



‘That’s What Art Does’: Disclosing Religious and Ethical Possibilities Through Film

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Abstract

The significance of narrative artworks as resources for, and possibly as instances of, philosophical thinking has increasingly been recognized over recent decades. Utilization of such resources in philosophy of religion has, however, been limited. Focusing on film in particular, this article develops an account of film’s importance for a ‘contemplative’ approach to philosophizing about religious ethics, an approach that prioritizes the elucidation of *possibilities of sense* over the evaluation of ‘truth claims’. Taking *Dead Man Walking* as a case in point, the article shows how this film facilitates an enhanced comprehension of specific concepts, most notably the concepts of faith, truth and love, as they feature within a characteristically Christian form of life.

Keywords Christian ethics · *Dead Man Walking* · Death penalty · Film · Philosophy of religion

As part of the Visiting Artists Series at DePaul University in 2013, the film *Dead Man Walking* (Robbins 1995) was discussed in a public forum by the film’s director, Tim Robbins, and the Catholic nun upon whose book the film was based, Sister Helen Prejean (see Robbins and Prejean 2014). Towards the end of the discussion, Prejean speaks about the variety of ways in which the film and the theatrical play that was adapted from it have been responded to by viewers and by participants in the play. As in the case of Prejean’s original book, both the film and the play have been widely interpreted as attempts to bolster opposition to the death penalty, and Prejean is well known as an outspoken campaigner for the death penalty’s abolition. Yet both Robbins and Prejean have insisted that the film and play amount to far more than propaganda for a specific cause. In the discussion at DePaul, Prejean recounts how a female student, who had ‘always been against the death penalty’, finds herself playing the part of a

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family member of one of the death row inmate's victims. Prejean reports the student as remarking that coming to understand more deeply what the victim's family are suffering is 'really making [her] think'. In a further case, a male student from Cincinnati was given an assignment to watch the film and write an essay about it. Quoting the student, Prejean says: 'Before I went to see that movie *Dead Man Walking* I was for the death penalty; after I came out of that movie I was for the death penalty *more*. He [the death row prisoner] got what he deserved'. With a smile, Prejean adds: 'And that's the way it affected him. That's what art does' (Robbins and Prejean 2014).

The insinuation in Prejean's words is not, of course, that what art does is, necessarily, to entrench the opinion of supporters of the death penalty that executing those who commit serious crimes is justified. Rather, what she may reasonably be understood to be suggesting is that art, in contrast to propaganda, presents its subject matter in ways that leave considerable scope for divergent interpretations. As Prejean puts it in a talk given on another occasion, Robbins calls the film art 'because he takes you over to both sides of the suffering ... so that then you take it and reflect' (Prejean 2014a).

Regardless of how precise the distinction between art and propaganda turns out to be, an analogous distinction can be made between different approaches to philosophy. Some approaches try deliberately to convince the reader or audience of a specific thesis. Although, in most cases, calling these approaches propaganda would carry unwarranted implications, they might fairly be described as advocatory, in the sense that they advocate some particular position on an issue. While such approaches are often assumed to be the only game in town, they can be contrasted with those whose aim is not so much to advocate a position, as to facilitate a broader comprehension of the range of possible positions on the issue in question. Among the approaches of this kind is one that the Wittgenstein-influenced philosopher D. Z. Phillips has termed a 'contemplative conception of philosophy'. By this, Phillips means an approach that aims 'to do conceptual justice to the world in all its variety' without presuming to arbitrate between competing perspectives in the name of some supposedly universal standard of rationality (see Phillips 2007a: 29; Phillips 2004: 55). By way of illustration, Phillips draws an analogy with the work of dramatists who place characters with conflicting points of view in juxtaposition to one another. Rather than seeking to resolve the conflicts or to present one position as superior, as would a work of didactic literature, the dramatists that Phillips has in mind simply bring the disagreements into sharper relief. In a comparable manner, contemplative philosophers, 'though inspired by the different questions of their subject', are attentive to the distinctiveness of diverse viewpoints while striving to prevent their own values from distorting the phenomena (Phillips 2007b: 207–208).

Elsewhere I have argued that Phillips' analogy can be turned around: just as philosophy pursued in a contemplative spirit may be compared to a work of dramatic fiction, so, by the same token, certain works of dramatic fiction (or of narrative art more generally, including novels and films) may be viewed as comparable to instances of contemplative philosophy (Burley 2017). Whether we then claim that narrative artworks can philosophize remains a live question, but that question need not be settled decisively for it to be granted that certain works of this sort can, and do, provide rich resources for philosophical reflection. Among the ways in which they can be philosophically illuminating is in their capacity to disclose what Phillips and others have referred to as 'possibilities of sense'—possible ways of viewing things, of

understanding the world, that might otherwise have remained opaque to us (see, e.g. Phillips 2001: 23–24). This capacity is especially valuable for the philosophy of religion, in which coming to see the sense in religious perspectives is sometimes difficult, not least because of the pervasiveness of secular and naturalistic assumptions in contemporary popular and academic culture. My task in this article is to substantiate the claim that a narrative artwork, and film in particular, can disclose possibilities of religious and ethical meaning in ways that are philosophically enriching.

The article's focus will be on the film to which I have referred already, namely *Dead Man Walking*, starring Susan Sarandon as Sister Helen Prejean and Sean Penn as a death row prisoner named Matthew Poncelet. The film's significance for philosophy of religion resides in its capacity not only to display the development of a spiritual relationship between Prejean and Poncelet but also to situate that relationship amid an assortment of alternative perspectives, both religious and nonreligious. This complex milieu foregrounds certain religious and ethical concepts, especially some distinctively Christian concepts, bringing them to life in evocative ways. Instead of isolating the concepts from the messy details of lived realities, as many philosophers are wont to do, a film such as *Dead Man Walking* facilitates an enhanced understanding of those concepts precisely by embedding them in the lifeworlds of human agents. As William Barbieri Jr. has recently noted, 'Because film provides such a complex confection of images, movement, sound, music, dialogue, and special effects, its possibilities as an ethical medium are especially rich' (Barbieri 2017: 200). It is, in part, this contention that I wish to develop.

