

# THE MORAL POWER OF THE NARRATIVE

ART, LITERATURE, AND MORAL KNOWLEDGE

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*Abstract*

Should moral criteria play any role in assessing pieces of art? In which way are ethical issues inscribed in literary works of art? Are there any ethical values in literature? Whether it is possible to be taught by art has been a question that has troubled philosophers since the time of Plato. In a way, one could argue that aesthetics, as a branch of value theory, began with Aristotle's defense of the cognitive value of tragedy in response to Plato's famous attack on the arts in the *Republic*. Cognitivist accounts of aesthetic experience have been central to the field ever since, although in the eighteenth century, it has been pointed out that aesthetic experience is important due to its emotional impact, precisely the opposite of what Plato criticized. Although one cannot

doubt the fact that art can have a strong emotional effect on us, the question is whether it is possible for art to influence us in such a way as to contribute to our self-development and to our understanding of the world. Moreover, the recent ethical turn towards art and literature redefines, on contemporary terms, the study of both ancient and modern philosophy by stressing the need to combine literature and the narrative arts into the pursuit of a common moral goal.

*Keywords:* ethics, art, literature, narrative, Martha Nussbaum.

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### **Moralna moč pripovedi. Umetnost, literatura in moralna vednost**

*Povzetek*

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Ali naj bi moralni kriteriji igrali vlogo pri ocenjevanju umetniških del? Na kakšen način se etični problemi vpisujejo v literarne umetnine? Ali so v literaturi etične vrednote? Vprašanje, ali nas umetnost lahko česa nauči, bega filozofe od Platonovega časa dalje. Na določen način bi lahko rekli, da se je estetika, kot veja vrednostne teorije, pričela z Aristotelovo obrambo kognitivne vrednosti tragedije v odgovor na Platonov znamenit napad na umetnost v *Državi*. Kognitivistične obravnave estetskega izkustva so odtlej na tem področju osrednjega pomena, čeprav so nekateri avtorji v osemnajstem stoletju poudarili, da je estetsko izkustvo pomembno zaradi njegovega čustvenega naboja, kar je natanko nasprotje Platonove kritike. Čeprav ne moremo dvomiti glede dejstva, da lahko umetnost na nas čustveno močno vpliva, ostaja vprašanje, ali je vpliv umetnosti lahko takšen, da prispeva k našemu samo-razvoju in k našemu razumevanju sveta. Nedavni etični obrat k umetnosti in literaturi znotraj sodobnih okvirov nanovo opredeljuje študij tako antične kakor moderne filozofije, tako da izpostavlja potrebo po združevanju literature in pripovednih umetnosti z zasledovanjem skupnih moralnih ciljev.

*Ključne besede:* etika, umetnost, literatura, pripoved, Martha Nussbaum.

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Should moral criteria play any role in assessing pieces of art?<sup>1</sup> In which way are ethical issues inscribed in literary works of art? Are there any ethical values in literature? Whether it is possible to be taught by art has been a question that has troubled philosophers since the time of Plato. In a way, one could argue that aesthetics, as a branch of value theory, began with Aristotle's defense of the cognitive value of tragedy in response to Plato's famous attack on the arts in the *Republic*. Cognitivist accounts of aesthetic experience have been central to the field ever since, although in the eighteenth century, it has been pointed out that aesthetic experience is important due to its emotional impact, precisely the opposite of what Plato criticized. Although one cannot doubt the fact that art can have a strong emotional effect on us, the question is whether it is possible for art to influence us in such a way as to contribute to our self-development and to our understanding of the world. Moreover, the recent ethical turn towards art and literature redefines, on contemporary terms, the study of both ancient and modern philosophy by stressing the need to combine literature and the narrative arts into the pursuit of a common moral goal.

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Furthermore, in this paper, I would also like to touch upon how politics and ideology influence art, not only in the theoretical domain of philosophy of art, e.g., politically motivated aesthetic theory, such as Marxist views about the arts such as socialist realism (Sim 1992, 441–471) or moralistic accounts of aesthetic theory such as Tolstoy's Christian art (Tolstoy 1889), but also in the practical domain of state educational policy. In a way, both these accounts are "consumer-oriented" in the sense that, according to them, art is to be viewed from the perspective of the person viewing or hearing the work (Hanfling 1992, xiii). In other theories, though, the central role is played by the person creating the work; art is to be defined by reference to the creator's feelings rather than to the feelings of the consumer, although it should be noted that the consumer's feelings are also taken, to some extent at least, into consideration.

