

Review of

The Power of Literature: Philosophy Beyond Authorial Aims

submitted by

Diana Kalášková

University of Pardubice, 2024

Reviewer: Jakub Mácha, Masaryk University, Brno

Date: 24 May 2024

I think this is a fair thesis. The author showed a good command of scientific literature. I have two main objections to the presented thesis and several challenges that could be discussed during the defense.

Objection 1: The thesis uncritically accepts the views of Cora Diamond and, to a lesser degree, the views of other authors. One may be convinced that Diamond is right, and the author obviously is. However, the point of a doctoral thesis should be to show a critical stance. Save for two critical remarks (one in a footnote), I don't see any attempt to challenge Diamond's views. The thesis is full of assertions like "I agree with Diamond that ..." or "I completely side with Diamond ..." (or with Mulhall, Meretoja, ...). On the other hand, the views of the authors who disagree with Diamond, primarily O'Neill, are presented in an uncharitable manner. Yet a closer look into O'Neill's writing reveals that her views are much more nuanced than the thesis suggests. More about this below.

Objection 2: The thesis relies extensively on the views of other authors presented as quotations. This may seem to be a rather formal point. However, this point has a direct impact on the philosophical content of the thesis. Instead of presenting their own views, the author resorts to quotations from other authors. There is hardly any paragraph without a quotation. On many occasions, quotations are unnecessary or even counterproductive. The author of the thesis is expected to provide their own summaries and conclusions. My rough estimate is that the thesis contains more text within quotation marks than the author's own text.

These objections significantly detract from the quality of the work presented. I suggest that the author be given the opportunity to revise the thesis and take these critical points into account.

What follows are critical challenges to the ideas presented in the thesis. Some of them are more serious than others. In general, I think the thesis presents many claims that are easy to challenge or contradict. Conversely, some claims are unclear, others quite trivial. Although I tend to agree with the overall moral philosophical outlook presented in the thesis, I feel compelled to defend O'Neill since I think her views are misinterpreted in the thesis.

Challenge 1: The notion of argument (and its cognates “argumentation” or “argue”) is unclear. The author suggests that there is a narrow or rigorous conception of argumentation and a broader or wider conception of argumentation. Yet, it is unclear what these conceptions are. I surmise that the narrow conception is that arguments must have the form of clear premises and a conclusion that follows from these premises, or they contain “a set of clear rules we can follow” (p. 31) or “a clear conclusion” (p. 41). I doubt that there is a single philosopher claiming that philosophical texts must adhere to this form. Of course, there is a tendency in philosophy, connected with Descartes and Spinoza, to strive for clarity, distinctiveness, and logical soundness. This is, however, something different to say that what counts as philosophy must adhere to this syllogistic form. The author admits that “many of the works regarded as philosophy don’t fit these criteria” (p. 42). My worry is that only an uncharitable reading could attribute the strictly narrow conception to O’Neill.

Challenge 2: Who is supposed to be convinced by arguments? One of the main claims of the thesis is that literature, as opposed to rational arguments, has the capacity to convince us. My question is: What is the reference of this “us”? Us philosophers? Ordinary people? All rational beings? It is a triviality to say that many people cannot be convinced by rational arguments (the author asserts this almost empty claim on p. 38). Rhetoric offers many strategies to convince people who don’t follow logical arguments. Perhaps a more promising reading is that the thesis speaks to philosophers. Then, the main claim would be that arguments, broadly constructed, have the power to convince philosophers. Who would dispute this? However, this interpretation backfires. The author claims that “rational arguments might not always be the right thing to use when convincing others” (p. 38, cf. a similar claim of p. 52). We have to assume that the other philosophers are meant here. Then, the author must admit that there are philosophers who cannot be convinced by rational arguments. I don’t think this view is plausible. The upshot is that the main thesis is either trivial – if it refers to all people – or implausible – if it refers to philosophers.

Again, there is an uncharitable interpretation of O’Neill’s views in the play. The author claims, without providing any reference, that she “hold[s] that people can only be convinced by arguments, are unable to see that literature can also convince us” (p. 66). I haven’t been able to find this claim in O’Neill’s writings. Anyway, in her review of Clark’s *Moral Status of Animas*, she distinguishes people who are not persuaded by Clair’s vision and ask for reasons for accepting his views from those who are convinced. It is suggested that moral philosophers may ask for reasons while other people can accept visions. One could argue, on O’Neill’s behalf, that this distinction is blurred in the presented thesis.

The upshot is that the unclarity of the addressee (who is supposed to be convinced by moral examples) is one of the main critical points O’Neill raises against the so-called Wittgensteinian ethics (in “The Power of Example,” p. 12). However, the authors doesn’t address this challenge.

