

Cognitive Theory and Phenomenology in Arendt's and Nussbaum's Work on Narrative

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Published online: 6 June 2007
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Abstract In this essay I compare Nussbaum's and Arendt's approach to narrativity. The point of the comparison is to find out which approach is more adequate for practical philosophy: the approach influenced by cognitive theory (Nussbaum) or the one influenced by hermeneutic phenomenology (Arendt). I conclude that Nussbaum's approach is flawed by methodological solipsism, which is due to her application of cognitive theory.

Keywords Narrativity · Practical philosophy · Cognitive theory · Hermeneutics · Phenomenology · Contingency · Plurality · Emotion · Arendt · Hannah · Nussbaum · Martha

Introduction

For some time now, narrativity has been a popular theme and tool of reflection in philosophy and the human sciences. Not surprisingly, cognitive theory and hermeneutic phenomenology stand out as the most used approaches. The cognitive approach emphasizes the narrative structure of the self, consciousness, memory, experience, and identity. It conceives of narrative as integrative work, producing the continuity and coherence without which identity, experience, and memory would not be possible. To cite a popular source, according to Daniel Dennett identity is conferred by the multiple tales we hear and tell throughout our lifetime, hence the title of a famous essay "The self is a center of narrative gravity" (1992). One doesn't have to share Dennett's anti-essentialist materialist leanings in order to appreciate the point cognitive theory is making. It in fact concurs with conceptions of narrativity coming from the quite different quarter of hermeneutic phenomenology. In *Time and*

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Narrative, and more extensively in *Oneself as Another*, Ricoeur makes similar claims concerning the integrative function of narratives. He even extends this function to the whole of our lives: “We equate life with the stories that we tell about it. The act of telling would seem to be the key to the sort of connection to which we allude when we speak with Dilthey of the coherence of life.” (1991, p. 195)

The convergence of the conclusions of cognitive science and hermeneutic phenomenology with respect to narrativity is the more convincing as they are arrived at along different roads—the empiricist experimental method and naturalist partiality of the former, and the reflective interpretive method and synthesizing propensity of the latter—and informed by different views of human life. Whereas cognitive theory focuses on the mind as the distinctive feature of the human species, hermeneutic phenomenology emphasizes the worldly, as opposed to natural, character of human existence.

In this essay I will compare both approaches to narrativity with the object of assessing their adequacy and usefulness in practical philosophy. My hypothesis is that the cognitive approach, with its emphasis on mental activities and “representational structures” (Thagard 2004), is too narrow to be able to do full justice to the practical aspects of human life. Exactly how this affects its approach and use of narrative is what I want to find out by the comparison. In order to have a productive comparison and to avoid a foregone conclusion I need two authors who are similar enough in that they have worked in the field of practical philosophy and showed considerable interest in the issue of narrativity, while at the same time are dissimilar in the approach they take. Martha Nussbaum and Hannah Arendt are the perfect candidates. Both are practical philosophers who, dissatisfied with the state of modern moral and political philosophy, turned to classical Greek examples and introduced narrative material and style in order to improve the content and method of practical philosophy. But whereas Nussbaum is influenced by cognitive theory, Arendt is indebted to hermeneutic phenomenology.

I will first introduce some pertinent features of Nussbaum’s work, followed by a discussion of her view and use of narrative in relation to practical understanding and judgment, and addressing the question of whether and in what way her cognitive approach affects her use of narrative. In the two subsequent sections I will introduce and discuss Arendt’s work. The discussion is focused on the light her work can shed on flaws detected in Nussbaum’s work. The last two sections will be devoted to the exposition of methodological solipsism and the argument that the appearance of this flaw in Nussbaum’s work is due to her application of cognitive theory. In order to make my case I need to shift the focus of attention from the role of narratives to that of emotions for it is in the elaboration of her conception of emotions that Nussbaum’s adherence to cognitive theory is most extensive and significant.

Introducing Nussbaum: Ethics, Emotions and Narratives

Nussbaum is one of the most eloquent defenders of the cognitive theory of emotions. Undercutting the traditional dualism of reason and emotion, cognitive theory emphasizes the connection between emotion and cognition. Nussbaum follows the

Stoic tradition in that she regards judgments as the cognitive core of emotions. For example, my fear of someone is the judgment that that person might harm me.

Nussbaum argues for the indispensable value of emotions for (practical) knowledge. There are some kinds of knowledge that are only accessible to us through the experience of emotion, for instance grief or love. The importance of emotions in Nussbaum's practical philosophy follows from her critical view of the standard varieties of moral philosophy. She is dissatisfied with the usual philosophical approach to ethics because instead of reflection on real life moral dilemmas moral philosophy offers a moral calculus (utilitarianism), conceptual analysis (analytical philosophy), or the search for and legitimization of general rules and principles (Kantian universalism). These approaches share two decisive weaknesses that make them particularly unhelpful for reflection on practical issues. The two related weaknesses are excessive formalism and rationalism. The typical treatise of modern moral philosophy is cleansed of empirical content which appears only, if at all, in the shape of examples illustrating the argument. Its style of discourse is rational in the narrow sense of the word, that is, aiming at the general rather than the particular, leaving out inductive work and bracketing emotional involvement while concentrating on conceptual analysis and logical argument, which elucidate general moral rules and provide deductive arguments and logical evidence for the universality of the moral viewpoint.