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Indeed, novels, poems, ancient tragedies, plays, films—and even, although less often, paintings and sculptures—can affect people’s emotions and influence their actions, sometimes in ways that appear to do harm. A famous example of a poem that had an impact on human psyche but also on one’s beliefs and ideas about morality has been William Wordsworth’s (1770–1850) famous poem “Daffodils” (Wordsworth 1807) that refers to artistic creation and aesthetic pleasure. This poem has, in a way, been associated with utilitarian theory, in the sense that J.S. Mill—as he himself says in his *Autobiography* (1865)—had his first nervous breakdown after he read it, since Mill realized for the first time, that there exists aesthetic pleasure and that not all is dependent upon Jeremy Bentham’s principle of utility and its maximization for the greatest good.

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At the same time though, another question connected to the relation between art and morality is associated with the relevance of morality to imaginative literature and of imaginative literature to morality. This is a long-standing debate that goes back to Plato and Aristotle and has its roots to “the ancient quarrel between the poets and the philosophers”, as it is called in Plato’s *Republic*. According to Jerrold Levinson, this issue involves two questions:

First, how can fictional narratives, being neither true nor pretending to truth, afford moral insight, instruction, or improvement? How can they give us knowledge of human nature, or of anything else? Second, if imaginative literature has a moral dimension, does this open it to moral assessment, and if so, how does the moral assessment of literature stand to the aesthetic assessment of it? (Levinson 1998b, 10)

Art in general, and literature in particular, seems not to be a source of real knowledge, of a moral one or of any other sort, given that imagining things a certain way, in response to a fiction, does not seem like any ground at all for thinking that they are that way. “Moral knowledge” could be defined “as justified true beliefs about right standards for judging real human actions to be morally good or bad” (McCormick 1983, 400). Thus, the question here is whether art is like philosophy in expressing universal truths, or as Aristotle famously claimed in his *Poetics* that “poetry is something more philosophical and more important than history, since poetry tends to give general truths

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while history gives particular facts” (1451b3-4),<sup>2</sup> since “a poet’s object is not to tell what actually happened but what could and would happen either probably or inevitably” (1451a36-37).<sup>3</sup> Of course, one will argue that literary works cannot *assert* moral truths; they can merely *suggest* moral truths. Literary works do not suggest moral truths in the sense that authors *intend* to suggest certain truths or in the sense that particular readers actually grasp these truths: “something is true even though the author may not intend it and be quite unaware of it, and even though the audience may be so imperceptive as not to grasp it” (Richards 1926; quote in McCormick 1983, 402). Therefore, another question that arises, in relation to whether fictions are cognitive, is whether the cognitive force of fiction should be construed in terms of moral truths or rather in terms of moral beliefs. Literature may be a source of “genuine moral beliefs about real and not just fictional human actions” and “moral fictions may be even necessary components of any reflective person’s attempt to articulate a satisfactory viewpoint” (McCormick 1983, 409).

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Related to the above is the question referring to the role that works of art might play in moral education; a question again as old as Plato’s *Republic*. As Noël Carroll points out:

Ever since Socrates met Ion, this has been the great quarrel between poetry and philosophy. For in his momentous effort to depose Homer as the educator of the Greeks in favor of his own tutor, Plato was at pains to argue that neither literature nor art could teach anyone anything, since teaching requires something to teach, namely, knowledge, moral or otherwise; and knowledge, according to Plato, was something that neither literature nor art had to offer. Moreover, this Platonic tradition, albeit modern variations adapted for different epistemological convictions, still persists. (Carroll 2002, 3)

2 Φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον ποιήσεις ἱστορίας ἐστὶν (*Poetics*, 1451b3-4).

3 φανερόν δὲ ἐκ τῶν εἰρημένων καὶ ὅτι οὐ τὸ τὰ γενόμενα λέγειν, τοῦτο ποιητοῦ ἔργον ἐστὶν, ἀλλ’ οἷα ἂν γένοιτο καὶ τὰ δυνατὰ κατὰ τὸ εἰκὸς ἢ τὸ ἀναγκαῖον. (*Poetics*, 1451a36-37).

Noël Carroll has, in his paper “Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding” (1998), but also in his “The Wheel of Virtue: Art, Literature and Moral Knowledge” (2002), argued that fictional narratives can yield moral amelioration and that narrative is thus rightly subject to moral assessment, though there is no value to narrative *per se* (Carroll 1998, 126–160). According to Carroll, literature and art can provide a source of knowledge and a contribution to education, especially moral knowledge and education with respect to the virtues. Literary works can be regarded as thought experiments that encourage conceptual discrimination of our virtue schemas through the imaginative deployment of structures of studied contrasts that function argumentatively. As he succinctly points out in the conclusion of his paper:

