

The Power of Literature: Philosophy Beyond Authorial Aims

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The dissertation by Diana Kalášková is a monograph of 223 pages also including a bibliography (6 pages), an author declaration, acknowledgements, and abstracts in English and Czech (half a page each).

Summery

In the dissertation, Diana Kalášková investigates two main questions. The first is whether literature has the power to argue and convince, and the second, whether the philosophical relevance of literature is tied to author intention. In chapter 1, Kalášková critically engages with the question of the power of literature to convince and argue and investigates views of rationality and human nature primarily represented by Onora O'Neill and Cora Diamond. Kalášková sides with Diamond and stresses the importance of imagination and emotion for argumentation and reasoned understanding. In chapter 2, Kalášková focuses on Martha Nussbaum's cognitive understanding of the emotions and further investigates the importance of emotional and imaginative engagement in literature for moral understanding. Kalášková also criticises Nussbaum's view for relying on the assumptions that moral understanding is only developed by novels that portray exemplary characters and that the argumentative and educative power of novels are tied to the aim or intentions of the author. In chapter 3 and 4, Kalášková examines two novels to investigate the argumentative power of literature. Chapter 3 presents various readings of the philosophical implications of J.M. Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*. According to Kalášková, the novel is best understood independent of expectations of author aim and presentation of arguments in a narrow sense, as it rather argues through the complexity of the narrative, enriching the understanding of its readers. In chapter 4, Kalášková turns to the novel *Kaputt* by Curzio Malaparte to show the argumentative potential of a novel with a morally ambiguous main character.

Evaluation

In relation to the first question addressed in the dissertation, Kalášková investigates two fine examples of how literature has the power to inform moral philosophy in various ways and thereby makes a good case for parts of the general claim of the argumentative power of literature. Kalášková also convincingly argues for her second claim that the philosophical relevance of literature is not tied to author intention. In pursuing these questions, the dissertation makes some contributions to the debate about how novels aid our moral understanding. The combination of philosophical analysis and close readings of novels is admirable, and equally so is the reading and in-depth discussion of Malaparte's interesting and difficult novel.

In addition, Kalášková makes a number of valuable points in the dissertation. The reading of O'Neill brings out several insights for example that O'Neill's requirement that any view of the moral status of animals must be given a foundation in the form of neutral facts is a version of what Alice Crary calls 'hard metaphysics' (20), just as Kalášková brings out the striking fact that even if O'Neill finds the utilitarian arguments for the moral status of animals admirable,

she does not seem to find them particularly convincing. Kalášková gives an insightful presentation of the philosophical discussion around Coetzee's novel *Elizabeth Costello*, and the reading of Malaparte's novel *Kaputt* brings new perspectives into the discussion of the role of literature in moral philosophy.

In general, the dissertation is interesting and well researched. The main points are reasonably lucidly presented and well argued, and the language of dissertation is clear. Kalášková has a good grasp of the central works in the discussion of the role of literature in moral philosophy in which the dissertation engages and of the central questions within this discussion. The dissertation is well structured around the two central research questions, and answers to these questions are persistently pursued throughout the work.

The dissertation does however also have several weaknesses, both minor and more serious ones – I focus on the latter here.

One of the main weaknesses of the dissertation is that it fails to clarify some of its central concepts. This is the case with central concepts such as those of 'convincing', 'argument' and 'argumentation'. In places, this lack of clarity makes it unclear what is being discussed. To take just one example: The first chapter focuses primarily on what is required to convince another person of something. It is however never clarified whether Kalášková thinks 'convincing' merely requires turning a person over to entertain a specific claim or position, or whether 'convincing' requires more, for instance that the person also comes to see that claim as reasonable justified, as important, or as valuable or the like.

A similar problem of lack of clarification applies to some of the concepts discussed more generally in the dissertation especially the concept of 'rationality'. In some places rationality is explicitly thematised as in the discussion of a narrow versus a broader understanding of rationality. In other places, rationality is simply assumed to be opposed to for instances values and self-understanding thus implying that they are by default irrational (see e.g. p. 1) even if this assumption conflicts with the adoption of a broader understanding of rationality. This problem is especially pertinent in Kalášková's presentation of the opposition between O'Neill's view of argumentation and Diamond's suggestion that reasoning also relies on capacities of the heart. Here Kalášková sometimes present the discussion as an opposition between rational capacities and capacities of the heart, but if capacities of the heart are not in any way rational it seems difficult to understand how Diamond would think they can play a role in human reasoning.

One of the main contributions of the dissertation is to oppose a view that ties novels' power to argue to author intention. This contribution is however somewhat diminished by the fact that the view is at best marginal in the debate about literature in moral philosophy (and more or less abandoned in literary theory). Kalášková ascribes the view to Nussbaum, and in some places, Nussbaum could be taken to indicate a view along these lines. However, in most of her writings, Nussbaum quite clearly states that she concerned with contribution of novels or narratives independently of the aim of the author. In fact, in a central passage in *Love's knowledge*, Nussbaum discusses whether she is at all justified in considering comments of the author (in this case Henry James), and she remarks that she only includes these comments because they are included in the published novel in her interest and therefore 'have become a part of the literary enterprise they introduce' (LK, 10). It can thus be questioned whether Nussbaum – or any other prominent thinkers in the debate of the role of literature in moral philosophy – ties the contribution of the novel to author intention. The problem is that

Kalášková therefore only makes a quite minor contribution to the current discussion by showing that this view is untenable.