In *The Fragility of Goodness* and *Love's Knowledge* Nussbaum makes a convincing case that the excessive formalism and rationalism of modern moral philosophy results in reductive and sterile texts that are of little use when we want some help in understanding and deliberating on real life moral issues. Literature, she argues, does a much better job, for its narratives typically focus on the particularities of persons and the complexities and ambiguities of human affairs, while its style elicits the kind of nuanced, comprehensive, and emotionally engaged reflection that practical understanding and deliberation requires. She claims that reading literature educates and strengthens practical understanding and deliberation not only because of the content of its narratives but also, and primarily, because of its style. A good novel appeals to the reader's imagination, evokes emotional response, and draws readers into the story, thereby offering them opportunities to experience, explore, test, amplify and modify their ethical intuitions and moral rules. Moral understanding and discernment are not about subsuming particular instances under general rules: they are about a constant "dialogue between perception and rule" (Nussbaum 1990, p. 157). For without engaged perception of the particularity and contingency of the human affairs and events in the world, the application of rules remains empty—indeed, a moral calculus—whereas perception and emotional response without abstract reflection and rule-governed deliberation risks the blindness that results from lack of distanciation.

The Ethics Lab of Literature

Nussbaum doesn't, of course, merely offer an argument concerning the value of narratives for practical philosophy. From *The Fragility of Goodness* onwards, most of her work contains interpretations of narratives, ranging from Greek tragedies and work of the Stoics

to the “stream of consciousness” novels of Henry James, Marcel Proust and Virginia Woolf, and the social reality fiction of Charles Dickens, Richard Wright and others. Though not exhaustive, this enumeration gives a good indication of what Nussbaum is looking for in narratives. Classical tragedy does not simply “display the dilemmas of its characters as pre-articulated,” but shows them “searching for the morally salient; and it forces us, as interpreters, to be similarly active” (Nussbaum 1986, p. 14).

In his perceptive and critical chapter on Nussbaum, Robert Eaglestone comments on this quotation with the observation that “literature plays a key methodological role,” for it bridges the gap between belief and theory (1997, p. 37). The latter refers to Nussbaum’s Aristotelian conception of ethics as “a reflective dialogue between the intuitions and beliefs of the interlocutor, or reader, and a series of complex ethical conceptions, presented for exploration” (Nussbaum 1986, p. 10, as quoted in Eaglestone 1997, p. 36). More precisely, the crucial methodological role of reading narratives is to help us develop the practical faculties of understanding, deliberation, and judgment. Literature can fulfill this role because of the way in which it unites form and content in regard to emotions, values, and virtues. Modern “stream of consciousness” novels are particularly good at exploring love’s and other emotions’ knowledge. Their protagonists show how reflection on emotional experience affords insight into deeply held convictions and values, thereby offering the chance to judge and clarify one’s worldview and goals in life. According to Nussbaum, the style and aspirations of the modern novel also further political values and social virtues, in particular the Enlightenment ideal of the equality and dignity of all human life (1995). Exemplary here is the way in which Dickens in *Hard Times*, a narrative to which Nussbaum recurrently returns, attacks the Benthamite utilitarianism of one of the protagonists (Mr. Gradgrind) and replaces it with imaginative sympathy for the destitute and marginalized other, thereby encouraging the virtues of empathy, broad-mindedness, and toleration.

Nussbaum’s use of narratives has not met with universal approval. Especially professional readers of literature lament her well-intentioned but reductive use of literature as an instrument to “cultivate humanity,” to paraphrase the appropriate title of one of Nussbaum’s books (1997). The accusation of instrumentalism, though correct, is by itself not very interesting unless good reasons are given why one shouldn’t use literature as a means to a (praiseworthy) end. Eaglestone’s chapter is discerning exactly because his critical observations go beyond the obvious charge of instrumentalism. He notes that “Nussbaum continually passes over the textual nature of a literary work and it is this which forms her crucial blindness. She understands a text as a surface behind which there are real situations and real events,” and he proceeds to make the Derridian point that Nussbaum’s work betrays a phonologocentrist neglect of the textuality of texts (1997, p. 46).¹

¹ Jacques Derrida (1976) introduced the term “phonologocentrism” to refer the privilege of spoken language (*phonè* in Greek) over written language in the history of Western philosophy since Plato. The reason for spoken language’s privilege is Western philosophy’s preoccupation with presence, the so-called metaphysics of presence. In his deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, Derrida shows that speaking, in contrast to writing, evokes the (illusionary) experience of meaning being present in the spoken signs, and of speakers being present to themselves, grasping their own meaning-intention. The typical phonologocentrist attitude is, therefore, to reduce the textual or “grammatological” features of written texts in favor of meanings, supposedly present behind the surface of the written signs.