Following this introductory section, I first locate the film *Dead Man Walking* in relation to some of the surrounding literature and other media that concern the events it dramatizes. Providing further background to my discussion, I then consider three existing philosophical treatments of the film. In response to one of these, I challenge the assertion that the film exhibits a central thesis that is articulated in the final words spoken by Poncelet before his execution by lethal injection. Without denying the significance of the short speech that Poncelet delivers, I indicate factors that militate against a reduction of the film's meaning to the content of that speech. A section then follows in which I elaborate key features of an approach to the philosophy of religion that prioritizes the elucidation of richly contextualized concepts over the somewhat hasty evaluation of religious 'truth claims'. As I have hinted already, it is with this more elucidatory, thickly descriptive and contemplative style of philosophizing that philosophically illuminating films have the strongest affinity. In the remainder of the article, I discuss some ways in which *Dead Man Walking* affords a deepened understanding of concepts with an important place in Christian life, focusing on the concepts of faith, truth and love.

***Dead Man Walking* and Its Reverberations**

From 1982 to 1984, Helen Prejean became the spiritual adviser of two death row inmates at Louisiana State Penitentiary, colloquially referred to as Angola.¹ The first was Elmo Patrick Sonnier, to whom Prejean agreed to write letters in January 1982 and

¹ The penitentiary is known as Angola because it was built on the site of a former slave plantation that was itself called Angola after the name of the country from which most of the slaves were acquired (see Hallett et al. 2017: 2).

then became spiritual adviser in July of that year. Having visited him several times on death row, as ‘a Christian work of mercy’ (Prejean 1996: 31), she witnessed his execution by electric chair on 5 April 1984. Six months later, in October, Prejean became spiritual adviser to a second inmate, Robert Lee Willie. This time, it was less than three months before the man was executed. Willie was killed—again by electric chair—on 28 December 1984. Based on her experience of coming to know these two prisoners and the families of the victims they had murdered, Prejean wrote the book *Dead Man Walking*, which was first published in 1993. It was only a little over two years later, in December 1995, that the film was released.²

In the film, the inmate Matthew Poncelet is a composite character, combining elements of both Sonnier and Willie; his visual appearance, however, is modelled primarily on the latter. According to Debbie Morris, who was abducted and raped by Willie when she was sixteen years old, Sean Penn’s ‘uncanny resemblance’ was so close that ‘[o]n screen he *was* Robert Willie’ (Morris 1998: 216, 236; see also Varnado and Smith 2003: 195). The film does not downplay either the egregious nature of Poncelet’s crimes or the darkest aspects of his character: we see shots of him making a contemptuous cutthroat gesture during his trial and expressing a naïve admiration for Hitler during a television interview.³ But he is not depicted as a caricature; he grows in emotional and spiritual maturity over the course of the film, largely in response to his interactions with Sister Helen. As a consequence of her gentle but insistent coaxing, Poncelet comes, towards the very end of his life, to face up to his part in the rape and murder of a teenage couple. He prays for his victims and expresses hope that his own death might bring some relief to their bereaved parents.

The cases of the two convicted criminals that inspired Prejean’s original book have also been written about by, or on behalf of, other people who were directly affected by the men’s actions. Especially notable is the book *Forgiving the Dead Man Walking* (Morris 1998), in which Debbie Morris tells the story of being kidnapped and raped by Robert Lee Willie and his accomplice Joe Vaccaro in 1980, eight days after these same two men had raped and stabbed to death eighteen-year-old Faith Hathaway, leaving her body to rot in a forested gorge. Having been kidnapped at gunpoint, Morris and her then-boyfriend Mark Brewster endured a two-day ordeal in which Morris was raped twice by Willie and once by Vaccaro, and Brewster was left partially paralyzed after being slashed with a knife and shot twice in the back of the head. Despite these traumatic experiences, Morris came to forgive her attackers. Harboring ambivalent feelings about Willie’s execution, she found some comfort in knowing that Prejean had been with Willie until the end, affording him at least the opportunity ‘to make his peace, to experience a real, meaningful, personal encounter with God’ (Morris 1998: 171).⁴

² Subsequent to the release of the film, the story of *Dead Man Walking* has also been adapted as an opera (Heggie and McNally 2002) and as a play for high school and college groups (see Robbins 2005; Prejean 2014b).

³ The cutthroat gesture is something that the real Robert Lee Willie is known to have done at his own trial when Mark Brewster, a young man whom he had come close to killing, took the stand (DeParle 1984).

⁴ Whether Willie did experience such an encounter seems unlikely. Asked by Morris whether Willie had shown any remorse before he died, Prejean replied ‘No. And you know, Debbie, I’m not sure he was capable of that’ (quoted in Morris 1998: 231). The remorseful aspects of Poncelet’s character in the film are modelled more upon Patrick Sonnier.

A tone contrary to that of Morris's book is struck in *Victims of Dead Man Walking* by Varnado and Smith (2003) and in *Dead Family Walking* by D. D. de Vinci (2005). Mike Varnado was a detective closely involved in the arrest and prosecution of Willie and Vaccaro. Providing horrific details of their murder of Hathaway, Varnado is critical both of Prejean's book and of the film based upon it. Accusing Prejean of 'glorifying Robert Willie while giving short shrift to the life and grisly death of Faith Hathaway' (Varnado and Smith 2003: 196), he lambasts the film for having given Willie precisely the notoriety that he would have desired (p. 195). These accusations seem harsh in view of Prejean's efforts both to emphasize the depravity of Willie's crimes and to make room for the voices of his victims' families to be heard. At one point in Prejean's book, for instance, a long conversation with Hathaway's mother and stepfather is recounted, which includes an explicit description of the terrible condition that their daughter's body was in when it was discovered by Varnado (Prejean 1996: 174). As for Willie's notoriety, Prejean's book and the film may indeed have contributed to this, but it is a contentious matter whether contributing to someone's notoriety benefits the person in question, even if, perversely, it is what he would have wanted.

