme of the novel is undeniably the nature of the university, the roles it fills for people affiliated with it, and its place in the larger world, it would be a mistake to think that the main issue with Stoner's personal story simply is his relation to that particular larger entity.⁶ We must also, I think, recognize how the three men resemble the component parts of Plato's tripartite division of the psyche.⁷ Stoner, with his concern for the Good shows clear affinity with the rational (*nous*) part of the soul whereas arrogantly (27) jovial Dave Masters with his lust for honor and recognition represents the spirited (*thumoeides*) part and overweight (27) Gordon Finch, with his colorful shirts (260), represents the appetitive (*epithumêtikon*) part.⁸ If the three friends are indeed to be read as governed by Plato's

6 The university, apart from being a protective institution, also takes on the form of a symbol of a way of life, e.g., "Sometimes he stood in the center of the quad, looking at the five huge columns in front of Jesse Hall that thrust upward into the night out of the cool grass; he had learned that these columns were the remains of the original main building of the University, destroyed many years ago by fire. Grayish silver in the moonlight, bare and pure, they seemed to him to represent the way of life he had embraced, as a temple represents a god" (14). This passage, it seems, recalls Hegel's discussion of architecture (Hegel 2003: 221) as well as Heidegger's (1977: 27–29) discussion of the role of the ancient temple.

7 Plato introduces this picture of the soul in the interest of accounting for the familiar phenomenon of psychological conflict. While the details of the argument are subject to much debate its outline is comparatively simple: starting out from the assumption that a simple thing cannot exhibit the relevant opposites (Pl. *Rep.* 436b–c), Socrates claims that desiring something and rejecting it are opposites (437b–c) and presents three different sorts of cases where the soul both desires and has an aversion to one and the same thing. He concludes that the psyche contains (at least) three different elements. For recent detailed reconstructions see e.g., Price 1995; Bobonich 2002; Lorentz 2006; Stalley 2007. Cf. Irwin 2007: §§47–48; Singpurwalla 2010: 881–882.

8 The rational part of the soul knows what is advantageous for the whole and for each of its parts (Pl. *Rep.* 442c), aims at truth, loves learning and wisdom, and can be called philosophical (Pl. *Rep.* 581c). While first introduced as the part of the soul with which we feel anger (Pl. *Rep.* 439e3–4), Socrates' most explicit characterizations of the spirited part occur at Pl. *Rep.* 439e–442d, 545b–550c, and 580d–592b. The appetitive part is described as multiform (Pl. *Rep.* 580d) and should not be reduced to the source of bodily pleasures as Socrates attributes a wide variety of desires to it. On this see e.g., Cooper 1984; Pettersson 2013.

intra-psychic parallels to the three classes in the ideal state, then it would seem, provided that we should subscribe to Dave Masters' view of the three friends as constituting the university, that the isomorphic structure of city and soul carries over to the university too, making it, at least in theory, a form of ideal state (*polis*). This also helps explain why Dave Masters' death at Châteu-Thierry (on July 18, 1918) is especially keenly felt by Stoner throughout the novel, as Socrates repeatedly stresses that the spirited part of the soul is the natural ally of reason (e.g., Pl. *Rep.* 440b4–7, 440c1–7, 440c7–d5, 440d5–8, 440e3–6).⁹

In *Republic* 9, Socrates claims that each part is wholly directed toward a certain end and that when an individual is governed by a certain part of the soul he organizes his life¹⁰ around the pursuit of this end (Pl. *Rep.* 580d–581c). This “suggests that we should think of the parts of the soul as representing deeply embedded drives or values, which color our perception of the world, as well as direct our actions” (Singpurwalla 2010: 888).¹¹ The picture we have arrived at

⁹ In addition, courage, the characteristic virtue of the spirited part, is defined in terms of reason at Pl. *Rep.* 442b9–c3. If what I have argued here makes sense, it is possible to read *Stoner* as an investigation into what happens to the soul when the spirited part is lacking. While Plato's two-way division of rational and non-rational desires has seemed to many easy enough to accept, it might seem more difficult to understand what calls for a three-way division of the soul as the spirited part does not seem to yield a class of desires parallel to the rational and the non-rational. A reading of *Stoner* along the lines suggested here could provide some insight into this hotly debated topic. For some recent contributions to this debate see Irwin 2007: §§46–49; Singpurwalla 2013.

¹⁰ Aristotle (Arist. *NE* 1.5, 10.6–8 Cf. *EE* 1.4–5, *Pol.* 7.1–2; Pl. *Phd* 68b–c) also relies on this trope that casts the problem of our final end in terms of three kinds, modes, forms, or ways of life (*bios*; on the term see e.g., Sellars 2009: 21–32; Reeve 2012: 239): the life of enjoyment (*apolaustikos*), the life of politics (*politikos*), and the life of contemplation (*theōrētikos*). On this see e.g., Joly 1956 (although see also Wilson Nightingale 2004: 17–24); Lawrence 1993: 33–34; Brown 2013; Lockwood 2014. It is unclear whether life (*bios*) in Arist. *NE* X 6–8 is supposed to be read (following e.g., Stewart 1982: II 443–445) as “aspects” of which there can be many or (following e.g., Cooper 1975: 160) as an exclusive “mode of life.”