I think that Eaglestone is right to criticize Nussbaum's representational presuppositions but that his reasons are wrong or, to say the least, not very convincing. In line with her conception of practical philosophy, Nussbaum takes the amateur rather than the professional reader of literature as her starting-point: the reader for whom the text indeed is "a surface," that is, a representation of real situations and events. To take the ordinary amateur reader as reference point is not a weakness but, on the contrary, one of the strengths of Nussbaum's work. But she underestimates the sophistication of the amateur reader. The amateur reader is less likely to suffer from the type of reductiveness professional readers are prone to when they are looking through the lens of their favorite theory. That appears to be the case with Nussbaum and Eaglestone. Both are guilty of similar reductive gestures. Eaglestone and other Derridian readers are right to emphasize the textuality of the text and, therefore, the distinction between literature and life. But they are wrong to reject the representational link between the two on theoretical grounds. Texts and thoughts are taken as representations of life itself because language, from the perspective of everyday experience, appears as, and is used as, a tool of communication and representation. That the representational model of language is inadequate in view of philosophical or scientific explanations of language does not, by itself, invalidate the everyday experience of language. On the contrary, to reject this kind of everyday experience on scientific or theoretical grounds is comparable to a scientist who insists that we are wrong in perceiving the movement of the sun across the sky for it is really the earth circling the sun. This kind of "scientism" neglects and replaces phenomenologically sound sources of experience and knowledge.² Nussbaum is right to take the representational link between text and life as her starting-point but, as I will argue later on, cognitive theory's emphasis on the role of representational structures in cognition blinds her to what most amateur readers intuitively know well, namely that the textual and real life world are not at all interchangeable. Amateur readers might be unable to articulate their implicit understanding, but their actions show that they tend to be aware of the fact that, despite the representational mirroring of novel and life, of thoughts and events, the experience of reflection and reading a novel is very different from the experience of living through the happenings of real life.

What Nussbaum and Eaglestone have in common, then, is not simply a professional reader's penchant to be (too) attached to certain theoretical presuppositions but, more precisely, an eagerness to replace the inconsistency of experience—literature and reality are both similar and dissimilar—with the consistency of theory leading to a certain reductiveness. Persuaded by the poststructuralist theory of language, the Derridian professional reader emphasizes the gap and censures the representational similarity of text and life. The professional reader who works from the perspective of cognitive theories is apt to do the reverse:

² I use the term "scientism" in the sense defined by John Dupré as the "exaggerated and often distorted conception of what science can be expected to do or explain for us. One aspect of scientism is the idea that any question that can be answered at all can best be answered by science" (2001, pp. 1–2). In my use, however, the meaning of scientism is extended to include reference to theories originating from the humanities and philosophy.

take the representational similarity for granted and forget about the disparity of text and life.

I will leave the case of the Derridian professional reader now and proceed with my argument in regard to Nussbaum. In order to corroborate the charge of reductiveness, I first need to detail the cognitive model Nussbaum appears to adhere to in her work, a model I will call “the ethics lab” for reasons that will soon become transparent.³

The most important claim Nussbaum makes with respect to the practical value of reading literature is a claim concerning moral cognition. Reading literature educates and improves our moral understanding and judgment for it allows us to get involved, perceive, ponder, and work through the ethical complexities evoked in the story, yet under the controlled and distanced circumstances of a reader. For

a novel, just because it is not our life, places us in a moral position that is favorable for perception and it shows us what it would be like to take up that position in life. We find here love without possessiveness, attention without bias, involvement without panic (Nussbaum 1990, p. 162).

A novel, in other words, can serve the function of an ethics lab. Comparable to scientific experiments in lab conditions that test, modify, and fine-tune scientific hypotheses and empirical observations, the reading of literature functions like an ethics lab in which moral cognition is tested, modified, and fine-tuned. Here as in science, the replication of real life situations in the controlled and distanced conditions of a carefully designed parallel world affords the reader ample opportunity to check every detail and ponder every ambiguity, reflect on the pertinence of moral rules and precepts, and compare with previous experience and other narratives, without the pressures of real life conditions.

The view that narratives can serve the function of an ethics lab makes sense when compared to the penchant for consistent but empty argument, bizarre thought experiments, and conceptual nitpicking in (moral) philosophy. Philosophical reflection on moral problems might indeed gain substance and pertinence if it exposes itself to the ethics lab of literature. Underlying the model of the ethics lab is the correct, though implicit, assumption that the experiential and cognitive conditions of philosophical reflection and reading narratives are similar enough for both to benefit each other. What Nussbaum seems not to be aware of, however, is that the same is not true of the experiential and cognitive conditions of being involved in and living through real life events. Reflection and reading have in common not only that they deal with representations, but also that they take place in an interior space, an *inner world*. Yet the experiential and cognitive conditions of the inner world in some respects differ sharply from those of the *outer world*, despite representational similarities. To read a story about, for instance, a dying parent is very different from living through the event itself. Nussbaum would, of course, not deny this. But the assumption underlying the ethics lab is that the

³ I borrow the felicitous description of Nussbaum’s use of and approach to narrativity in terms of an “ethics lab” from Ortwin de Graef (2002), whose argument in other respects has little in common with mine.

experiential and cognitive conditions of inner and outer world are, as it were, on the same scale and only differ in degree of emotional involvement, attentive perception, room for reflection, etc. The stress-free, tranquil environment and leisured concentration of the literature lab promises better results than the everyday chaos of real life with its distractions, obligations, and emotional over-involvement.