De Vinci's book is even more polemical than is that of Varnado and Smith. It sets out to tell the story of the murders committed by Patrick Sonnier and his younger brother Eddie and of how these affected the family of one of the victims, Loretta Bourque. Along the way, de Vinci, who is described in the book as a friend of the Bourques (de Vinci 2005: 160), claims that Prejean had fallen in love with Patrick Sonnier and that this had motivated her compassion for him (pp. 173–176). It is difficult to know what to make of such allegations and I do not intend to discuss them at length here. While it is true that Prejean loved Sonnier, she maintains that this was the unconditional love with which Christians are commanded to love their neighbours. One of the points I shall come to later is the way in which, much like an extended parable, the film *Dead Man Walking* invites reflection upon the forms that such love can take. As a prelude to that analysis, however, it will be helpful to consider some existing philosophical treatments of the film.

Philosophical Treatments of *Dead Man Walking*

Although the field of philosophy of religion has engaged with films only sporadically,⁵ philosophy more generally has had much to say about this art form. Over recent decades, the philosophy of film has become a thriving subfield of the philosophy of art, and debates over whether films themselves can instantiate genuine philosophizing have given fresh impetus not only to philosophical thinking about film but also to the perennial question of what philosophy is.⁶ The film *Dead Man Walking* has not featured prominently in philosophical studies, but neither has it been ignored altogether. In this section, as a means both of contextualizing and of supplying points of

⁵ D. Z. Phillips is among the few philosophers of religion who have reflected seriously upon particular films, most notably works by Ingmar Bergman (Phillips 1982: ch. 10). Other examples from philosophy of religion include Geivett and Spiegel (2007: part four).

⁶ For provocative discussion of film as philosophy, see Read and Goodenough (2005) and Mulhall (2016: ch. 7). See also Sinnerbrink (2016) on the notion of film as *ethics*.

comparison with my own discussion of the film's philosophical significance, I concisely examine three notable philosophical treatments that it has received.⁷

In an essay first published in 1997, Patricia Molloy highlights a point in response to *Dead Man Walking* that has also been raised in other forums. Without herself endorsing it, she makes the observation that since Poncelet's 'redemption' appears to be engendered 'only by the reality of his impending death', it is possible to draw from the film the conclusion that capital punishment 'works' in the sense 'that execution leads to absolution' (Molloy 1999: 226). By 'redemption', Molloy and others who make this point are alluding to Poncelet's coming to accept responsibility for his part in the crimes for which he has been convicted. In his final hour, he expresses to Sister Helen his remorse for having murdered Walter Delacroix and raped the boy's girlfriend, Hope Percy, before she was stabbed and shot by Poncelet's accomplice, Carl Vitello. Recognizing his sincerity, Sister Helen affirms that despite the terrible acts he has committed, Poncelet has 'a dignity now' that no one can take away from him (*Dead Man Walking* Scene 14).⁸

Responding to precisely the kind of interpretation mooted by Molloy, and to comparable contentions about the purported merits of capital punishment more generally, the real Helen Prejean has, in public, cited a reply that Tim Robbins offered when the point was put to him by a journalist at the Berlin International Film Festival in 1996. Paraphrasing Robbins, Prejean remarks that one does not really know whether, had Poncelet received a sentence of life imprisonment instead of death, 'he would not have reflected on what he had done and come to remorse and redemption'. Moreover, Prejean continues (again paraphrasing Robbins), 'What is it really that led Matthew Poncelet to acknowledge and take responsibility: is it because of the threat of death or because for the first time in his life he met unconditional love?' (Robbins and Prejean 2014). I shall return to the theme of unconditional love later. At this juncture, the principal point to note is how Prejean's remark, posed as a question rather than as a categorical statement, productively disrupts the assumption that it must have been—exclusively or at least primarily—the imminence of Poncelet's death that transformed him ethically and religiously.

In another essay that refers to *Dead Man Walking*, albeit only as one example among others of how films can, as she puts it, 'change the terms of our conversation' about a particular issue, Nancy Bauer concentrates on the climactic scene in which Poncelet is executed (Bauer 2005: 43). What interests Bauer most in this scene are two main aspects. First is its vivid depiction of how, in the process of execution by lethal injection, those carrying it out are protected from the enormity of what they are doing by dint of a strict division of labour: each participant is shown performing only one component in a series of minor acts, such as inserting a needle in Poncelet's arm or flicking a switch on the machine that releases chemicals into a tube, and yet these acts add up to the killing of a human being. These, and other shots in the scene, prompt the viewer to consider what it means for an American state to kill someone in the name of its citizens while striving to maintain anonymity for those who 'carry out its business'

⁷ Also of philosophical interest is the discussion of *Dead Man Walking* from the perspective of biblical studies in Reinhartz (2003: ch. 3), though I do not have space to discuss that treatment here.

⁸ Hereafter, I use the abbreviation 'DMW' in citations of the film. My citations of specific scenes follow the scene numbering of the DVD (Robbins 2001).

(p. 42). The second characteristic that Bauer remarks upon is the scene's deployment of intercutting to contrast the detached and clinical method of execution with the brutality of the acts for which Poncelet and Vitello were convicted. Without being reducible to a simple pro- or anti-death penalty message, Bauer proposes, the film thus shifts the viewer's perception, emphasizing 'features of state-sanctioned killing that have been scarcely articulable in the current death penalty debates' (p. 43).

