In a great deal of contemporary theorizing of literature, the mass media, and other cultural forms, ethical issues are treated either as if they were purely a matter of cultural or group preference, or they are explained away in terms of processes of ideological or social conditioning. The widespread acceptance of this kind of view of the ethical — and of the impoverished conception of the human agent that it entails — has resulted in a rejection within literary and cultural studies of the proposition that literature, and other cultural forms, can provide genuine illumination of the ethical. But ethics is a form of rational inquiry grounded in the notion of substantive moral agency. Moreover cultural forms such as literature do not simply evidence particular social attitudes and relations; they are conventional mechanisms that enable individuals to express important ethical insights. This latter claim has seemed obvious to people from widely different cultures, and for hundreds, indeed thousands, of years, but it is now so widely rejected, albeit within the relatively narrow ‘cultural’ confines of contemporary cultural studies, as to require restatement and justification.

There are two main theoretical positions or tendencies discernible in the writings of the contemporary theorists in question. The first view is a species of cultural relativism, and has adherents across a wide range of humanities disciplines, though very few within the discipline of moral philosophy itself. The second view, which might be termed ‘ethics as ideology’, is prevalent in cultural studies, though once again not in the discipline of philosophy itself. This view is subscribed to by certain marxist theorists and — in a somewhat different form — by many supporters of Foucault. This is not to say that all marxists or all Foucauldians or all practitioners of cultural studies subscribe to one or other of these views. That would be absurd. There are many exceptions including, notably, humanist marxists. However, it is clear that these philosophical views are sufficiently widespread to require attention.

Both views have long been discredited within philosophical circles, including within analytical marxism and communitarian political philosophy. They both confront an array of powerful objections. Here are some of these objections.
According to cultural relativism, actions or practices are not right or wrong sim-\textit{pliciter}, rather they are right or wrong for some cultural group. Thus if in a particular society some practice is generally accepted then this makes it morally right for that society to engage in that practice.

Cultural relativism has profoundly unacceptable consequences. If cultural relativism is true, it follows that slavery is as right as any practice can be. And it follows that destroying other species or polluting waterways or female circumcision or discriminating against another race group or cannibalism or indeed any practice characteristic of some cultural group, is as right as any practice can be. For slavery is the accepted practice in some societies, and if it is the accepted practice of some society, then it is morally right for that society to have that practice. In another society which does not practise slavery, slavery is wrong (for that society). But according to cultural relativism there is no external standpoint to evaluate cultural practices. Since slavery is generally practised in some societies, and is therefore right for those societies, slavery is as right as anything can be. In particular, it is no less wrong than the practice of outlawing slavery favoured by other societies.

Indeed, if cultural relativism were true, then it would be morally wrong for an individual within, say, a predominantly racist society, to oppose and refuse to participate in those racist practices. For according to cultural relativism, if it is the generally accepted practice in that society, then it is morally wrong for an individual member of that society not to participate in it. This has the absurd consequence that those men and women who opposed racism when most of those around them fully participated in racist practices, were not persons of moral insight and courage, but rather evil doers!

Before turning to the ethics as ideology conception, I want to make some further points about a certain version of cultural relativism that has had great prominence in literary theory in particular. I refer to that form of cultural relativism associated with post-structuralism.

Post-structuralism lays great stress on the alleged constructive capacities of linguistic practices, as opposed to general cultural practices. Certain influential versions of post-structuralism treat ethics, and indeed the very notion of the moral agent, as essentially linguistic constructions. Thus does a leading American deconstructionist, Hillis Miller claim in his \textit{Ethics of Reading}: 'Well, if ethics has nothing to do with any of the things it has traditionally thought to be concerned with (self-hood, freedom, interpersonal relations, etc.) with what does it have to do? The answer is that ethical judgement and command is a necessary feature of human language.' Here it is important to stress that these theorists see language as constructing the
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There is no ethical truth as such. There are only the claims and assumptions of particular languages. It is language in its fictive capacity that is central to this conception. Ethical conceptions and judgments are allegedly entirely fictional. Thus Hillis Miller claims: ‘An ethical judgment is always a baseless positing . . .’