The experiential and cognitive conditions of the inner world and outer world do not simply differ by degree. They are not on the same scale, or, to use an old-fashioned qualification, there is an essential difference that limits the validity of the use of literature as a stand-in for real life. I will attempt to substantiate these claims by way of a discussion of Arendt's work.

Introducing Arendt: Story-telling and Politics

Arendt's work contains a lot of stories in the conventional sense of narrative interpretations, mostly of historical-political events—for instance the American and French Revolution (1963/1990)—and the lives of particular people—for instance the 18th century German Jewess Rachel Varnhagen (1958/1974), the Danish writer Isak Dinesen, and the Marxist thinker and activist Rosa Luxemburg (1968/1995). Her use of narrative is related to the philosophical method, or attitude would be a more appropriate label in this case, of hermeneutic phenomenology. Though Arendt's phenomenological attitude has little in common with the scientific rigorosity and abstract transcendentalism of the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl, her exposure, as a student, to the hermeneutic phenomenology of the young Heidegger has been decisive. As the young Heidegger has done with important concepts of human existence, Arendt's phenomenological analyses of political concepts attempt to uncover the experiences that underlie them in order to achieve a better understanding of the phenomena they refer to. It is the commitment to understanding phenomena and their underlying experiences, rather than concepts, which defines Arendt's phenomenological attitude and explains her use of narrative.

Story-telling in Arendt's work is a generic term for the outcome of the process of understanding. Understanding is a creative process of lending meaning to reality resulting in stories.⁴ The effort to understand and to articulate one's understanding in stories is an important, and even indispensable, part of politics; for without story-telling the public world of politics would not survive. In line with hermeneutic phenomenology, Arendt takes human beings first and foremost as worldly creatures, but more than any other hermeneutic phenomenologist she proceeds to uncover the political implications of our worldliness. A world, in contrast to nature, is not a given. It needs to be built and maintained, not only in its material infra-structure but also, and especially, in the intangible "web of human affairs": that is, the events and facts brought about by human actions (Arendt 1958/1989, pp. 181–192). Constituted and sustained by acting and speaking people, the intangible world is

⁴ Considering the central place and significance of story-telling in Arendt's work, there is surprisingly little attention given to this aspect of her work. For useful discussions, see Elisabeth Young-Bruehl (1977), Lisa Disch (1994/1996), Ursula Ludz (1996), Seyla Benhabib (1996), and Annabel Herzog (2000).

very fragile and ephemeral. It is ephemeral for acts, facts, and events lack impact and meaning, and can even disappear altogether, unless they are recorded and given meaning in stories of various kinds, ranging from official historiography to novels and news stories, and from discussions among friends to debates in the media and in parliament. The intangible world is also fragile, for its dependency on stories makes it susceptible to ideological manipulation.

Arendt insists that the existence of a shared world is dependant on the possibility of articulating many different views of the same reality. Without a plurality of stories concerning human actions and the consequences thereof, the reality of the web of human affairs will become insubstantial to the point of simply evaporating. The articulation of plural viewpoints is the illumination, from many different perspectives, of the same fragile, ephemeral, and contingent web of human relationships, facts, and events—making it thereby more solid, more objective, more real.⁵ Without a plurality of stories about worldly matters, the world will first lose its character of commonality, then its meaningfulness, and finally, its reality. When plural viewpoints are replaced by a homogenized story—an increasingly common feature of the media in a globalized world, exemplified by the news coverage of the Iraq war and “the war on terror”—the typical result is a lack of factual substance. The same images and sound-bites are repeated over and over again. Instead of illuminating the complex web of human affairs, the overexposure to the blinding light of just one perspective creates a sort of stark black and white dreamscape, which has lost all nuance and haunts us instead of guiding our understanding.

The first reason why it is important to sustain and strengthen the intangible human world by a plurality of stories is that it strengthens our sense of reality. Human beings, social and political animals, need to be able to orient themselves in the world, a feat that becomes harder than the less substantial the web of human affairs is. The second reason is that politics requires the existence of a shared world and vice versa. In contrast to its everyday conception, politics in Arendt’s sense is not the drafting and execution of policies, nor the achievement of political goals, but, first and foremost, the realization of plurality and freedom in word and deed.⁶ Without politics, that is, without people freely and publicly speaking and acting together, there would not be a shared world at all, yet without shared world, or more precisely, without pluralistic story-telling sustaining a common and free public space, speech, and action of individuals cannot manifest itself: hence politics becomes insubstantial or the kind of caricature observable in dictatorial or totalitarian regimes.

⁵ Of course, things are more complicated because perspectives may dispute each other’s version of reality, of the facts. It would be too much of a digression to discuss Arendt’s subtle notion of the factual here. Suffice it to say that, first, facts in Arendt’s sense are hybrids of interpretation and an event or state of affairs, and, second, that most politically relevant discussion is about interpretation.

⁶ Action is the realization of freedom because only action enables us to change the status quo and establish a new state of affairs, a new worldly reality. Plurality refers, in Arendt, to the fact that people as actors are both equal and different. My difference with other people, the uniqueness of my person, who I am as opposed to what I am, appears only, and can appear only, in speech and action. Cf. Arendt (1958/1989).