In light of Bauer's observations, it is pertinent to note the filmmakers' deliberate decision to show a death by lethal injection even though, in real life, the executions that Prejean witnessed were by electric chair. Robbins wanted to avoid eliciting from viewers a repulsion at the death penalty that stemmed primarily from the harrowing spectacle of sending searing waves of electricity through a human body, for such a reaction might leave intact the thought that capital punishment would be less objectionable if only a more 'humane' method could be utilized. As Robbins puts it, he was aware that depicting an electrocution would have constituted a 'graphic and disturbing' climax of the film, but he considered it 'even more disturbing' to show 'the clinicalization' of capital punishment in the form of lethal injection (Robbins and Prejean 2014).

Whether lethal injection is more disturbing than electrocution (or other methods, such as poison gas) is, no doubt, a matter upon which viewers will have differing opinions. It would be surprising, for instance, if someone were to describe the electrocution scenes in a film such as *The Green Mile* (Darabont 1999) as less disturbing than the lethal injection of Poncelet in *Dead Man Walking*, even if the way in which they are disturbing is different. But by choosing to show the method that is widely touted as the most benign, instead of one that leaves the executed person's body charred and contorted, Robbins remained true to his intention of not turning the film into a blatant polemic against the death penalty.

The third philosophical treatment of the film that I shall mention here comes in a chapter by Dan Shaw (2012: ch. 10). Reflecting upon the film's relevance to discussions of the ethics of capital punishment, Shaw identifies 'the real thesis of the film' as being encapsulated in Poncelet's final words before his execution (Shaw 2012: 117). What Poncelet says is that he thinks 'killing is wrong, no matter who does it, whether it's me or y'all or your government' (DMW Scene 15). He is then laid horizontal on the gurney and turned sideways in relation to the watching witnesses. Turning his head to look towards Sister Helen, he says 'I love you'. Silently, she mouths back to him 'I love you, too', and stretches out her right arm as though to touch him through the thick glass that separates them. It is not this expression of love that Shaw considers to be the film's 'thesis', but the assertion that killing is wrong regardless of who does it.

The moment in which those words are uttered is undoubtedly poignant, yet to imply that the film can be boiled down to a single thesis, expressible as a proposition about the wrongness of killing, is questionable. Indeed, if Prejean is right in supposing that what art does—or one of the important things that art can do—is to open up a space for various interpretations, then the claim that the film has an underlying thesis such as this might, if true, count against its artistic quality. It is, of course, no secret that Robbins and Prejean are vociferous opponents of the death penalty. Prejean has even affirmed that, for her, the wrongness of killing 'under any conditions' is 'the unnegotiable moral bedrock' (1996: 40). But both Robbins and Prejean have also stated explicitly that they did not want the film to present a one-sided account. Shaw acknowledges that they

succeeded in presenting a ‘compelling case ... for both sides in the debate’ (Shaw 2012: 115), and yet he maintains nonetheless that the words voiced by Poncelet sum up the film’s message.

By intercutting graphic glimpses of the murders and rape committed by Poncelet and Vitello with the images of Poncelet’s final moments of life, the filmmakers not only emphasize the difference between these modes of killing, as Bauer points out: they also ensure that the horror of the crimes remains fully present in the viewer’s mind. Poncelet is condemned not only to death but also to be someone who, in life, committed an atrocity. Having accepted responsibility for his part in that atrocity, his denunciation of killing possesses a gravity that it would otherwise have lacked. But the spiritual presence of the murdered teenagers within the scene, culminating in the eerie representation of their reflections on the window of the witness room, typifies the film’s refusal to oversimplify, ensuring that any claim about its ‘real thesis’ is unlikely to do justice to the film’s nuance and complexity.⁹

Rather than searching for a single thesis, I wish to argue that *Dead Man Walking* constitutes a powerful instance of a film—a work of narrative fiction—that serves the philosophical purpose of disclosing certain religious and ethical possibilities. One way of explicating how it does this is to consider a number of concepts that the film helps to elucidate. I shall come to a discussion of three such concepts shortly. First, however, a little more should be said about the particular philosophical orientation that, once recognized, may be perceived as being embodied in, or at least assisted by, a narrative artwork.

From Evaluating ‘Truth Claims’ to Elucidating Possibilities of Sense

In a notebook entry from 1929, Ludwig Wittgenstein describes his new method of philosophizing as ‘consist[ing] essentially in leaving the question of *truth* and asking about *sense* instead’ (Wittgenstein 1998: 3e). This need not entail that the *concept* of truth is left aside, but it does mean that any inquiry involving that concept cannot simply take the *sense* of ‘truth’ for granted and proceed to ask about what is true and what is false; one must always ask what, in the specific context in which one is interested, the concepts at issue mean—and this applies as much to the concept of truth as to any other. As Wittgenstein was to put it later, the concept of truth is among those that are often treated by philosophers as though they formed an order of ‘*super-concepts*’ whose essential meanings must be sought independently of the concrete situations in which they have their ordinary uses (Wittgenstein 2009: §97). In fact, however, it is to the everyday uses that philosophers should look, and the everyday uses of a word such as ‘truth’ are apt to be no less ‘humble’ than those of words for ordinary objects such as “‘table”, “‘lamp”, “‘door”” (ibid.). All these words are humble in the sense that none of them is imbued with meaning intrinsically: the meaning is a consequence of the uses to which the respective words are put in everyday discourse.