So for these post-structuralists moral rightness and ethical worth are relativized to particular culture-specific discourses, and assume the status of culture-specific fiction. This conception of the ethical is a species of cultural relativism, and is open to the objections already made to that doctrine. However it has an additional difficulty. It deploys an incoherent conception of language. Language cannot make up the world, be it its ethical, social, physical or other dimensions. Rather language stands to the thought of particular individuals and social groups both as an enabling mechanism and as a constraint. Language enables individuals and groups to express thoughts. Sometimes these thoughts or complexes of thought (e.g. theories) have never been expressed in the language before. Sometimes these thoughts while not new are nevertheless prior to language. For words sometimes come into existence in order to enable us to express prior thoughts or experiences or objects. Take the words, ‘headache’ or ‘holocaust’, as examples. We did not summon into existence the very real phenomena of headaches or the systematic extermination of six million Jews by performing linguistic acts of uttering the words, ‘headache’ or ‘holocaust’. Quite the reverse; language followed thought. Language also constrains thought, although partially so. In providing a conventional instrument or enabling mechanism for thinking and communicating thought – thoughts are expressed in some language – language partially constrains the thoughts that can be expressed.

It is common for post-structuralists to respond to this by suggesting that there is no such thing as an objectively existing social, psychological, ethical, or even physical, world, since there is no fundamental distinction to be drawn between the real and the imaginary. And there is no fundamental distinction to be drawn between the real and the imaginary because there is no fundamental distinction to be drawn between fictional and non-fictional language. But this simply leads to absurdity. For we can now no longer distinguish between Sherlock Holmes and Conan Doyle, or between Moriarty and Adolf Hitler; on this account all these personages were equally real and equally fictitious.

According to the ethics as ideology conception, ethical standards, practices and traits of character are essentially expressions of, and vehicles for, relationships of power between institutions and individuals and between social classes. Thus Foucault states in his Two
Lectures: 'Right should be viewed, I believe, not in terms of a legitimacy to be established, but in terms of the methods of subjugation that it instigates.'

The first point to note about this strong ethics as ideology conception is that, if it were true, it would follow that in any given society there is no real ethical order and no real moral agents; there are simply exploitative ideological practices followed by ideologically constructed ‘agents’. But a society without a real ethical order and without real moral agents would be a society bereft of any real sense of right and wrong, of any real concern for others, of consistency in the application of standards, and so on. For these features are in part constitutive of moral agency and of the ethical.

If ethics is ideology then no doubt many societies will appear to be ethical, and appear to consist of moral agents. Thus contemporary Australian society appears to be ethical to some extent and to contain some morally worthy individuals. But if ethics is ideology then these appearances are not the reality. There appears to be a degree of freedom and justice in countries like Australia. But in fact this is not the reality. And South Africans appear at times to have a real concern for one another, but in fact they do not. For on the ethics as ideology conception, ideologically constructed appearances are constitutive of ethics. It follows that if we look through the ideology and the institutional and social power relationships we see a community with no sense of justice and no compassion. Such a community might be construed as a community of psychopaths with an ideological overlay, and to claim that the ethical is necessarily merely ideological appearance is to accept such a community as being the only possible community.

This strong conception of ethics as ideology could be weakened. It might be maintained that much, but by no means all, of what presents itself as morality is merely ideology. This is no doubt true. But the point is that if it is true, then there are genuine ethical issues and real questions of morality that need to be confronted, and not simply dismissed as ideological effects. It follows that ethics is not simply ideology.

A further point involves drawing a distinction between the rhetoric and the actual value commitments of proponents of ethics as ideology. The rhetoric says that ethical discourse and moral agents are out; but in practice, of course, it is clear that they are not. On the contrary such discourse is both invoked and employed. One such example would be the way in which a marxist view is often used to criticize existing paradigms of self and society. Another example is the deployment of Foucauldian models of social power to account for the relations between the sexes. Such critiques, whilst rhetorically denying the
ethical and the moral agent, are in fact employing notions of these very things in order to describe, evaluate and deplore the repressive nature of society as they find it. In committing themselves to notions of freedom and social justice they are themselves moral and cannot do without moral categories and judgments. Such projects exemplify a kind of anti-humanism against itself, in which political change is required to achieve ends that correspond to values, that at another level of theorizing, have been renounced.