Good Stories and the Limitations of Science, Philosophy, and Literature

Arendt doesn't explicitly discuss standards of story-telling, but from her critical evaluation of scientific, philosophical, and literary narratives one can infer that story-telling has to fulfill at least two standards: first, a robust concern with the world of human affairs that is tough enough to face up to and examine "the impact of reality and the shock of experience" (1951/1968, p. x) And, second, an understanding that is flexible enough to acknowledge the contingency and plurality of this world.

Most scientific and philosophical discourse doesn't qualify, nor does it pretend to qualify, as story-telling in Arendt's sense. Scientific and philosophical discourse may nevertheless be, and often is, pertinent to story-telling. It may have an auxiliary role with respect to story-telling. Scientific and philosophical explanation and knowledge are necessary, in so far as they establish and explain facts, but they are not sufficient to make sense of the facts, which is what a good story does. Even when they do not (solely) rely on methods of quantitative research and conceptual analysis, the narratives of the human sciences and (practical) philosophy often fall short of the kind of understanding exemplified by a good story. This is not surprising, for the aim of science and philosophy is not to tell a good story but to get a handle on the ambiguities, complexities, and contingency of acts, facts and events, by clearing up the ambiguities, reducing the complexities, and explaining the phenomena by fitting them in a causal and consistent pattern. If successful, the result will be useful and applicable in a way that story-telling is not. Problematic however, is when scientific and philosophical narratives replace story-telling, as appears to be happening in contemporary Western society. Consistent with the prevalence of scientism in contemporary Western society, Western democracies are more and more turning into expertocracies in which the accounts of scientific and philosophical experts are valued more highly, and consequently have more influence, than the stories of amateurs. The reason to worry about this phenomenon is because of the potential destructive impact of scientific and philosophical narratives in politics. Because of "reason's strong aversion to contingency" (Arendt 1972, p. 12), the explanations and conceptual systems of scientific and philosophical narratives tend to not simply explain, but *explain away*, the contingency of the human world.⁷ In many ways it is easier to stick to the causal explanations of science and the consistent conceptual systems of philosophy than to acknowledge the frightening unpredictability and inconsistency of factual reality—which is what good stories force one to do. Good stories are needed exactly because they acknowledge and try to make sense of contingent worldly reality. When expert accounts replace stories we run the risk of being left with justifying and reductive rationalizations, which keep the complex, confusing and terrifying worldly reality at bay or, worse, undermine the reality of the intangible web of human affairs.

⁷ Cf. Arendt's analysis of the role of "professional problem solvers," members of "think tanks," and other experts in politics. They want to "discover laws by which to explain and predict political and historical facts as though they were as necessary, and thus as reliable, as the physicists once believed natural phenomena to be" (1972, pp. 11–12).

Apart from facing up to contingency, good stories also need to acknowledge the plurality of perspectives on acts, facts, and events. Philosophy is more likely than science to perform poorly in this respect. Science's empirical nature forces it to stick to facts which, per definition, are observable in one way or another in the outside world whereas philosophy is the result of thought processes taking place in the inner world of the mind. For this reason philosophical narratives are more prone than science to the fallacy of solipsism, exemplified by Descartes' "cogito ergo sum" (Arendt 1971/1978, pp. 45–53). Extended stay in the inner world provides a fertile breeding ground for the Cartesian illusion that, among all our experiences, the experience of the thinking self is the most certain, indubitable, rock-bottom real one. Yet, Arendt argues convincingly that the ephemeral thinking self, which only exists as long as and in so far as we withdraw from the outside world and pay attention to what goes on in our minds, actually derives its reality from its appearance in the outside world and its interactions with others. That is why, for instance, solitary confinement is a very effective instrument of torture. Under such conditions it is not only very hard to hold on to one's sense of reality, but first and foremost, to one's sense of self. The authenticity and solidity of one's sense of self does not find its source in the interior recesses of the mind but, on the contrary, in the appearance of the self in the world through word and deed—which makes us visible, audible, and real to others and, through the acknowledgment and reactions of others, to ourselves.

The Ethics Lab and the Risk of Methodological Solipsism

Arendt's observations with respect to the limitations of scientific, philosophical, and literary narratives derive from a keen sense of the disparity of the experiential conditions of inner and outer world. Whereas pluralism is the defining feature of human speech and action in the outer world, solipsism is an illusion generated by the activities of the inner world.⁸ What is decisive in this respect is not the content of representations but the fact that we are alone (*solus*) with ourselves (*ipse*) while reading and reflecting. Speaking and acting in the outer world, by contrast, wouldn't be possible without minimal acknowledgment of the people one speaks to or acts with as *other* people, that is, as persons both separate and different from myself. If solipsism persists in the interaction with people in the outer world, we perceive it as a pathological condition: for instance, autism. The inner world of reading, writing and reflection predisposes to another attitude with respect to contingency as well. Whereas engagement in the outer world and interaction with other people exposes us directly and uncontrollably to the contingency of human affairs, withdrawal into the inner world of reading, writing, and reflection gives one the chance to control contingency by fitting events and affairs into the pattern of a narrative.