Needless to say, the conception of philosophical methods advanced in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* and elsewhere in his later writings is by

⁹ See also the account in Baugh (1997: 152) of how any feelings of sympathy for Poncelet on the viewer’s part are attenuated by revelations of ‘the ongoing destructive power of Poncelet’s crime’.

no means uncontroversial. Much of mainstream analytic philosophy carries on as though Wittgenstein had been a mere glitch in the tradition who has long since been surpassed, while many philosophers who remain committed to Wittgenstein's work disagree over how to interpret his methods. Offering a full defence of any specific interpretation lies beyond the scope of the present article. My purpose in invoking Wittgenstein's ideas is simply to indicate that there is a conception—or there are conceptions—of philosophy in which the contextualized elucidation of concepts is prioritized over the evaluation of 'truth claims' in terms of some supposedly universal standards of rational appraisal. It is, in large part, this reorientation from the evaluation of truth claims to the elucidation of possibilities of sense that has facilitated a burgeoning appreciation of the philosophical credentials of works of narrative fiction, including films, for narrative artworks are well disposed to provide precisely the kind of thoroughgoing contextualization of significant concepts, and of competing perspectives on the world, that the sketchy thought experiments typical of much prevailing philosophy routinely fail to supply.

In the philosophy of religion, the most prominent inheritor of a Wittgenstein-inspired approach has been D. Z. Phillips, to whom I referred earlier. It is Phillips who did much to promote the importance of possibilities of sense as objects of philosophical inquiry. By this, he meant again to shift the emphasis away from the supposition that there is, or must be, a single correct perspective on the world, and towards the recognition that life and the world are amenable to being understood and assessed from multiple ethical and religious viewpoints. Citing his friend and colleague Peter Winch, Phillips maintained that the purpose of a contemplative approach to philosophy is to perform the valuable, yet invariably difficult, task of bringing the multiplicity of viewpoints to light and exposing their complex interrelations.¹⁰ Such a task need not preclude, where appropriate, the pointing out of incoherencies or implausible doctrines, but the principal objective remains the hermeneutical one of understanding, as opposed to the normative or prescriptive one of trying to advocate some particular viewpoint as superior to its rivals. Although, in principle, these objectives need not be mutually incompatible, in practice there is a tendency for philosophers who privilege the normative task to devote insufficient attention to examples that could count against their preferred thesis.

My own recent work (e.g. Burley 2020) has sought to develop further the critical dimension of the style of contemplative hermeneutics articulated by Phillips. The criticality resides less in overt appraisal of the objects of investigation and more in the light that the investigation sheds, either upon the presuppositions of the one undertaking the investigation or upon the overhasty generalizations of others, whether these be philosophers or other theorists. Reading, or watching and listening to, narrative works of art can be illuminating in this connection, for precisely the reason that such works can display the intelligibility of a viewpoint by showing it within the embodied context of sociocultural intercourse. Like philosophers in general, philosophers of religion are often predisposed to work with thinly described thought experiments or

¹⁰ Phillips (2001: 319) cites with approval Winch's reference to 'a philosophical tradition which has concerned itself precisely with the problem of how to present moral or religious world-views in such a way that the passion behind them ... is clearly in view, along with the conception of the good that they embody, while at the same time equal justice is done to alternative and even hostile conceptions' (Winch 1996: 173).

with concepts abstracted from their lived environments. Attention to, and engagement with, narrative artwork is one fruitful means of overcoming that predisposition.

With these thoughts in mind, concerning the potential of narrative artwork to enable an expanded comprehension of concepts and perspectives (including religious and ethical ones), the next section examines more closely how the film *Dead Man Walking* exemplifies such an enabling procedure, considering in particular the three salient concepts of faith, truth and love.

***Dead Man Walking* as Contemplative Philosophy of Religion**

Faith

Although the word ‘faith’ occurs only twice in *Dead Man Walking*, the concept of religious faith constitutes a pervasive theme. Both utterances of the word are in a brief exchange between Sister Helen and Earl Delacroix (played by Raymond J. Barry), the father of the boy, Walter, who was murdered by Poncelet. Sister Helen meets Delacroix (though not for the first time) in a cemetery immediately after Poncelet’s funeral, which she has attended along with Poncelet’s mother and brothers. After hugging each member of the family, Sister Helen looks up to see Delacroix standing some distance away. Unlike the parents of the murdered teenage girl, who are portrayed throughout the film as avid supporters of the death penalty, Delacroix embodies a more ambivalent attitude. While feeling a natural repugnance towards Poncelet, Delacroix struggles to reconcile those feelings with the aspiration to love and forgive that is so prominently articulated in his own Christian faith.

In the scene in question, Sister Helen walks over to Delacroix and tells him ‘It’s good to see you’. ‘I don’t know why I’m here’, Delacroix replies, ‘I got a lot of hate. I don’t have your faith’. Sister Helen tries to minimize the difference between them: ‘It’s not faith’, she says. ‘I wish it were that easy. It’s work’. Interpreting these words is not straightforward. On the one hand, Sister Helen clearly means to indicate a distinction between the responsibilities that accompany her vocation as a nun and her own personal faith. She implies that, even for her, faith is not something that comes so naturally that she can simply allow herself to be guided by it. She also has to work. On the other hand, however, her words contain an implicit irony, for the film as a whole graphically demonstrates how faith is itself something to be worked at. As the real Helen Prejean has put it in another public remark about the film, the story concerns a ‘faith journey’ (Prejean 2014a): not only her own but also that of several other characters—notably, of course, Matthew Poncelet, but also others, including Mr. Delacroix.¹¹ Faith is therefore not something ‘easy’ that might be contrasted with work, but demands ongoing effort.

Her conversation with Delacroix continues with Sister Helen suggesting that the two of them might ‘help each other find a way out of the hate’. Delacroix looks sceptical: ‘I don’t know. I don’t think so’. But the very fact that he came to the cemetery implies that there is some part of him that is looking for a release from the anger. And in the

¹¹ As Baugh reminds us, *de la croix* is French for ‘of the cross’, and Earl Delacroix is himself ‘living through a passion’ as a bereaved father whose marriage has failed (Baugh 1997: 156).

final scene of the film, we see Delacroix and Sister Helen sitting side by side in an otherwise empty church, heads bowed in silent prayer, again accentuating that faith is a process rather than a once-and-for-all achievement.