The inadequacies of cultural relativism and of ethics as ideology indicate the inescapability of a conception of the ethical grounded in the notion of a substantive moral agent, as opposed to the constructed and insubstantial self entailed by cultural relativism and ethics as ideology. The set of properties such a substantive moral agent would necessarily possess include the following. One, he/she possesses a capacity for rational and imaginative thought. This involves, among other things, a capacity to envisage hitherto unencountered situations and ways of behaving. It also involves the capacity for consistency in the making of ethical judgments. Two, the agent possesses freedom in the sense that he/she can make decisions on the basis of his/her rational thought processes and implement these even in the face of external resistance. Three, the agent experiences emotions such as sympathy for other people, compassion, love and so on. Four, the agent possesses an awareness of him/herself, and this together with his/her powers of rational thought and volition, enables the agent to conceive of his/her life as a totality, and to develop that life in particular ways. Five, the agent possesses a sense of ethical value. This includes the sense that certain things are worth doing and others not; and that certain actions are morally right and others not. Importantly, this sense exists and can be acted on despite contrary personal inclinations and various forms of external social prohibition and pressure. Six, in virtue of the above properties, and especially the capacity for sympathy and a sense of justice, the agent is able to establish intrinsically valuable relations with other agents. Seven, the agent's values and standards must cohere with one another and persist over some significant period of time. Otherwise his/her ethical dimension will become conflict-ridden and eventually disintegrate. Eight, the structure of ethical values internalized by the agent will be to some extent a response to, and a result of, the particular historical circumstances – including social circumstances – in which the agent finds him or herself.

This last point is in need of further elaboration, since it is the source of persistent confusion. Given that the structure of ethical values internalized by an individual agent is to some extent a response to, and a result of, particular historical – including social – circumstances,
we would expect to find the following. Firstly, we would expect to find agents belonging to the same social group to share a core set of ethical values. It does not follow from this that each member agent is the passive recipient of the values of the group. The existence of shared values follows from the fact that groups of individuals do not confront the world wholly as atoms but rather in concert with their fellows. People who live together have to work out a coherent system of shared values. Now in some cases these values might be imposed on the individual members of the group by the coercive action of the group as a whole or by some controlling sub-element. But this is not necessarily the case, and it is a matter for empirical investigation whether some value has been imposed on a particular individual(s) or not.

The second thing we would expect to find, given that the structure of ethical values of an individual and/or group is partly a response to and a result of particular historical circumstances, is some differences in ethical values from one socio-historical group to another. In some instances this might be due to moral development. Presumably, contemporary attitudes to women in the workforce, while by no means exemplary, constitute moral progress over attitudes prevailing in the nineteenth century. In other instances it is simply due to the different requirements of the material and social circumstances of the day. Physical courage is a great virtue in war but not nearly so important in times of peace. Physical strength is rightly valued in a society at a low level of technological development. And so it goes on. But it is important to stress that the inevitability and, indeed, desirability, of such differences in no way supports cultural relativism or the ethics as ideology conception. Here I do not have in mind the claim that these differences between cultures, and over time, typically take place against a background of a commonality of ethical values across cultures and times, though this claim is in fact true. My point is rather that the objectivity of ethical values and judgments is not called into question by the obvious fact that different circumstances call for, and cause, different ethical responses. Allowing weak and sickly infants to die might be morally right for a community living on the very edge of survival and morally wrong for us. But this might simply mean: as a matter of objective truth, to allow infants to die under certain circumstances is morally right and under other circumstances is morally wrong. It is morally right, for example, if the infants are weak and sickly and would be a burden of such a kind as to threaten the survival of the community.

We have seen that certain accounts of the ethical and of the moral agent prevalent in contemporary theorizing of cultural forms are inadequate. In their place I have put forward the notion of a
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substantive moral agent, and outlined some of the features of such an agent. I shall now argue that literary texts, and other representational cultural forms, can simulate and embody salient aspects of the ethical realm, and indeed are centrally concerned to do so. In short, the genre of fictional literature is a conventional enabling mechanism; it enables the communication of ethical truth through the construction of imaginary worlds. It does not follow from this that literary texts do not have ideological content, or even that some texts are not principally ideological in character. Some texts are principally ideological, just as some agents are bereft of moral qualities. Perhaps all texts are to some extent ideological and all agents in possession of some ideological beliefs. But the point is that the ethical is not reducible to the ideological, and texts can offer, and are often concerned to offer, genuine ethical illumination.

The communicative acts which constitute, for example, a literary text are not themselves either true or false, and typically they do not have explicit ethical content. So how is it that I am able to claim that fictional discourse represents the ethical realm?