Another weakness of the dissertation is that presentations of views that Kalášková opposes are not always charitable and in some cases outright misleading. One example is that Kalášková in one place presents O'Neill's view of a good argument as an argument that will automatically convince everyone (35), but this is not implied by anything O'Neill writes. Another example is that Kalášková ascribes to Nussbaum the claim that novels are only philosophically relevant to the extent that 'there is a character that has the correct values, does the right thing, and represents an ideal worth striving for' (90), but Kalášková does not offer independent support for ascribing this very strong claim to Nussbaum. Rather Kalášková seems to move from Nussbaum's claim that we should only engage with novels that have something to teach us morally to the idea that Nussbaum approaches literature with 'a clear precondition of what is good and morally elevating' (114). But these are two different claims.

In other places Kalášková develops the views of thinkers discussed in ways that are problematic without explaining why anyone would come to interpret their views in this way. As an example, Kalášková objects to Diamond's use of a Wordsworth's preface in the discussion of one of Wordsworth's poems, claiming that this invocation of the preface may somehow make us 'come to hold that only those works of literature that have been created by authors wanting to express their aims are those that have the power to convince' (61). Kalášková explicitly and correctly writes that Diamond does not want to imply this, and that Diamond does not hold the view that only works of literature written by an author with an aim have the power to convince. But this leaves it an open question why Kalášková thinks that Diamond's mentioning of the author would lead any reader to interpret her view in conflict with what Diamond herself explicitly state.

Another general limitation of the dissertation is that Kalášková primarily presents, evaluates, and criticises points made by other scholars and only to a lesser degree develops point of her own; for example, the reading of *Elizabeth Costello* relies heavily on the work of other thinkers. Particularly notable is the fact that Kalášková in central places relies heavily on points made by her supervisors something that points to a somewhat limited degree of academic maturity.

In chapter 3, Kalášková works to show that there is argumentative power also in novels without an aim, arguing that we should widen the notion of argumentation to involve insights that are difficult to see and cases where it is not clear to us what we want to argue (see e.g. 174). At the end of chapter 4, Kalášková adds that literature may lead us to have a deepened understanding of reality, to question and explore we hold to be true, and to raise questions of reality. However, it is not clear what anyone in these cases are actually trying *to argue*, rather they seem to be cases where we leave the concept of argumentation behind – we might be doing do all kinds of other reasonable or rational things, but not arguing. To frame my point in another way: *Cambridge Dictionary* defines argumentations as 'a set of arguments used to explain something or to persuade people'; *Merriam-Webster* defines argumentation as 'the act or process of forming reasons and drawing conclusions in discussion'. The problem is that even if we widen the meaning of argumentation, it still does not seem possible to talk about argumentation in cases where we are unclear about reality or about what we want to say. Literature seems to be a resource in these cases, but if these are not cases of argumentation, this is not because of literature's power of argumentation. This raises the rather fundamental question of whether part of what Kalášková have done in the dissertation is not to show the argumentative of power literature but rather to show literature's power to do something *else*?

A final point of criticism concerns a point made in relation to Kalášková's reading of *Kaputt*, that it shows us 'that we shouldn't aim to answer the question of responsibility once and for all, condemning those who are guilty; if it is kept open, we can also ask ourselves and explore how we might be found responsible' (217). As a reading of *Kaputt*, it seems right that the question of responsibility should be kept open, and that engagement with this question should always involve self-reflection. However, Kalášková also endorses another point, that we should never identify and condemn those who are guilty. Given the context of the novel, this point is very problematic. There are some horrors done by human beings in which the question of responsibility and guilt cannot just 'stay open' because these horrors must be acknowledged as the result of certain people failing their responsibilities and becoming guilty and object to condemnation for doing so. Among these horrors are for instance the concentration camps of the Second World War. In such cases, even if we can let the question of responsibility stay 'open', we cannot do the same with certain questions of guilt and blame. I think this is the background in which the evasion of questions of responsibility and guilt in *Kaputt* is to be considered, but this background is absent from the discussion of the novel in the dissertation.

Finally, I want to add some minor, formal issues of criticism. In places, the writing is somewhat lengthy, and the length does not always contribute to depth. The discussion of the first chapter would have been improved by being shortened, as this would have made it more focused and less repetitive. And even if the dissertation is clear and fairly well written, the English is sometime strained and somewhat crude, and some sections, especially the introduction and the final part, are marred by typographical errors. One linguistic choice is especially worrisome: In self-references, Kalášková shifts back and forth between 'I' and 'we'. The shift rather disturbs the reading of the dissertation, and the use of 'we' is furthermore puzzling as Kalášková claims to be sole author of the dissertation.

Overall evaluation:

This is an interesting and acceptable dissertation with several substantial weaknesses. It would benefit from further revision. Nonetheless may be put up for oral defence in the current form.