Stories that Move Us: The Intersection of Fiction and Moral Engagement

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In this essay, which I hope one day can turn into a book, I am going to explain how my moral intuitions are engaged with my beloved fictions: The Lifecyle of software objects (Ted Chiang, 2010); Wild Wise Weird: The Kingfisher stories collection (Vuong, 2024), The three-body problem (Liu Cixin, 2014).

The Lifecyle of software objects

If we spend years and years creating, training, interacting, and ultimately, falling in love with our imperfect digital pets, what course of events would make us delete them? What does such a loss entail?

Indeed, *The Lifecycle of Software Objects* by Ted Chiang is thought-provoking as it is poignant. The novella masterfully pushes my moral intuitions to the edge on multiple questions: our responsibility toward our digital creations, their personhood and rights, and whether these digital creations can have consciousness. Ted Chiang, in his characteristic clear prose that blends philosophical inquiry with emotional depth, poignantly invites readers to reflect on the complexities of the relationships between humans and digital beings.

The story follows Ana Alvarado, a former zookeeper, and Derek Brooks, a 3D animator, who work at a tech company called Blue Gamma. Their task is to develop sentient digital avatars known as “digients,” which are designed to serve as pets in a virtual world called Data Earth. As the digients grow and learn, they exhibit personalities and emotional responses akin to those of children. The narrative spans over a decade, chronicling the challenges Ana and Derek face as they navigate the evolving landscape of technology, including software upgrades and changing market demands.

The digients’ existence raises profound questions about the nature of intelligence, attachment, and the ethical implications of creating life-like entities. Ultimately, the novella reflects on themes of empathy, community, and the fragility of relationships in an era of rapid technological change. It poses critical inquiries about what it means to form bonds with artificial beings and the responsibilities that come with such connections.

Wild Wise Weird

Imagine you are among the birds, listening to their songs. It’s likely that they are arguing and hashing something out. What if the birds' village is like a human village? How would they tell

right from wrong? How do they teach each other things of value? How do they avoid being fooled by the social game of face-saving?

Quan-Hoang Vuong's *Wild Wise Weird: The Kingfisher Story* collection features 42 short stories about Kingfisher, a character living in a bird village filled with changes—his dreams and ambitions, social events, new technologies, the changing climate, and the inevitable aging of the body. Life in the bird village parallels life in traditional Vietnamese villages. While the Kingfisher is one of the wisest and most respected birds in the bird village, the ever-changing world often presents him with situations that lead to comical attempts to save face. And his quirky thoughts are sure to bring readers smiles, better yet, moments of quiet reflection, which is befitting because the first 15 stories were published in the *Khoảng Lặng* (Quiet Moment) column of the Vietnamese magazine Kinh Tế và Dự Báo (Economy and Forecast Review) from 2017 to 2019.

In these stories, the author reminds us that even qualities typically considered moral goods, such as planning, innovation, traditions, or meditation, must be approached with a balance of seriousness and absurdity. Moral wisdom comes from not taking ourselves too seriously, and looking at the world and ourselves in it in a with a just a bit more openness, generosity, and free spirit than we normally have.

The Three-body Problem

If we know that there exists an interstellar advanced civilization that one day will come to earth, how would humans react? What are the ethical responses to this situation? What if some groups of humans believe that humans cannot save themselves and only want to follow the aliens? How do we persuade them otherwise? Can we ever develop an interstellar moral code?

These are questions posed by *The Three-Body Problem* by Liu Cixin, where the story begins during China's Cultural Revolution, where astrophysicist Ye Wenjie witnesses her father's brutal death and is subsequently sent to a labor camp. She eventually finds herself at a secret military facility called Red Coast, where she uses her expertise in astrophysics to amplify radio signals, leading to contact with an alien civilization known as the Trisolarans.

Disillusioned by humanity's flaws, Ye invites the Trisolarans to Earth, believing they can save humanity from itself. The narrative then shifts to the present day, focusing on Wang Miao, a nanomaterials researcher who becomes embroiled in a series of mysterious events linked to the Trisolaran threat. As he investigates, he discovers a virtual reality game that simulates the chaotic environment of the Trisolaran solar system, which is plagued by unpredictable stellar conditions. It delves into the conflict between factions on Earth—those who wish to collaborate with the Trisolarans and those who aim to defend humanity against their impending invasion.

The Three-body problem explores themes of existential risk, the redemption and humanity's nature, trauma and its consequences, the nature of scientific progress, and the philosophical implications of first contact with an alien species: our instinct for survival vs. individual moral idealism.

Concluding thoughts

Having briefly explained why I admire the skillful way the authors enhance my moral intuitions through their storytelling, I hope to one day develop these initial thoughts into a book. Each chapter will explore in detail which moral intuitions are being tested in these stories. Like many other great writers before me, I hope to articulate my accounts of on how stories shape our understanding of what it means to be human, and how great story-tellers achieve what even the greatest philosophers aspire to: making us reflect on our shared humanity.

References

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