¹¹ It is unclear whether we should read Plato as claiming that the three lives exhaust our possibilities. Aristotle considers and dismisses what is for him a fourth candidate, a life devoted to moneymaking (which for Plato constitutes the most versatile version of the life of enjoyment), as a non-starter due to the instrumental nature of money (Arist. *NE* 1096^b5–10). *Stoner* seemingly takes a similar view, as indicated by the brief account of Stoner's father-in-law's suicide in conjunction with the 1929 stock market crash (111–112).

might seem far removed from the way(s) people ordinarily tend to live their lives.¹² I believe the most fruitful reading to be along the following lines: while there is nothing in principle that excludes a life made up of many aspects, the strategies for attaining fulfillment that naturally go together with such modes require a more or less exclusive focus to stand any chance of success. This means that any one of the three life-archetypes can take on a range of different guises when manifested in particular lives. It is certainly true that many of us are more comfortable with a balancing of multiple aspects (e.g., social, familial, and civic) of life than with a singular focus on one sort of activity but this (as e.g., Lockwood 2014: 366–367 remarks concerning a similar problem in Aristotle) does not in and of itself provide an argument against the latter strategy, as we might equally well argue that a “view of life as comprising an unending balancing act is a bit chaotic (if not downright Sisyphean)” (Lockwood 2014: 366).¹³ At any rate, Stoner’s strategies and way of looking at the world abound with such Platonic elements, since his love of learning, the true, the good, and the beautiful, and disregard for money and reputation is clearly governed by reason (*cf.* *Pl. Rep.* 581b). In order to fully appreciate Stoner’s personal narrative, we must evaluate his conviction to teaching and learning and the strategies he employs in dealing with this way of life. Stoner is, as Lear on the heath, plagued by both inner and outer turmoil, but if, as Livatino (2010: 421) suggests, we are to read him as a hero, then we must ask ourselves how he is capable of overcoming (if indeed he does) those obstacles.

12 Aristotle, reiterating Anaxagoras’ claim, recognizes that the *Sophos* will appear “absurd” (*atopos*, *Arist NE1179^a15*) to most people (*cf.* *Pl. Symp.* 175a5, 221d). The *exempla* of virtuous agents to be found in the first nine books of the *NE* are both social and emotive whereas the *exemplum* of the sage (*sophos*) to be found in Bk. X 7–8 by contrast is singularly preoccupied with his mind (*nous* – a part of the soul Aristotle describes as disconnected from emotions and as possible to exercise, provided one is wise, in perfect isolation from others (*Arist. NE1178^a15–16, 1178^a19–20, 1177a33–34*)). The quasi-divine (see Long 2011) life described as the pinnacle of happiness in *NE* X 6–8 (*cf.* esp. 1177^a33–34) seems equally strange and some commentators (e.g., Jaeger 1948; Nussbaum 2001: 276–377) have sought to excise Bk. X 6–8 on the grounds that it can be read as belonging to an earlier platonic phase of Aristotle’s thinking.

13 For recent introductory treatments of the modern debate that originated with Hardie 1965, see e.g., Lear 2009; Irwin 2012. The debate has often been framed in terms of what activities a well lived life includes or excludes with “monistic” or “dominant” end interpretations (such as Hardie 1975; Heinaman 1988; Kraut 1989) holding that it includes only contemplative activities and “inclusivist” end interpretations (such as Ackrill 1980; Cooper 1999; Crisp 1994; Whiting 1986) allowing for non-contemplative activities. For compromise positions seeing non-contemplative activities as approximating a final end see e.g., Charles 1999; Lear 2004; Scott 1999. For dissatisfaction with the state of the debate in general see e.g., Bush 2008; Long 2011; Bostock 2000: 201. For an attempt to side-step the debate see Lockwood 2014.

Doing so will highlight what I take to be important insights into the internal workings and costs of applying such a strategy.

4 Conviction, Love, and Planning

Some commentators (e.g., Livatino 2010: 421) have remarked upon a feeling that grips the reader; a feeling that one would want Stoner to “get out” and turn his back on his wife or the university in order to save himself.¹⁴ This feeling, it seems to me, results, at least partly, from the difficulties we have in comprehending the magnitude of the demands inherent to a life devoted to contemplation and teaching places upon us.