I suggest, following the philosopher John Searle, that fictional discourse consists of what he calls ‘pretend speech acts’. A ‘speech act’ is simply a communicative act such as asserting or commanding or asking a question. Such acts are either written or spoken. A ‘pretend speech act’ is simply an act of pretending to perform a speech act without actually doing so. So according to Searle, in writing, for example, ‘Holmes turned into Baker St.’, the author pretends to be speaking about a real person, and pretends to assert of that person that he turned into Baker Street.

Ordinary speech acts (whether written or spoken) are able to be performed in virtue of the conventions of language. But fictional literature is governed by an additional set of conventions which suspends the operation of the ordinary conventions of language, so as to enable ‘pretend’ assertions to be performed. These ‘pretend speech acts’ are not acts of linguistic deception. The audience knows, and is intended to know, that they are ‘pretend acts’. The point about such convention-determined ‘pretend speech acts’ is that they construct an imaginary world. This imaginary world consists of those persons and events which the author in performing these ‘pretend speech acts’, pretends exist. But where in all this could there be ethical truth?

Truth in fictional literature consists of some relation between this imaginary world and the ordinary world that we inhabit. It is obvious that some of the elements of this imagined world — characters, events and so on — in varying degrees resemble elements of the ordinary world. But it does not follow from the fact that one thing resembles another that the first thing is true of the second. One acorn resembles
another, but the one is not true of the other. And even if someone draws a picture of a suburban street which fortuitously resembles very closely a particular suburban street, it does not follow that the drawing is a representation of that particular street, much less a true representation. If, on the other hand, the artist had done the drawing for a resident in the street, and intended it to be taken as a representation, then it would be assessed in respect of truth/falsity, accuracy or inaccuracy. Translated into the case of literature, the question is whether certain conventions exist by virtue of which the author is taken as intending that these fictional objects created by his 'pretend' assertions are representations of the real world. The aspects in question could be particular individuals and events or general features. Quite clearly, the answer to this question is in the affirmative; and indeed this is one of the things that distinguishes fictional literature from other forms of pretence like (say) circus clowing, where it is not assumed that the activity performs any representational or instructive function. It is mere pretence for the sake of pleasure.

I have argued that ethics is a form of rational inquiry grounded in the notion of a substantive moral agent. I have also argued that there is a variety of cultural forms which deploy fictional discourse for the conventionally-determined purpose of conveying ethical truths. Now it does not follow from this that novels, plays, films and so on, do in fact provide genuine illumination of the ethical. But there is an ethical realm to be illuminated, and these cultural forms provide a communicative mechanism by means of which such illumination could be provided. There can be no a priori objection to the claim that such cultural forms deliver ethical insights. Whether or not in any given case there is ethical insight will depend on the particularities of the novel or play or film in question. It will be a matter of the rational judgement of morally, politically and aesthetically sensitive readers, whether or not any given 'text' is ethically insightful or merely evidential of social attitudes. Or at least, it will be a matter of the judgement of such readers, as to what extent it is insightful, and to what extent merely evidential.

The view that literature, and other cultural forms, have the power to represent the ethical has been dismissed in many quarters. But, as I have argued above, the rational backing for this dismissal is very weak. Moreover the arguments against prevalent forms of ethical relativism and the ideological constructedness of texts are powerful and longstanding. There is in fact within much contemporary theorizing of culture a deep aversion to notions of truth and of morality, and also to the possibility that social forms could facilitate, rather than repress, individual lives; and there is an accompanying
immunity to rational debate on these issues. This immunity to rational debate marks the existence of ideological commitments.

NOTES
1. The term was coined by Richard Freadman.
2. Thanks to Andrew Alexandra, Will Barrett, Tony Coady, Allen Hazen and Crawford Miller for comments on this paper. Special gratitude is owed to Richard Freadman for lengthy discussions on these issues. A number of the passages in this paper were in fact formulated in concert with Richard during our co-writing of Re-thinking Theory: a Critique of Contemporary Literary Theory and an Alternative Account, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992.
3. For a detailed treatment of this conception see Seumas Miller, ‘Marxist Literary Aesthetics’, Philosophy and Social Criticism, 16(4), 1990.
6. This set of properties was first elaborated in Seumas Miller’s ‘Ethics and Literature’, Redoubt, 14, 1991.