Without acknowledgment of the dissimilar experiential conditions of inner and outer world, the ethics lab of literature is more likely to impair than improve our

⁸ For an excellent analysis of Arendt's argument concerning the solipsist fallacy and other "metaphysical fallacies" (Arendt 1971/1978, pp. 11–16), see Jacques Taminiaux (1992, Chap. 4).

understanding and judgment of life's moral complexities because of the risk of methodological solipsism. I use the term "methodological solipsism" to refer to the unwitting generalization of (the standards of) inner world experience, and the concomitant misappraisal of contingency and plurality. In the remainder of this section I will provide an analysis of the implications of this claim and an argument for its likelihood.

Together with the pressures of real life, the ethics lab of literature suspends the impact of contingency and plurality. Human interaction in the outer world is contingent in the sense of having unpredictable and sometimes unprecedented consequences. Even when they are carefully planned and carried out, the words and deeds of human agents are unpredictable with respect to their future impact and meaning for the simple reason that we cannot know in advance with certainty the consequences they will have and the various ways in which they will figure in stories, accounts, and explanations in the future (Arendt 1958/1989, pp. 191–192). The unpredictable consequences of human interaction include that the latter might give rise to new, unprecedented states of affairs. For Arendt, the paradigmatic example of an unprecedented new phenomenon was the rise of totalitarianism, and especially Nazism, in the first half of the 20th century. A prominent contemporary example, albeit on a different scale, would be the terrorist attack of 9/11. Because of these unpredictable and, sometimes, unprecedented consequences of human interaction, it is only by hindsight, if at all, that we are able to assess the impact and meaning, the consequences and implications, of acts, facts and events; an assessment that, in principle, is never exhaustive or definitive because of the plurality of interpretations and the open future of human history. In short, contingency and plurality don't allow for closure. Literature may evoke or bear witness to the plural, unpredictable and unprecedented character of human affairs, but narratives cannot but replace the shock of the new and the open-endedness of real-life contingency and plurality with mimetic closure. In contrast to real life circumstances, readers of narratives find themselves in the comfortable position of being protected against the shock of the new,⁹ and of being able to follow the chain of events to the end. And even if a story has an open end, plays with the conventions of the genre and the expectations of the reader, and introduces a plurality of perspectives, a narrative, in stark contrast with real life circumstances, always affords an overview and a sense of closure. Because understanding real life is without any closure Arendt insists that understanding is an "unending" task of coming to terms with a plural, unpredictable and ever new human reality (1994, pp. 307–308).

In addition to the lack of closure and overview, real life plurality presents another complication. Adequate understanding and judgment of acts, facts, and events requires that one is able to widen and transform the subjectivity of one's own perspective with the perspectives of others. In the ethics lab this endeavor proceeds

⁹ Literature, and narratives in general, cannot give us the shock of the new. In regard to newness, narratives are either mimetic, articulating, and repeating the new phenomenon in order to make sense of it, or they try to evoke a (fictional) new state of affairs themselves. But in both cases, the only shock we are likely to register, if at all, is a shock of recognition. The shock of the new is the (traumatic) experience of being confronted with a state of affairs one does not understand and cannot get a grip on—at the time when it happens—because it is completely new and unexpected.

without exposure to real others. This lack diminishes the experiential and cognitive value of the ethics lab significantly. Real others are much more likely to correct, resist, and check the assumptions inherent in my perspective than the represented others I encounter in the textual world because unlike the latter, real others talk back, react to, and otherwise interfere with the way I perceive and interpret things. As the confrontation with conflicting and incompatible perspectives is nearly inescapable, interaction with real others teaches the hard lesson that enlarging and transforming the subjectivity of one's viewpoint is an open-ended, messy business which lacks the intellectual satisfaction of coherence and full intelligibility. In the inner world of the ethics lab, by contrast, we are more likely to absorb only what fits our frame of reference and, thus, to simply extend our subjective viewpoint through the integration of compatible perspectives.

Summing up, the naïve use of the ethics lab—that is, without taking the dissimilar conditions of inner and outer world into account—might install the illusion that it is possible to master the contingency and plurality of the outer world. Guided solely by inner world experience where coherence and intelligibility are within reach and afford a sense of mastery or “cognitive success,” the messy and opaque open-endedness of real life experience, instead of providing a necessary correction and antidote, will simply be perceived as flawed, to be improved upon in the ethics lab. Another probable consequence of methodological solipsism is that the extended subjective viewpoint will be mistaken for impartiality, whereas conflicting and incompatible perspectives that challenge coherence and intelligibility are ignored.