Initially, we share this incomprehension with Stoner himself. At the beginning of his university career, Stoner seems to lack any sort of plan (other than to attain a degree from the college of agriculture, which is forced upon him from the outside), let alone a clearly formulated one. On top of this, Stoner’s stoicism – inherited, it is suggested (e.g., 2), from his parents and agrarian upbringing – leads him to endure life in a manner that might lead us to question whether he really constitutes an active agent. It might be thought that he stumbles upon the few opportunities he is awarded without anything resembling a clear plan:

‘But don’t you know, Mr Stoner?’ Sloane asked. ‘Don’t you understand about yourself yet? You are going to be a teacher.’

Suddenly Sloane seemed very distant, and the walls of the office receded. Stoner felt himself suspended in the wide air, and he heard his voice ask, ‘Are you sure?’

‘I’m sure,’ Sloane said softly.

‘How can you tell? How can you be sure?’

‘It’s love, Mr Stoner,’ Sloane said cheerfully. ‘You are in love. It’s as simple as that.’ (19).

Stoner’s love brings definitiveness and change of perception as his practical deliberation goes from being unreflectively ordinary in the sense that it lacks a clear purpose to hinting at comprehension of the demands and costs that his new path will involve. It would be a mistake to take this initial lack of a clearly formulated plan to constitute the reason for Stoner’s ultimate shortcomings. This

¹⁴ Upon the possibility of retiring at 65, Gordon Finch remarks “[H]ell, Bill, life’s too short. Why don’t you get out too? Think of all the time –” to which Stoner retorts: “I would not know what to do with it,” [...] “I never learned” (261).

would be to miss the significance of this meeting with Archer Sloane as an evocative moment in Stoner's life. Immediately after that meeting, Stoner starts to recognize the costs of the choices he has made:

He thought of what he would have to tell his parents, and for the first time realized the finality of his decision, and almost wished that he could recall it. He felt his inadequacy to the goal he had so recklessly chosen and felt the attraction of the world he had abandoned. He grieved for his own loss and for that of his parents, and even in his grief felt himself drawing away from them (21).

A plan begins to take form, even though it is by no means fully articulated or understood by the protagonist.

He saw the future in the institution to which he had committed himself and which he so imperfectly understood; he conceived himself changing in that future, but he saw the future itself as the instrument of change rather than its object (24).

Little by little Stoner begins to recognize that a plan, or at least a commitment to a certain kind of life, is needed. This commitment comes with an estrangement from his parents (*cf.* 21–23), a, at times gripping, “awareness of all that he did not know, of all that he had not read” that disrupts “the serenity for which he laboured” (25), and a felt inability to convey his own excitement to his students (26).

5 External Goods and Moral Vision

Some of William Stoner's shortcomings – at least early on in the novel – stem from the process character of external goods necessary for life fulfillment. Many, if not all, of the things that stand out as plausible candidates for constituents of the good life, such as friendship and knowledge, are processes.¹⁵ They ought, so to speak, never to be far from one's mind and for them to fulfill the role they ought to play in a fulfilled life we must continually engage with them. This continual engagement seems hard to account for if these goods are not part of an overarching plan but rather just engaged with when the situation at hand speaks in favor of doing so. Many of the things that could have been valuable and fulfilling activities in Stoner's life fail to deliver, at least partly, because Stoner, at least initially, seems to

15 The “if not all” qualification is intended to side-step the intricacies of what has been called “the passivities objection” (Lott 2016; Wolterstorff 2008: 176), i.e. the idea that the emphasis on agency and activity inherent to many perfectionist ethical approaches prevents them from accounting for important goods – such as goods consisting in being treated in certain ways, that are neither activities nor necessary instruments for such activities (see Crisp 2010; Lott 2016; Wolterstorff 2008).

view them as intermediate goals to be achieved (and simply kept on hold once they are), rather than as activities forming part of a life-plan. The problem is, arguably, worsened due to Stoner's exclusivist strategy in that such a strategy invites, and in its more extreme incarnations perhaps requires, looking at intermediate ends as valuable only in so far as they are conducive to the overarching activity embraced.

The realization that many goods necessary for life-fulfillment have such a process-character is, in line with the novel's preoccupation with love, most keenly felt in connection to Stoner's love affair with Katherine Driscoll, a gifted younger colleague¹⁶:

In his forty-third year William Stoner learned what others, much younger, had learned before him: that the person one loves at first is not the person one loves at last, and that love is not an end but a process through which one person attempts to know another (199).

This understanding of love closely resembles that which Iris Murdoch develops out of the writings of Simone Weil:

Love is the extremely difficult realisation that something other than oneself is real. Love [...] is the discovery of reality. What stuns us into a realisation of our supersensible destiny is not, as Kant imagined, the formlessness of nature, but rather its unutterable particularity; and most particular and individual of all things is the mind of man (Murdoch 1959a: 51–52).