Challenge 3: The role of emotions. My worry is that the thesis claims that emotions determine moral views or values and that emotions reflect those values. On p. 61, we read that poems elicit feelings that are “meant to lead the reader to accept a moral view

that is being introduced.” However, on p. 122, we read something different: “The emotions we feel reflect our thoughts, beliefs, and values.” Either emotions are the basis of our moral views and values (this view is called moral emotivism), or they are derivative. The first view is attributed to Diamond, and the second to Nussbaum. However, the author seems to agree with both. What is, then, the source of our moral values? This problem can be traced back to O’Neill’s article “The Power of Example”. Either we ground the moral law in examples (that may elicit emotions), or in rational principles. Although O’Neill follows Kant in maintaining that moral law needs rational principles, one could make a case for a grounding of ethics in examples. However, the thesis seems to ignore this problem.

Challenge 4: The role of facts. In section 1.2.10, the author makes several quite radical claims concerning the role of facts in our reasoning. I’d disregard that whether these are the author’s own claims, or they are derived, rightly or not, from Diamond. The first claim is very radical: “Diamond regards facts as more or less useless for moral philosophy” (p. 69). Hence every single fact is, more or less, useless for moral philosophy. Maybe this means that ethics is grounded in nonempirical a priori principles. However, this view is dismissed when the author argues against O’Neill. Moreover, we read that facts have no emotional color. I’m struggling to understand what is meant by this. There are facts about human or animal suffering. There are facts about the existence of works of literature depicting suffering. That is to say, there are actual as well as fictional (possible) facts that give rise to an emotional response – and this response is something factual too. To say that they don’t matter in moral philosophy is tantamount to saying that emotivism is not a viable view. Or is this a variant of Wittgenstein’s view, from the *Tractatus*, that facts have no value? Where does the value come from, then?

Challenge 5: The status of fictional characters. The thesis discusses extensively the status of fictional or fictionalized characters and their relation to the author. The author seems to suggest that fictional characters discussed in the thesis (primarily Costello and Malaparte) are, to an extent, independent of their authors’ aims (e.g. the author discusses “how important it is for some fictional characters to control their narratives”, p. 201). I don’t find the argument (broadly constructed) compelling. The whole point of presenting fictional characters is to set up a certain distance between them and the author. The author is not fully committed to the ideas presented by the fictional characters they created. But one can say that the author’s aim must have been to write a novel featuring such fictional characters and to distance themselves from them. This is a quite common stylistic device in philosophy and literature. Socrates was fictionalized by Plato, Napoleon was fictionalized by Tolstoy, and Zarathustra by Nietzsche. One may wonder whether figuring out the author’s specific intention is a good way of approaching these works. And it is, I think, quite clear that the author’s specific aim does matter sometimes and can be ignored other times. However, maintaining that the power of literature depends on disregarding the author’s aim is open to challenge.

Challenge 6: I’d like to point at a worry already raised by the author in the concluding section. The author writes:

There were two questions I tried to answer in this dissertation. The first one concerned whether literature has the power to argue and convince, and the second explored the possibility of interpreting works of literature, and their eventual philosophical importance in a way that does not require that we are able to tie a specific philosophical “thought content” to the author’s intention. It might seem that the connection between the two is rather loose. ... The second question directly follows because if we accept the power of literature to convince, then, when looking at works of literature, we might conclude that it is the authors who are trying to convince the readers of something.

I’m afraid that the second question doesn’t follow, directly or indirectly, from the first one. The author (of the thesis) seems to think that the author’s intention must have been to convey specific philosophical content expressed as a conclusion of a philosophical argument (narrowly constructed).

The whole thesis centers around the notion of the author’s intention or aim (cf. the title). The author’s aim is something we must (should/could?) disregard when we want to pursue the philosophical power of literature. However, are we urged to disregard any aim whatsoever? Some formulations suggest that: “*Elizabeth Costello* can be considered to be an example of a novel without an aim” (p. 151). Or we find expressions “without aim” (without any article). Given the centrality of this concept, it is surprising that the thesis doesn’t clarify it. There are several very rich interpretative traditions that are completely ignored in the thesis. Barthes’ structuralist thesis about the death of the author is well known. Barthes’ concept challenges traditional notions of authorship and argues that an interpretation should not be limited by its author’s intentions, background, or context. Instead, he suggested that the meaning of a work should be derived from the interaction between the text and the reader. Or we can turn to the debates about the pragmatics of meaning within analytic philosophy (Austin, Grice, Searle). Are we talking about illocutionary meanings or conventional implicatures? Anyway, both traditions offer rich frameworks for clarifying the role of the author.

And finally, there the author’s intention might not be related to any argumentative content. The author’s intention might have been to present a philosophical vision, i.e., arguments broadly constructed. We find this option suggested on p. 166 in a quotation from Christensen (misattributed as Christiansen): “In moral philosophy, we therefore need ways to explore new possibilities of such ‘far-reaching and coherent visions’ together with new ways to engage morally with others”. This is, I think, a good description of the author’s possible aim we may want to explore. Interpretative questions along these lines are quite legitimate: What is the philosophical vision Plato wanted to express? Or Dostoyevsky, or Coetzee? I think a lot will be lost if we ignore such questions.

Overall evaluation: As I already mentioned above, my suggestion is to give the author the opportunity to address the concerns expressed in this review and submit a corrected version. On the other hand, the thesis could be defensible in its current shape, provided that the challenges mentioned above are addressed during the defense.