If the naïve use of the ethics lab runs the risk of methodological solipsism, what does it take, in methodological terms, to use the ethics lab critically? Critical use requires acknowledgment of the distinct and, by itself, limited, cognitive value of inner world and outer world experience. This acknowledgment allows the application of the two sets of experience in such a way that they enhance each other. The ethics lab experience enables one to extend one's viewpoint and frame of reference, and to clarify, adjust, and nuance cognitions, beliefs, and convictions one already possesses. What it seldom does, by itself, is truly change and widen one's viewpoint and frame of reference: that is, *transform* them in a way that the resulting viewpoint and frame of reference allow one to see and understand new things that one didn't see and understand before—because they were not consistent with one's former frame of reference and unintelligible from one's former point of view. Transformation of this kind usually requires experiences in the outer world that override the inner world standards of intelligibility and coherence, like the shock of the new. Exposure to new, shocking, strange, and incomprehensible events, acts, or facts does not, of course, by itself accomplish transformation of one's viewpoint and frame of reference. In addition, one must be willing and committed to the “unending task of understanding,” as Arendt calls it. And that is where the ethics lab comes in: it may help to make sense of this kind of outer world experiences that have a strong impact and are, at the same time, not really comprehensible. A variation on the Kantian principle of experience sums up nicely how the two sets of experiences may be applied to enhance each other: whereas the shock of the new and similar outer world experiences will remain “blind” without the cognitive

processes of the inner world, the latter will remain “empty,” in the sense of generalizing the subjective viewpoint and frame of reference without learning anything truly new, without the input of the former.

Nussbaum's use of the ethics lab is not critical in the above sense. It hardly can be, for her use is limited, mostly, to bridging the gap between belief and theory, more precisely, between the moral cognition and intuition of ordinary people as represented in narratives on the one hand, and the claims and arguments of moral philosophy and ethics on the other. What is strikingly absent in Nussbaum's work is the driving force of Arendt's work: the attempt to make sense of real life experience with the help of narrative resources. The most prominent and controversial example of such an attempt is Arendt's report, and subsequent reflection, on the Eichmann trial she witnessed in Jerusalem 1961. Arendt was struck by the banality of this man—who was responsible for the smooth execution of the *Endlösung*, the Nazi policy of extermination of the Jewish population. Instead of anti-Semitism and other evil motives one would expect, Eichmann, according to Arendt, demonstrated nothing so much as thoughtlessness and lack of imagination. In order to make sense of this unexpected experience, Arendt returns to the question of thoughtlessness in *The Life of the Mind* where she proceeds to investigate the hypothesis that the use of imagination and the activity of thinking “condition” men “against evil-doing” (1971/1978, p. 5) with her usual recourse to narrative resources of all kinds, ranging from the Apostle Paul to Kafka, and from Herodotus to Paul Valéry.

Though there are enough references to real life experiences in Nussbaum's work, sustained interpretation of, and reflection on, real life experience with the help of the ethics lab are missing.¹⁰ Instead of showing how the ethics lab may help close the gap between living life and understanding it, Nussbaum stays in the inner world of reading and reflection, detailing and adjusting the claims and arguments of moral philosophy with the help of narrative material—despite her claim that the ethics lab might improve the understanding and judgment of life's moral complexities. This, by itself, could already be taken as evidence of methodological solipsism, for Nussbaum apparently thinks that inner world and outer world experience are similar enough for the former to substitute for the latter. It would also explain her consistent tendency to conflate (literary) representation with the represented real thing, as Eaglestone has pointed out, and self-understanding with understanding a text (Wheater 2004, p. 217).

However that may be, I prefer to address the question why Nussbaum—who appears to have such a clear view of the methodological role of narratives, in contrast to Arendt, who hardly ever reflects on the methodology of her use of narratives—at the same time omits substantiation of the important claim that the ethics lab might help improve the understanding of real life experience. My answer will be that this omission is probably due to Nussbaum's application of cognitive theory. The final thesis I want to defend is that cognitive theory tends to reduce the

¹⁰ The one exception would probably be the real life example of the death of Nussbaum's mother in *Upheavals of Thought*. However, this example mostly concerns inner world experience that isn't likely to make one aware of the consequences of contingency and plurality, and is treated accordingly. Apart from other (existential) reasons Nussbaum might have had for the choice of this real life example, I don't think it is coincidental that it fits her inner world emphasis.

cognitive value of outer world experience and, hence, predisposes to methodological solipsism, evidence of which can be found in the conception of emotions elaborated in *Upheavals of Thought*.

The Cognitive Value of Emotions

Underlying cognitive theory is an implicit mentalist ontology that takes human beings primarily as minds; that is, as centers of perception, emotion, and thought, located in the interior space of the body and, therefore, separated from the outer world of things, events, and other human beings. In the phenomenological tradition this unacknowledged Cartesian heritage has been criticized as an ontological and epistemological mistake. Starting with Heidegger's elaboration, in *Being and Time*, of being-in-the-world as the primary ontological condition of human beings and followed by Merleau-Ponty's argument, in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, that the body's perceptions and capacities open up the world and enable us to move around in it with confidence,¹¹ phenomenologists understand the ontological and epistemological condition of human beings in different and, I contend, more realistic terms. Human beings are embodied creatures who spend most of their lives not enclosed in their minds but, on the contrary, doing things in the world, e.g. driving cars, talking with people, cooking dinner, and watching TV. It is not the inner world of the mind but our thoroughly worldly existence that enables and shapes the sense of reality on which cognition and adequate moral conduct depend. The understanding of human beings as embodied worldly beings shifts the epistemological emphasis from "knowing that," i.e. the representational structures of explicit cognition, to the implicit cognitive contribution of "knowing how" which results from embodied practices, and of emotion as a specific disclosure of reality.