Closely connected to this understanding of love as recognition of the other as real is another idea Murdoch gathers from Weil and elaborates upon, namely that morality is (largely) “a matter of attention not of will” (Murdoch 1961: 20/295, 1956b; cf. Weil 1956: 205; Broackes 2012: 53; Holland 2012) and that “true vision occasions right conduct” (Murdoch 1970: 66/353).¹⁷ This, combined with the idea that what

16 The sharp contrast between Stoner's marriage (with its impersonal initial courtship (55), purely bodily sexual arousal, and questionable release thereof on behalf of both parties (75–76; 86–87)) and his love affair (with its age-difference, reciprocity (198–200), seamless mingling of body and soul (202, 205), shared spiritual goals (204), progress towards insight (204), and painful aftermath (224–226)) correspond in minute detail to the stages outlined in the *Phaedrus*, see esp. Pl. *Phd.* 250d–252b. For an insightful and thorough treatment of this difficult passage in Plato see Nussbaum 1994: 1570–1581. On this in relation to Murdoch see Nussbaum 2012.

17 The connection, as far as I understand it correctly, seems to be possible to spell out along the following lines: recognition of, and proper attention to, the other as real helps us, provided that we put in the effort (1970: 37/329), to hone our conceptions into a personal vision (1956a: 39–40, 1970: 22/316–317, 37/329) and through the application of these conceptions – which are “normative-descriptive” (Murdoch 1970: 42/334) – to the world “an action will follow naturally” (Murdoch 1970: 42/334) if our vision is correct. On this see below. The idea here, I take it, is, at least in part, that “by tightening the connection between cognition and choice, we make this connection in one way easier to defend: it need not go through the metaphysics of the will” (Setiya 2013: 7. Cf. McDowell 1978: 15–16, §2; 1979).

we are able to see is dependent upon our conceptual scheme (*cf.* Murdoch 1970: 32), makes moral progress largely a matter of conception revision, a process of perfecting our grasp of concepts. This, it seems, is exactly what Stoner accomplishes with his understanding of love:

In his extreme youth Stoner had thought of love as an absolute state of being to which, if one were lucky, one might find access; in his maturity he had decided it was the heaven of a false religion, toward which one ought to gaze with an amused disbelief, a gently familiar contempt, and an embarrassed nostalgia. Now in his middle age he began to know that it was neither a state of grace nor an illusion; he saw it as a human act of becoming, a condition that was modified moment by moment and day by day, by the will and the intelligence and the heart (201).¹⁸

This episode resembles Murdoch's famous example (Murdoch 1970: 16–23/312–313) of a mother, M, who, without exhibiting any outward changes in behavior, changes her conception of her daughter-in-law, D, thus illustrating both the importance of the inner life and how moral progress can be a matter of changing our way of conceptualizing the world and others that we meet in it.

As Kieran Setiya (2013: 10) points out, it is tempting to understand such changes in light of Bernard Williams' (1985: 140) notion of "thick moral concepts" such as "*coward, lie, brutality, gratitude, and so forth* [...]" characteristically related to reasons for action" whose application is simultaneously "action-guiding" and "world-guided" (Williams 1985: 140–141, italics in original).¹⁹ However, as Setiya (2013: 11) points out, it is not, *pace e.g.*, Brookes (2012: 14–15), mere non-vicarious correct application of such concepts but the rarely approached perfection of "true vision" that guarantees motivation on Murdoch's approach. Furthermore, Murdoch's Platonic approach is, in contrast with Williams' Nietzschean leanings, much less bound up in the degree of social convergence displayed by such concepts and she consequently allows for "specialized personal *use* of a concept" (Murdoch 1970: 25/319, italics in original) that "may be private or idiosyncratic" (Setiya 2013: 11).

18 Note how the stages of realisation outlined here correspond to the stages on the soul's journey towards enlightenment outlined at *Pl. Rep.* 509d–511e.

19 On Williams' connection to Murdoch in this instance see Williams 1985:141n7; Brookes 2012: 15n37. The connection to reasons envisaged by Williams makes him focus on concepts with valence, a restriction not to be found in Murdoch. These concepts are world-guided in that there are necessary limits to divergence in their use as those who grasp the relevant concepts are bound to agree in their application (except at the margins (Williams 1985: 140–141)) and action guiding through their characteristic relation to reasons and because one cannot grasp them unless one shares, at least through imagination, their evaluative point (Williams 1985: 140–142). "Thin" concepts do not share the same degree of world-guidedness due to their freer terms of application (although they are not, presumably, unbounded, on this see Foot 2002: xiv).

Our grasp of the relevant moral concepts is “infinitely perfectible” (Murdoch 1970: 23/317) in a way that drives reason to accept such perfection as an ideal limit:

I want here to connect two ideas: the idea of the individual and the idea of perfection. Love is knowledge of the individual. M confronted with D has an endless task. Moral tasks are characteristically endless not only because ‘within’, as it were, a given concept our efforts are imperfect, but also because as we move and as we look our concepts themselves are changing. To speak here of an inevitable imperfection, or of an ideal limit of love or knowledge which always recedes, may be taken as a reference to our ‘fallen’ human condition, but this need be given no special dogmatic sense. Since we are neither angels nor animals but human individuals, our dealings with each other have this aspect (Murdoch 1970: 28/321–322).