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Since the knowledge in question is conceptual, it makes no difference that the cases are fictional. Since the education involved concerns the refinement of our grasp of virtue concepts, it is not best described as banal or platitudinous, but rather as affording added insight into what we already know. This need not always be taken as a mere repetition of familiar knowledge but can be an amplification or refinement thereof. Admittedly, much of the work of argument and analysis served up by art, especially art that employs virtue wheels, transpires in the mind of the audience. But in that respect, artworks function no differently than philosophical thought experiments. Thus, in the great and ongoing quarrel between philosophy and poetry, philosophy cannot win without undermining itself. (Carroll 1998, 19)

Indeed, Carroll is sharp in pointing out that the very own practice of philosophy, its own way of arguing, is based on creating thought experiments, metaphors, myths, and allegories. It should be pointed out, nevertheless, that one could argue back—in defense of Plato and the like—that philosophical thought experiments are not artistic creations; they are consciously made up cases aiming at clarifying a philosophical argument. Similarly, myths and allegories presented by philosophers—like, for example, the ones in Plato’s *Republic*—are either purpose-written imaginary examples or borrowed by

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literature or mythology, aiming at educating into virtue. So, in that sense, they are not at all like works of art whose intension is arbitrary.

In “Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding”, Carroll also provides us with a very useful classification of the four views that have been formulated so far on the relation of art to morality which he labels *autonomism*, *Platonism*, *utopianism*, and *clarificationism*, respectively. He defends the latter. According to Carroll, on the one hand, *autonomism* holds that art and morality are entirely separate, and that the latter is irrelevant to the former. On the other hand, *Platonism* and *utopianism* both take art as a whole to be subject to extensive moral assessment; but a negative moral assessment as far as *Platonism* is concerned and a positive one in the case of *utopianism*. According to Carroll, “*Platonism* regards all art as morally suspect”, due to its essential features, while “*utopianism* leads us to presume that, in virtue of its very nature, art, properly so called, is always morally uplifting” (Carroll 1998, 127). *Clarificationism*, though, the view that Carroll defends, maintains only that *some* narrative art, properly engaged with, can deepen moral understanding, through clarifying the content of our moral categories and principles, and that such art is thereby both better morally and better as art. It is better art, according to Carroll, because it is ultimately more absorbing in virtue of its moral content (Levinson 1998b, 10–11).

According to a further classification made by Christopher Hamilton, accounts such as Carroll’s presented above, *clarificationism* can be termed as an imagination-based conception of the way in which works of art can be morally significant (Hamilton 2003, 37–55). Other imagination-based accounts are the ones presented by Martha Nussbaum (Nussbaum 1996) and Frank Palmer (Palmer 1992). These are accounts of the relation between art and morality in which the moral significance of art lies in developing our imaginative capacity to be sensitive to the needs, emotions, and moral qualities of other people. Hamilton thinks that this type of insight into the inner life of others is characteristic of many works of art, and indeed an important part of their value as art. Hamilton, nevertheless, points out that such an insight is not always beneficial, and it is for this reason among others that many works of art are deeply morally ambiguous. It does not follow, according to Hamilton, that works of art—or the love of art in general—will make us better people, that

they will morally equip us with compassion, sensitivity, and concern for others (Hamilton 2003, 39). Hamilton argues that, on the contrary, they might inspire the cruel to do evil (Hamilton 2003, 40).

At this point, I would like to focus more specifically on Martha Nussbaum's work on literature and the narrative arts, and mainly, on what I would call her "imagination-based utopian account". Martha Nussbaum puts forward in her books *Love's Knowledge* (1990) and *Poetic Justice* (1996) an imagination-based conception of the way in which works of art can be morally significant which clearly lies, according to my opinion, within the *utopianism* camp, although Carroll does not quite think so (Carroll 1992, 156, n. 5). I would like, at this point, to examine briefly Nussbaum's imagination-based utopian account which focuses mainly on the moral significance of literature.

More specifically, in *Love's Knowledge*, Martha Nussbaum investigates the connection between philosophy and literature, the relationship between style and content in the exploration of ethical issues, the nature of ethical attention and ethical knowledge, the role of emotion in deliberating and self-knowledge. Nussbaum also offers an argument in favor of a conception of ethical understanding that involves emotional as well as intellectual activity, and gives priority to the perception of particular people and situations rather than to abstract rules, a conception which, according to Nussbaum, "finds its most appropriate expression and statement in certain forms usually considered literary rather than philosophical," which must themselves be included as texts within moral philosophy (Nussbaum 1996, ix). Most importantly though, Nussbaum's project in this book is to reorient moral philosophy and to sustain a distinctive approach to moral thinking and judgment that has ancient roots (mostly Aristotelian), but has been largely neglected in modern thought, by arguing that we should take literature, and the narrative arts in general, as partners in a common enterprise. Nussbaum also argues that emotion and love are key moral phenomena important to the good life. Nussbaum, following Stanley Cavell (Cavell 1976; Cavell 1979; Cavell 1987), argues that we should look carefully into the possibility that literature not merely presents values, descriptions, and morally interesting cases, but also a complete standpoint about the good life, necessary to all who engage with the study of moral philosophy, but also important to moral education in general.