Because of its mentalist presuppositions, cognitive theory tends toward a representational, self-referential, and disembodied model of the mind. This model entails that outer world experience results in cognition only if it can be represented in some way in the inner world of the mind, and if the representations can be somehow incorporated in one's frame of reference, viewpoint, and set of beliefs, convictions, and knowledge. Compared to the phenomenological model, this representational model of cognition is extremely reductive, for it filters the most important source of cognitive content, outer world experience, in such a way that most experiential know-how is lost. In addition, it excludes the specific cognitive contribution of emotion. As it conceives the mind basically as an active disembodied agent, processing all kinds of external (outer world) and internal (inner world) input, the cognitive model tends to overlook the passive or receptive dispositions of the embodied mind, of which emotion is the most important instance. Emotion implies that one is not doing but *undergoing* something. To be moved or affected by something requires a receptive, though attentive, openness of the mind,

¹¹ The body can do this because it is intentional or, rather, intentionality is a feature of human beings as *embodied* minds, and not simply of minds. Cf. Vasterling (2003).

distinct from, and often eluding the grasp of, the active, filtering, representing, and appraising functions of the mind. The receptive emotional disposition therefore enables the embodied mind to register, in the form of emotions, new phenomena or well-known phenomena in a new light, while the active functions of the mind remain blank because the emotional awareness is not (as yet or fully) translatable in representations. For example, as a teenager in the seventies in the rural Catholic South of the Netherlands, I increasingly suffered from feelings of disgust, shame and humiliation that I wasn't able to explain or even acknowledge for what they were. It took me two decades before I found out what these emotions were trying to tell me. At that age—and in the changing, more liberal atmosphere of the seventies with its second awakening of feminism—disgust, shame, and humiliation constituted the unwitting but very appropriate reaction to and registration of exposure to behavior that only much later was commonly recognized as sexist and abusive.

The conception of emotions Nussbaum elaborates in *Upheavals of Thought* follows the representational and self-referential model of the mind, as is clear from Nussbaum's own summarizing statements: “*Upheaval* argues that emotions are evaluative appraisals that ascribe high importance to things and people that lie outside the agent's own sphere of control” (2004a, p. 443). “Emotions always concern an object or objects that, from the agent's point of view, are appraised as important in the agent's scheme of goals,” and as such, emotions entail “self-reference” (2004b, p. 477). It is not surprising that *Upheavals of Thought* does not contain any consideration or acknowledgment of the cognitive (and moral) value of emotion as a receptive disposition of the embodied mind. Even if the states of emotional awareness to which it gives rise may, in due time, become translatable and consequently available for the self-referential appraising function of the mind—as in my example—Nussbaum's conception of emotions is incapable of grasping the truly important cognitive value that emotional states of this kind may have: their transformational quality. Exactly because of its receptive disposition, emotion may make us aware of new phenomena, or throw a new light on known phenomena; an awareness which, in due time, may transform our viewpoint, frame of reference, and scheme of goals and ends, instead of merely extending it.

The other reason why I have chosen this example is that it features the feelings of shame, disgust, and humiliation. In an extended argument in the first part of *Upheavals of Thought* Nussbaum contends that the “cognitive content” of shame and disgust is likely to be “false or distorted, and linked with self-deception” (2001, p. 454). My example indicates that that argument might be simply wrong. Nussbaum's argument is the result of her one-sided focus on the self-reference of emotions and her blindness to emotion's receptivity. For this reason she doesn't seem to realize that the cognitive content of negative and “primitive” emotions like shame and disgust might be more revealing of occurrences in the outer world than of the self's assumptions or predispositions.

Nussbaum does not only fail to acknowledge the transformational quality of emotions. More seriously, she doesn't seem to be aware of the fact that transformation might be something more than, and distinct from, extension. When Nussbaum explicitly ponders the issue of “ethical change,” she only considers the question of how we can *extend* our scheme of goals and ends (2004b, pp. 484–486).

As I pointed out before, the crucial difference between extension and transformation of (in this case) one's scheme of goals and ends is that only in the latter case one has learned something truly new as a consequence of (most likely) outer world experience.

What these instances of blindness have in common is the reduction of embodied worldly experience in favor of inner world experience, standards, and features. As such, they are, I think, a clear sign of the methodological solipsism which is an intrinsic danger of much of cognitive theory.

Conclusion

The exposition and argument in this article are not meant to invalidate Nussbaum's use of the ethics lab, nor her very careful and extensively elaborated conception of emotions. On the contrary, it is because I value Nussbaum's innovative approach that I have attempted to pinpoint and elucidate what I consider to be a constitutive flaw that limits the full potential of the approach. The flaw of methodological solipsism is probably not only due to Nussbaum's application of cognitive theory: analytical philosophy's obsession with consistency, clarity, and coherence comes in as well. This is an obsession of which Nussbaum is not free, despite her critical distance to analytical philosophy. Cognitive theory is its most significant source. By drawing on the work of Arendt, I have tried to show, however briefly and generally, that hermeneutic phenomenology is, in important respects, better suited to Nussbaum's approach to practical philosophy than is cognitive theory.

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