This idea of infinite perfectibility, which should not be conflated with this ideal being unreachable, shields Murdoch from charges of passivity against the idea that the virtuous agent is “compelled almost automatically” (Murdoch 1970: 37/329) to act. If this is the whole story, the argument goes, then the ideal deliberator is always simply reacting to (his conception of) the situation at hand rather than from a general plan for shaping his environment and this is hardly a depiction of life at its best (cf. Kraut 1993: 366n2). If we understand the idea that the agent – capable of choice, deliberation, calculation, and supplied with a “view about the reason why” (Arist. *EE*1226^b21–30) – ought to live life under “a correct conception of doing well [cf. Arist. *EE*1214^b6–10; *NE*1095a18–20], as brought to bear on this situation, dictates acting with a view to [the] particular end” (McDowell 1996: 25) then the endless activity of shaping the relevant conception takes on such a prominent role that a charge of passivity seems much less compelling. This is so even if the conception at work “is only implicit in the mind of the deliberator” (McDowell 1996: 24).

Also, since the situational comprehension that occasions such almost automatic reactions is the object of continual conscious effort on behalf of the agent, we have even less cause for concern. The historical, personal, and continuous elements (all stressed by Murdoch, cf. e.g., Murdoch 1956a: 43, 1961, 1970: 26/319–320) of this process are illustrated toward the end of *Stoner*:

Then he smiled fondly, as if at a memory; it occurred to him that he was nearly sixty years old and that he ought to be beyond the force of such passion, of such love.

But he was not beyond it, he knew, and would never be. Beneath the numbness, the indifference, the removal, it was there, intense and steady; it had always been there. In his youth he had given it freely, without thought; he had given it to the knowledge that had been revealed to him – how many years ago? – by Archer Sloane; he had given it to Edith, in those first blind foolish days of his courtship and marriage; and he had given it to Katherine, as if it had never been given before. He had, in odd ways, given it to every moment of his life, and

had perhaps given it most fully when he was unaware of his giving. It was a passion neither of the mind nor of the flesh; rather, it was a force that comprehended them both, as if they were but the matter of love, its specific substance. To a woman or to a poem, it said simply: look! I am alive (259).

This episode bears a striking resemblance to Plato's Analogy of the Divided Line (Pl. *Rep.* 509d–511e) and the journey of the soul portrayed there, and it is to this that we shall turn in the next section.

6 Love and Learning

In the midst of his efforts to come to terms with his choice to remain at the university, the United States enter the First World War, and Stoner “discovered within himself a vast reserve of indifference” (33). Although he resents the disruption upon the university, he, unlike his friends, cannot muster any strong feelings of patriotism, and ultimately, after yet another enlightening encounter with Archer Sloane, who recounts the devastating effects the American Civil War had on scholarly efforts, elects to stay at the university rather than to join the war effort. Sloane urges him:

You must remember what you are and what you have chosen to become, and the significance of what you are doing. There are wars and defeats and victories of the human race that are not military and that are not recorded in the annals of history. Remember that while you are trying to decide what to do (36).

It is clear that Sloane speaks from personal experience as he is soon destroyed by the onset of the war (*cf.* 39–40) in a manner that foreshadows Stoner's later rapid ageing during the next Great War. Unlike Sloane, destroyed by the sense of waste that the war brought, Stoner manages, at least for a while, to endure through belief in the strategy he has committed himself to:

He foresaw the years that stretched ahead, and knew that the worst was to come.

As Archer Sloane had done, he realized the futility and waste of committing one's self wholly to the irrational and dark forces that impelled the world toward its unknown end; as Archer Sloane had not done Stoner withdrew a little distance to pity and love, so that he was not caught in the rushing that he observed. And as in other moments of crisis and despair, he looked again to the cautious faith that was embodied in the institution of the University (228).

This strategy, although successful in the moment, does have a dividing effect upon Stoner and thus threatens to undermine itself from the inside in the long run just as the war, as it drags on, constitutes more and more of a threat to the protective institution that is the university:

The years of the war blurred together, and Stoner went through them as he might have gone through a driving and nearly unendurable storm [...]. Yet for all his stoical endurance and his stolid movement through the days and weeks, he was an intensely divided man. One part of him recoiled in instinctive horror at the daily waste, the inundation of destruction and death that inexorably assaulted the mind and heart; once again he saw the faculty depleted, he saw the classrooms emptied of their young men, he saw the haunted looks upon those who remained behind, and saw in those looks the slow death of the heart, the bitter attrition of feeling and care (254).²⁰

The level of self-sufficiency attained by the (near-)exclusivist strategy adopted by Sloane and Stoner is so high, especially when one is shielded by a protective institution such as the university, that only extraordinary circumstances – here most forcefully depicted by the onset of war – can mar one’s life:

He saw good men go down into a slow decline of hopelessness, broken as their vision of a decent life was broken; he saw them walking aimlessly upon the streets, their eyes empty like shards of broken glass; he saw them walk up to back doors, with the bitter pride of men who go to their executions, and beg for the bread that would allow them to beg again; and he saw men, who had once walked erect in their own identities, look at him with envy and hatred for the poor security he enjoyed as a tenured employee of an institution that somehow could not fail (226–227).