What *Dead Man Walking* certainly does not offer is a neat definition of religious faith. In this respect, as in others, it is unlike the sort of philosophical investigation that craves general definitions. For an examination of multiple definitions or 'models' of faith, one might turn to work by John Bishop, who, in addition to arguing for a conception of faith as 'doxastic venture' (Bishop 2002, 2007, esp. ch. 5), has set out a typology comprising seven 'principal models of faith' (Bishop 2016). Each of the respective models gives prominence to one or more features of faith, including 'a feeling of existential confidence', knowledge of revealed truths, belief *that* there is a God, belief or trust *in* God, 'practical commitment beyond the evidence' and so on (2016). There is no obvious reason why all of these could not be features of religious faith, to a lesser or greater degree, depending upon contextual factors such as the person whose faith it is and the situation in which he or she is placed. The elucidation of Christian faith that *Dead Man Walking* affords is not one that radically disrupts this typology, but it does give us a picture of faith that is more richly textured than any one model, taken on its own, is likely to be. We see, in the film, the ways in which affective, epistemic, doxastic and conative strands are woven together over the course of a faith journey, making the concept of faith resistant to attempts at definitive characterization.

Truth

In the case of the concept of truth, an especially striking scene is one in which Sister Helen is urging Poncelet to admit to himself the role he played in the murders for which he has been convicted. Poncelet insists that if he were to be allowed to take a lie detector test, the results would demonstrate his innocence. Thus, when Sister Helen recommends that Poncelet read Chapter 8 of the Gospel of John, containing the phrase 'you shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free' (John 8:32),¹² Poncelet interprets this in light of his own immediate interests. He thinks of being freed from prison or at least from death row and conceives of truth in instrumental terms—as something that could enable him to escape from his present physical predicament. If only he is given another chance to convince the authorities of the 'truth', then he will be, as he puts it, 'home free' (DMW Scene 10). Sister Helen is concerned with something deeper. She connects truth with a form of self-knowledge, a confession of one's innermost character and personal history, however disquieting or shameful it might be. Though not unconcerned that Poncelet is going to die, Sister Helen is also preoccupied by the conviction that, when he does die, he should not do so with a heart burdened by insincerity. The truth shall make him free in the sense that, by being true to himself, by taking responsibility for his past actions, he will gain a dignity that cannot be his as long as he is living a lie.

By juxtaposing these divergent understandings of truth, the film gives each of them a sharper edge. From what we come to learn about Poncelet, we know that he is hiding the truth from himself when he insists upon his lack of guilt; hence, not only is he thinking of truth in self-serving terms when he maintains that a lie detector test would

¹² All biblical quotations in this article are from the Douay–Rheims translation (*Holy Bible* 1914).

substantiate his innocence, but he is thinking of it as something he can manipulate. In Sister Helen's lexicon, meanwhile, truth is a soteriological category: confessing the truth is a means of laying oneself open before God, a precondition of asking for God's forgiveness. From this point of view, to treat the truth as something to be moulded and manipulated is to increase one's distance from God.

The extent of Poncelet's initial refusal to own up to the truth is represented by means of differing depictions of the murders. Midway through the film, as Sister Helen is being driven through the grounds of the penitentiary on her way to visit Poncelet, black and white imagery of the rape and murders is intercut with colour shots of the fields that Sister Helen is presently looking at and close-ups of her face. An obvious reading of the scene is that she is imagining the crimes, that her thoughts are becoming haunted by the events of that night. What is shown in the black and white imagery, however, is not Poncelet himself committing rape or murder. Only his accomplice, Vitello, is shown raping Hope Percy and then shooting both Hope and Walter Delacroix; Poncelet is depicted as startled and bewildered by what his partner is doing. Robbins informs us in his audio commentary (available on the DVD of the film) that this is specifically 'Matt's version of what happened' (Robbins 2001: Scene 9); hence, it would seem that Sister Helen's own understanding of the events is, at this point, distorted by Poncelet's rendition of them. It is only during the execution scene, when colour footage of the rape and murders is intercut with the death of Poncelet himself, that a more truthful representation is shown—a representation of what Poncelet finally comes to admit, to himself and to Sister Helen (and hence, in a sense, to God), about his involvement. In this version, Poncelet participates in the rape of Hope Percy and it is Poncelet who shoots Walter Delacroix in the back of the head. In hindsight, and with the help of Robbins' audio commentary and the intercutting techniques to which I have referred, the viewer is enabled to see how Poncelet has been constructing a narrative that suits his façade as the innocent party, a façade that crumbles in the final hours of his life as he comes to face up to his sins.

Reflecting upon the notions of truth and understanding in relation to religion, the philosopher Rush Rhees once observed that an important difficulty 'lies in the idea that "truth" is something that is always and everywhere the same'—that regardless of whether we are studying philosophy or science or anything else, it is simply truth that is being sought (Rhees 1997: 31).¹³ Some years later (in June 1971), Rhees wrote to his friend Drury that if one wishes 'to understand the use of "truth" in religion', one suitable place to start would be with the saying in John 14:6, where Jesus declares himself to be 'the way and the truth [and the life]' (Rhees 1997: 98). Again, Rhees's point is that we should not be too hasty to conflate different uses of 'truth'; if it is specifically religious conceptions of truth that interest us, then it is to religious—and in this case Christian—contexts that we ought to look. The exchange between Poncelet and Sister Helen discussed above suggests a similar point, highlighting the difference between a Christian conception, typified in the Gospel of John, and the conception of truth that has its place in talk about lie detector tests. As we have seen, one of the things that the character of Sister Helen does in the film is bring out the intimate connections between, on the one hand, the Christian conception of truth that she derives from the

¹³ The remark originates from a manuscript of Rhees's dating from 1956.