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It should be pointed out though that Nussbaum's *Love's Knowledge* is mainly a collection of essays written at various points in time, not altogether agreeing completely with each other. These are bound together by Nussbaum's "common project" presented in her "Introduction" which is mainly an auto-biographical account that provides us, nevertheless, with very interesting historical information about the study of literature and philosophical aesthetics, and in particular its reception by the Anglo-American philosophical tradition at the time that Nussbaum was a student.

The questions that Nussbaum poses throughout her book are many and of various sorts, interesting for both literature and philosophy, but mainly for moral philosophy and literary criticism. For the purposes of this paper, I will only mention some of these questions that she poses: "How should one write, what words should one select, what forms and structures and organization, if one is pursuing understanding? (Which is to say, if one is, in that sense, a philosopher?)" (Nussbaum 1996, 3) Literary form is not, according to Nussbaum, separable from philosophical content (as *autonomism* claims), but is, itself, a part of a content—an integral part of the search for and the statement of truth. But this suggests, again according to Nussbaum:

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that there may be some views of the world and how one should live in it—views, especially, that emphasize the world's surprising variety, its complexity and mysteriousness, its flawed and imperfect beauty—that cannot be fully and adequately stated in the language of conventional philosophical prose, a style remarkably flat and lacking in wonder—but only in a language and in forms themselves more complex, more allusive, more attentive to particulars. (Nussbaum 1996, 3)

Further to the above, Nussbaum also makes an interesting point about love, the most important emotion in ethical theory, since it is our concern for others that makes us moral agents:

And what if it is love one is trying to understand, that strange unmanageable phenomenon or form of life, source at once of illumination and confusion, agony and beauty? Love, in its many varieties, and their

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tangled relations to the good human life, to aspiration, to general social concern? What parts of oneself, what method, what writing, should one choose then? What is, in short, love's knowledge—and what writing does it dictate in the heart? (Nussbaum 1996, 4)

This brings us to another question posed throughout the book: “What does all this mean for human life? What possibilities does this recognize or deny?” (Nussbaum 1996, 12) Indeed, there are many interesting points raised by Nussbaum in *Love's Knowledge*, the most important being, according to my philosophical preferences, her appropriation of Aristotle. Throughout *Love's Knowledge*, Nussbaum is referring to an Aristotelian account of morality and moral philosophy, to an “Aristotelian ethical position”, which also borrows Stoicism and the eighteenth century moral sentiment theories, such as Adam Smith's. The Aristotelian ethical position is of course in opposition to Plato's theory, but also to both Kantian and utilitarian theories.

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One of the most important features of this theory is the “ethical value of emotions and imagination”. Emotions involve cognitive structure and “beliefs about how things are and what is important”, as well as being “discriminating responses” to what is valuable, good, and proper (Nussbaum 1996, 41). Affectivity is best put into play when controlled by the disciplined and essentially loving imagination of the novelist. According to Nussbaum, “practical reasoning unaccompanied by emotion is not sufficient for practical wisdom” (Nussbaum 1996, 40). This is something that, according to Nussbaum, Aristotle also asserts. If emotion is prevented or excluded, not consulted as emotion, then this in, at least, “certain contexts will actually prevent a full rational judgment—for example by preventing access to one's grief, or one's love, that is necessary for the full understanding of what has taken place when a loved one dies” (Nussbaum 1996, 41).

This is indeed a very interesting and insightful account presented by Nussbaum that I do not, unfortunately, have enough time to discuss here. Nevertheless, I would like to point out that this last point made by Nussbaum brings us back to the aforementioned question posed previously by Christopher Hamilton. It is not at all clear that art cannot pose a threat to morality. Nussbaum is not merely arguing, as Hamilton does, that a novel

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can contribute to the life of virtue, but she is actually making a much stronger claim. She is arguing that a novel, by its very nature, rules out the possibility that it could cultivate a person's cruel or wicked dispositions, claiming that a novel promotes mercy through its invitation to empathetic understanding, that it cultivates a moral ability that is opposed to hatred in its very structure (Nussbaum 1996, 76). This is a strong *utopianism* position to maintain and its validity still remains to be seen or is, at least, in need of further philosophical and not mere historical argument that Nussbaum amply produces by making reference to the attitudes of the Ancients towards all forms of literature in general and tragedy in particular. But this would require another paper.

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