Self-sufficiency (*autarkes*: Arist. *NE*1097^a15–1098^b10; cf. Annas 1993: 34–42) is a formal demand that together with completeness (*teleios*; Arist. *NE*1097^a25–30; cf. Bradley 1927: 74–78) is placed on our ultimate end, the well-lived life (*eu zên*), commonly accepted in the ancient ethical discussion.²¹ The level of self-sufficiency attained by Stoner, I think, accounts for the feeling that while he might be conceived as failing, he is perhaps never defeated.

It is with his choice to remain at university that Stoner for the first-time experiences that the continual activity of building up and adjusting our practical world (cf. Murdoch 1970: 26/319–320) and sense of what matters by articulating a plan for our life can, at times, make moral choice a matter of simply seeing what is to be done²²:

20 Archer Sloane’s fate and Stoner’s later misfortunes recall Aristotle’s remarks concerning Priam at Arist. *NE*1101^a1–14; cf. e.g., Hursthouse 1999: 74–75.

21 This end is also characterized as being desired by everyone for its own sake (See e.g., Pl. *Euthd.* 282^a1–2, *Sym.* 205^a7f; Arist. *NE*1097^a5–6; Green 1883: §253) and as forming the resting place of desire (See e.g., Pl. *Sym.* 205^a; Arist. *NE*1097^a15–24 Arius 76.21–4, 131.4; Sextus, *PH* I 25; Alex. *Aphr. de An.* II150.20–21, 162.34; Green 1883: §§ 171, 176).

22 Stressing this continuity moves us away from “choice” as a central notion and the “choice situation” as the assumed *locus* of moral philosophy. It also seems to problematize any clear demarcation of the sphere of moral philosophy (cf. Bradley 1927: v, 193ff./215ff.). This emphasis on continuity and the whole of an individual’s life, in turn, also questions the idea of morality as marked by “imperatives’ and disagreeable duties” (Bradley 1927: 194/215; cf. Annas 1993: 4–7).

He had never got in the habit of introspection, and he found the task of searching for motives a difficult and slightly distasteful one; he felt that he had little to offer to himself and that there was little within him which he could find.

When at last he came to his decision, it seemed to him that he had known all along what it would be (37).

Here, it seems to me, Stoner becomes aware that “our ability to act well ‘when the time comes’ depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention” (Murdoch 1970: 56/345), that moral development has much to do with the work we are required to do with honing our conceptions in between isolated situations of choice (*cf.* Murdoch 1970: 37/329), and “that reflection rightly tends to unify the moral world, and that increasing moral sophistication reveals increasing unity” (Murdoch 1970: 57/346–347; *cf.* 1970: 70/357; *Pl. Rep.* 443d). This unity manifests itself through the increased understanding of the connections between concepts such as “love” and “knowledge” (*cf.* *Pl. Rep.* 508d–509b; Murdoch 1970: 95/378).

‘Lust and learning.’ Katherine once said. ‘That’s really all there is, isn’t it?’

And it seemed to Stoner that that was exactly true, that that was one of the things he had learned (204).

This idea of unity (“quite unlike the closed theoretical unity of the ideologies” (Murdoch 1970: 94/377)), when combined with the theory of conception revision outlined above amounts to nothing short of an interpretation of Plato’s analogy of the divided line (*Pl. Rep.* 509d–511e, itself, presumably, an allegory of the soul *cf.* *Pl. Rep.* 508d, 592).²³ On what I take to be Murdoch’s (1970: 94–95/377–378; *cf.* Broackes 2012: 73) understanding of the Plato passage, the soul ascends through four stages of enlightenment to the idea, or concept, of the Good only to descend again in order to revisit the concepts it had previously only had an imperfect understanding of.²⁴ This conceptual understanding must be brought to bear on “the world of particularity and detail” (Murdoch 1970: 96/379) through proper

²³ The label “divided” is, on this interpretation slightly misleading in that it might suggest that the world of forms is in some strong sense separate from the world of perceptible things and that our mode of epistemic access to the two are distinct. On the interpretation here offered quite the opposite is the case.