Johannine writings and, on the other hand, a comprehension of what it is to live, and to die, with dignity.

Love

We saw above that those involved in making and promoting the film *Dead Man Walking* have, on occasions, invoked the term 'unconditional' to describe the kind of love exhibited by Sister Helen towards Poncelet. In her foreword to the published screenplay, Prejean writes (with some perhaps unintended hyperbole) that, beyond eliciting feelings and thoughts about the death penalty, it is the film's 'scent of unconditional love that makes people leave the theater feeling uplifted and heartened and saved' (Prejean 1997: xiii). And Robbins, in his introduction to that same publication, reports that Susan Sarandon, who plays the role of Sister Helen, 'saw the film as a love story', by which she meant a tale of 'true love—courageous, independent, unconditional love', represented as something genuinely achievable rather than as a mere ideal (Robbins 1997: ix).

In this regard the film can be seen as an extended parable, illustrating in narrative form how the injunction to love one's neighbour as oneself may be understood. Just as, in the Gospel of Luke, the lawyer's question, 'And who is my neighbour?', is responded to by Jesus not by means of a definition but with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:29–37), so, in a film such as *Dead Man Walking*, the Christian ethic of love is represented through the comportment of a particular character, in this case Sister Helen. A comparison might also be drawn with a nun described by the philosopher Raimond Gaita—a nun in whose behaviour Gaita perceived a 'wondrous' goodness (Gaita 2000: 2) that he characterizes in terms of 'saintly love' or 'the love of saints' (e.g. 2000: xxiii–xxiv, 5, 24; 2004: xxiv–xxv, xxxi). By responding to patients on a psychiatric ward with a grace and compassion devoid of condescension, the nun's presence amounted to nothing less for Gaita than a revelation. Though initially inclined to say that it revealed 'something mysterious' about the value of human beings (2000: 19), Gaita came to have misgivings about this way of putting it, for it could be taken to imply the pretentious thesis 'that there are deep mysteries for deep people to marvel at' (2004: xxxi). But Gaita does not revoke the description of himself as being at a loss to articulate in anything other than specifically Christian vocabulary what is revealed. Notwithstanding the efforts of philosophers and theologians to supply intellectually satisfying formulations of the sense in which human life is inestimably precious, Gaita suspects that it is precisely 'the unashamedly untheoretical, anthropomorphic language of worship' that is more capable of giving verbal expression to 'the structure of the concepts which make the nun's behaviour and what it revealed intelligible to us' (p. 23). As Stephen Mulhall has observed, Gaita's persistence in disavowing any religious commitment on his own part generates a tension in his treatment of the topic (Mulhall 2011). While freely admitting the irreplaceability of distinctively Christian modes of discourse for articulating what the nun has revealed to him—including, centrally, the Christian affirmation of the sanctity and dignity of human life—Gaita cannot bring himself to partake of that discourse (see, e.g. Gaita 2004: xxvi).

From the perspective of a more thoroughly contemplative approach to philosophy, the difficulty of reconciling a recognition of the nun's having revealed something important, on the one hand, with one's inability to use—in one's own voice—the

distinctively Christian vocabulary that best expresses what has been revealed, on the other, is less acute than it is for Gaita. The tension exists for Gaita because he finds himself unable to suspend judgement on whether the nun's attitude of love has disclosed a genuine truth about human value: she has "proved" it to him, for Gaita feels unable to 'doubt it' (2004: xiii). And yet he cannot feel at home in the forms of life and language that give meaning to that revelation. From a contemplative philosophical point of view, meanwhile, it need only be acknowledged that what the nun has revealed is a *possible* way of perceiving and of relating to human beings. If one were to accept for oneself that this is indeed the right way of perceiving and relating and that no language other than that of Christian faith could adequately give sense to it, then one would, in effect, have come to see the possibility as an actuality for oneself. But a contemplative philosophical approach does not demand that extra step.

Similar points can be made in connection with viewing *Dead Man Walking*. The character and demeanour of Sister Helen, as depicted in the film, show us a possibility of Christian love. We see what the term 'unconditional love' can mean within an embodied interpersonal relationship, as opposed to hearing it as an abstract platitude. But in order to see such love as a human possibility, the viewer is not compelled to aspire to live a life of the sort that imbues the words 'unconditional love' with the meaning they have for many Christians. Regardless of whether one is prompted to become a Christian oneself, insofar as one's understanding of what it means to make unconditional love a goal to strive for has been enhanced, the film has performed an instructive philosophical purpose.

An essential dimension of the love that Sister Helen displays towards Poncelet is its willingness to challenge the beloved to be the best that he can be. In another context, it has been noted by Gaita that if someone who has committed appalling crimes were to be 'the beneficiary of a saint's love, it would be a severe love' (2004: xxx). We see this severity in Sister Helen's love for Poncelet when she presses him to take responsibility for his actions. In one scene, she encourages Poncelet to recognize the radical nature of Jesus' love, describing it as instilling such a sense of worth and dignity in the oppressed that the leaders of society felt it necessary to have Jesus put to death. 'Kinda like me, huh?', Poncelet replies, glibly comparing his own situation to that of Jesus. Sister Helen immediately rejects the comparison: 'No, Matt. Not at all like you. Jesus changed the world with his love. You watched while two kids were murdered' (DMW Scene 9). Not only does her love for Poncelet not prevent Sister Helen from speaking these pointed words: it is because she loves him that she wants to help him look more deeply into himself.