²⁴ Murdoch (1970: 95/378) admits that “Plato’s image implies that complete unity is not seen until one has reached the summit, but moral advance carries with it intuitions of unity which are increasingly less misleading.” This insight is illustrated (Murdoch 1970: 95/378) through (the intuitive plausibility of) the thesis of the unity of the virtues.

attention (there is a return to the cave at *Pl. Rep.* 520c). This return is effectuated by Stoner through his teaching, and it is at its most effective when he is able to transcend his ego and display his loving attention to his subject (e.g., 114–116), which paves the way for insight into the self:

He felt himself at last beginning to be a teacher, which was simply a man to whom his book was true, to whom is given a dignity of art that has little to do with his foolishness or weakness or inadequacy as a man. It was knowledge of which he could not speak, but one which changed him, once he had it, so that no one could mistake its presence (115–116).

Stoner relies on an intellectual discipline to get to grips with the virtues “at work in *accurate perception* of an independent and respected reality” (Broackes 2012: 69) in a manner similar to that in which Murdoch utilizes art (Murdoch 1970: 85–90/370–274; cf. Broackes 2012: 71–72). Indeed, Murdoch recognizes that “[a]n intellectual discipline can play the same kind of role as that which I have attributed to art, it can stretch the imagination, enlarge the vision and strengthen the judgment” (Murdoch 1970: 90/374).

Although the above-quoted passage illustrates how “increased understanding of an art reveals its unity through its excellence” (Murdoch 1970: 96/379), it also illustrates how there is still work to be done for Stoner. “A serious scholar,” Murdoch remarks, “has great merit. But a serious scholar who is also a good man knows not only his subject but the proper place of his subject in the whole of life [as ... the] area of morals, and ergo of moral philosophy, can now be seen, not as a hole-and-corner matter of debts and promises, but as covering the whole of our mode of living and the quality of our relations with the world” (1970: 96–97/379–380). Stoner too, although he has the outward appearance of someone cloistered in his studies and teaching, understands this outside world:

It was a commonplace among his colleagues – especially the younger ones – that he was a ‘dedicated’ teacher, a term they used half in envy and half in contempt, one whose dedication blinded him to anything that went on outside the classroom or, at the most, outside the halls of the University [... b]ut William Stoner knew of the world in a way that few of his younger colleagues could understand. Deep in him, beneath his memory, was the knowledge of hardship and hunger and endurance and pain (226).

7 Light

The imagery of light plays a major part in the novel. Many of Stoner’s realizations are accompanied by a change of lighting (e.g., 11–12, 14, 19–20). Further emphasis is added by the contrasting of natural versus artificial light (e.g., 47, 201), with

many of the most profound changes in Stoner's life taking place with light shining in through the windows etc (*cf.* esp. 288). This not only recalls the usual metaphoric connection between light and enlightenment (*cf.* Reichardt and Cohen 1998) but also Plato's Simile of the Sun (*Pl. Rep.* 507b–509c) and its continued influence – through neo-platonic philosophers (*cf. e.g.*, Remes 2008: esp. 197ff.) – upon medieval art, Stoner's own area of specialization.

The Simile of the Sun is further extrapolated upon *via* the allegory of the cave (*Pl. Rep.* 514a–520a) and in the present context, given the contrast between natural and artificial light already noted, we need to place special emphasis on the role of the fire in the cave as a false and distracting sun. Murdoch argues that there is a “genuine mysteriousness” (1970: 99/381) that attaches to the idea of goodness and the Good due to the unsystematic nature of the world (coupled with our human frailty) and our distance from the Good (coupled with our tendency to be blinded by the self). If we, following Murdoch, understand the fire in the cave as a false sun representing “the self, the old unregenerate psyche, that great source of energy and warmth” (1970: 100/382), we find a way of understanding the role played by artificial light and romanticism in *Stoner*.

Romanticism's (and its descendants' (on this, see Murdoch 1959b)) preoccupation with the self, in the sense of *e.g.*, the belief in and celebration of the genius, is most obviously to be found embodied in Stoner's professional antagonists, department chairman Hollis Lomax (*e.g.*, 172–177), and his protégé Charles Walker (*e.g.*, 143–152, 156–165), as well as in Stoner's wife Edith (*e.g.*, 53–55, 118–123, 240–242). The three characters display different extreme incarnations of that concern for the self deeply bound up with romanticism's view of man that Murdoch calls “romantic freedom,” *i.e.* a view of the individual as “solitary and as having importance in and by himself” (Murdoch 1959a: 53/217), and which she sees as leading to existentialism.

Hollis Lomax is by far the most successful of the trio, since he manages to stake out his own identity, whereas the other two only can manage to define themselves by reference to something else (*e.g.*, Walker's respectful and loving “caricature” of Lomax at 144 and Edith's conscious dismantling of Stoner's relationship with their daughter at 125–126). Even so, we get the feeling that even despite his charisma (*e.g.*, 92–95) and the fact that Lomax is described as “a good man” (170, 264) and “a good teacher” (264) that has soul (*i.e.*, he resembles Dave Masters (see 94–95)), something is not quite right with his relation to the true and the good (175, 264).

Edith's cloistered upbringing (which, it is strongly hinted, was plagued by sexual abuse from her father) tied to her social class severely limits her sense of identity. She is brought up “upon the premise that she would be protected from the gross events that life might thrust in her way” (53). This leads to a form of life diametrically opposed to the one aiming at self-sufficiency through focus on a

single all-embracing end pursued by Stoner. At times (e.g., 120–121, 129–131), Edith’s attempts at self-fulfillment through a range of “hobbies” read like a parody of existentialism’s concern with the self’s creation of meaning.

It is telling that whenever Lomax (e.g., 165–168, 173–177), Edith (e.g., 7781), or Walker (e.g., 141, 149–150) makes reference to what is right or just, they do so by reference to benefits or advantages to selves or groups of selves in a way that recall the attempted definitions of justice forwarded by Thrasymachus and Glaukon in the *Republic* (Pl. *Rep.* 338e, 358e–359a). Lomax, Edith and Walker are the products of an understanding of the self, traceable to the Enlightenment and Romanticism in such a way that, in a sense, William Stoner’s ultimate dilemma is that described by Iris Murdoch:

We have not recovered from two wars and the experience of Hitler. We are also the heirs of the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and the Liberal tradition. These are the elements of our dilemma: whose chief feature, in my view, is that we have been left with far too shallow and flimsy an idea of human personality (Murdoch 1961: 16).

But Stoner is far from flimsy. He is far from being unconcerned with “techniques of improvement” or “emphasising choice at the expense of vision” (Murdoch 1961: 19). Indeed, his death can be seen as illustrating Murdoch’s point that “there is a special link between the concept of Good and the ideas of Death and Chance (One might say that Chance is really a subdivision of Death. It is certainly our most effective *memento mori*.) A genuine sense of mortality enables us to see virtue as the only thing of worth, and it is impossible to limit and foresee the ways in which it will be required of us” (Murdoch 1970: 99/381):

He dimly recalled that he had been thinking of failure – as if it mattered. It seemed to him now that such thoughts were mean, unworthy of what his life had been (287).

It hardly mattered to him that the book was forgotten and that it served no use; and the question of its worth at any time seemed almost trivial (288).

The scene also illustrates Shakespeare’s 73rd sonnet’s main theme of heightened perception at the imminence of death, and in so doing, highlights how this perception can result in a kind of “attention which is not just the planning of a particular good action but an attempt to look right away from self toward a distant transcendent perfection” (Murdoch 1970: 101/383), which might provide help when difficulties seem insoluble. This activity is, Murdoch argues, “difficult and easily corrupted” (1970: 102/383), and it is easy to see how the kind of single-mindedness that is required by Stoner’s adopted strategy requires that there be no turning back, no abandonment of the project, for any reason whatsoever as that would mean a return to a meaningless existence. William’s flowing prose can be

thought to stand in the way of immediate contemplation in that the reader is swept along with the narrative in a manner that makes questions concerning e.g., the narrator's reliability seem secondary, but, I believe, the narrator's remorselessly relentless factuality is instrumentally essential in conveying this image of Stoner's unwavering conviction. Through the narrator's voice we are given an illustration of how unwavering commitment can be transformed into unquestioning acceptance of the unfolding events as both natural and unavoidable. The dangers of this transformation should be apparent enough. Unwavering commitment can, when distorted, lead to dangerous fanaticism but it can also, if guided by love and proper attention, provide a kind of stability that brings with it a high degree of self-sufficiency. I think that it is one of *Stoner's* greatest strengths under the reading here presented that it does not argue for or against the strategy in question but instead vividly presents to the reader its dangers, costs, and limitations as well as its benefits.

I have argued for a close-reading of John Williams' *Stoner* as providing us with a useful illustration of the practical implication of pursuing a strategy for self-realization along Platonic lines which seeks unification through the adoption of a single exclusive end in a manner that emulates the Socratic maieutic teacher. This illustration, the thought goes, helps us better understand the importance both of conceptual work related to our understanding of our end and the nature of love. Thus read, the novel is an example of a literary text that provides insight by scrutinizing philosophical positions in a manner that elucidates or poses problems for the position(s) in question while all the while leaving the final evaluation up to the reader.

References and abbreviations

Abbreviations for Greek authors follow the list of abbreviations in Liddell H. G., Scott R. & Jones H. S. (eds.) (1968) *Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press. Roman numerals following an abbreviated work refer to chapters or parts; Arabic numerals following a colon refer to pages; Arabic numerals following a section sign refer to sections. References to the Corpus Platonicum use standard Stephanus numbering. References to the Aristotelian corpus use Bekker numbers.

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