In a discussion of 'Our Duty to Love the People We See', Søren Kierkegaard cites the example of Christ's love for his disciple Peter. It was a love that, despite Peter's treachery, did not demand that Peter change in order to become worthy of Christ's love; rather, it was with the aid of Christ's love that Peter was able to change. 'And how did Christ look at Peter?', Kierkegaard asks. Far from being repelling or dismissive, 'it was as when a mother sees the child in danger through its own carelessness, and now, since she cannot manage to grasp the child, she catches it with her admittedly reproachful but also saving look' (Kierkegaard 1995: 170).¹⁴ The boundless unconditionality of the love expresses itself in the look that both reproaches and saves—indeed, saves *because* it reproaches. The way Sister Helen looks at Poncelet when he compares himself to

¹⁴ For discussion of Kierkegaard on this matter, see Ferreira (2001: 110–111) and Lippitt (2012: 193–194).

Jesus resembles such a look, as does the look she gives him later, when he implies that Jesus' having 'died on the cross for us' means that Jesus will take care of him when he, Poncelet, stands 'before God on Judgment Day'. In response, Sister Helen sternly reminds him that redemption is not a 'free admission ticket that you get because Jesus paid the price. You gotta participate in your own redemption. You got some work to do' (DMW Scene 10).

It is in exchanges of this sort that the concept of unconditional love is given concrete expression, not merely in the words but in the glances, the countenance and the tone of voice. In abstraction from such factors, we might be tempted to speculate about the 'extent' of the unconditionality—are there really *no* conditions under which love of neighbour, or love of enemy, ought to be withheld? We might, in other words, be tempted to search for a definition of, as it were, the conditions of unconditionality. But Christianity refuses to offer any such definition. Instead, it presents examples and, with Jesus, tells Christ's followers to 'Go, and do thou in like manner' (Luke 10:37).

What Sister Helen's embodiment of unconditional love in *Dead Man Walking* also discloses is the way in which love of neighbour can itself make one vulnerable to emotional suffering. Loving Poncelet exposes her to inevitable anxiety and grief and, as the atheist George Orwell once wrote of interpersonal love, to the possibility of being 'defeated and broken up by life' (Orwell 1970: 527). This vulnerability becomes most manifest when, with only a few hours left before Poncelet is to be executed, Sister Helen is struck by the stark reality of the situation. To escape momentarily from the routine hubbub of the death row corridors, she enters the ladies' restroom. There she prays to God for strength in 'such a terrifying place'—'so cold, so calculated, this murder' (DMW Scene 13).¹⁵ A little later, as she sits near Poncelet's cell, tears come irresistibly to Sister Helen's eyes as she hears Poncelet speaking for the final time to his mother and brothers on the telephone. Poncelet, too, weeps as he tells his mother that he loves her.

Notwithstanding the emotional stress to which the commitment to love has subjected her, Sister Helen continues to derive resilience from her faith. She promises to be 'the face of love' for Poncelet, urging him to look at her so that such a face will be 'the last thing [he sees] in this world' (Scene 15).¹⁶

Concluding Remarks

It would be easy to regard any philosophical significance of a film such as *Dead Man Walking* as residing exclusively in its capacity to provide raw material for philosophical reflection. Films certainly can provide such material, and *Dead Man Walking* is a paradigm example. Indeed, there is a sense in which this article of mine constitutes a philosophical reflection upon the film. But I am claiming that the film instantiates something more. Beyond providing raw material, it organizes that material in carefully orchestrated ways that, as I have put it, disclose religious and ethical possibilities and facilitate a deepening of the viewer's understanding of certain salient concepts. Here I have focused on the concepts

¹⁵ Baugh compares this scene to Jesus' prayer at Gethsemane, in which Jesus asks 'God to strengthen him, so that he can complete the mission of human salvation' (Baugh 1997: 155).

¹⁶ Compare the words that the real Prejean recalls saying to Patrick Sonnier: 'I cannot bear the thought that you would die without seeing one loving face. I will be the face of Christ for you. Just look at me' (Prejean 1996: 47).

of faith, truth and love, but I have not presumed that these are isolated cases. It is in large part through exhibiting the interconnections between these and other concepts—by constructing an elaborately textured conceptual fabric—that a film or other narrative artwork can bring a distinctive perspective on the world to life.

In a diary entry from 1931, Wittgenstein describes Kierkegaard's philosophical method as involving the representing of a life, which the reader may then reflect upon to see how he or she relates to it (Wittgenstein 2003: 83). Regardless of whether one is tempted to adopt a life of the kind being represented, one has at least been shown how such a life can be intelligible. D. Z. Phillips, as I have noted, emphasizes the importance of placing divergent points of view—discordant voices—side by side, to accentuate the particularities of each without assuming that they must ultimately be reconciled. *Dead Man Walking* does both of these things. It depicts a distinctively Christian form of life in the figure of Sister Helen and in her relationships with others—most notably the criminal Matthew Poncellet, a man despised and condemned for his murderous actions—and it also accentuates the specificities of that form of life by placing it in relation to other perspectives. These include the alternative religious and ethical perspectives of the parents of Poncellet's victims, but also others, such as the ostensibly secular viewpoints of prison wardens at Louisiana State Penitentiary.

As a work of narrative art, the film invites viewers into the story; it humanizes its characters, including the prisoner who has been convicted of rape and murder. Some of those personally affected by the crimes of the men on whom the character of Poncellet is based have objected to that humanizing portrayal, supposing it to dilute the monstrous nature of the deeds those men committed. The film undoubtedly makes it hard for viewers to think of Poncellet as reducible to his worst acts, but despite Sean Penn's 'uncanny resemblance' to one of the real death row inmates, Poncellet remains a complex composite. The film does not force the viewer to accept his final denunciation of all killing, for it also helps us to see why, notwithstanding the 'cold', 'calculated' and (in the case of lethal injection) 'clinicalized' nature of capital punishment, some may be motivated to regard it as a necessary instrument of justice. Leaving open that interpretation may not suit the sensibilities of those who would favour an uncompromisingly anti-death penalty message, but doing justice to religious and ethical complexities often requires going beyond such one-sided treatments. That, as Helen Prejean puts it, is what art does.

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