

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *European Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_european-journal-theology_01.php

- **Greeks Bearing Gifts? Appropriating Nussbaum (Appropriating Aristotle) For A Christian Approach to Old Testament Narrative Ethics**
- ***Les Grecs apportant leurs dons? Pour bénéficier des apports de Nussbaum (et d'Aristote), dans une approche chrétienne de l'éthique narrative de l'Ancien Testament***
- ***Geschenke bringende Griechen? Zur Anwendung von Nussbaums Anwendung von Aristoteles im Rahmen eines christlichen Ansatzes einer alttestamentlichen Narrativethik***
- **Robin Parry, Cheltenham**

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article examine l'œuvre de la philosophe Martha Nussbaum afin de voir comment ceux qui étudient l'éthique biblique peuvent apprendre de ses travaux sur la littérature et l'éthique. Un chrétien ne pourra certainement pas accepter toutes ses

propositions, mais il pourra recueillir certaines de ses trouvailles dans quatre domaines importants: l'incommensurabilité des biens, l'importance de la situation particulière dans laquelle les actes se commettent, l'importance des émotions dans la contribution éthique des récits, et la place centrale des récits en éthique.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Artikel untersucht das Werk der Philosophin Martha Nussbaum, um zu ermitteln, ob—und wenn ja, wie—biblisch ausgerichtete Ethiker von ihrer Arbeit in den Bereichen der Literatur und der Ethik profitieren können. Dabei wird betont, dass Christen, auch wenn sie nicht unbedingt gewillt sein mögen, alle ihre Anregungen und Anliegen

aufzunehmen, durchaus einige ihrer Einsichten anwenden können (wie z.B. in Bezug auf die Inkommensurabilität von Gütern, die Bedeutung der konkreten Situation, in der eine Handlung ausgeführt wird, den Stellenwert von Emotionen im Zusammenhang mit dem ethischen Beitrag von Geschichten sowie die zentrale Bedeutung von Geschichten für die Ethik).

In contemporary philosophical discussions about the role of narrative in ethics the name of Martha Nussbaum is one of the best known and her work some of the most discussed.

In this article I intend to briefly overview some of the themes central to Nussbaum's work on literature and to see

whether Christian readers of the bible can make fruitful use of (perhaps modified) ideas from the Nussbaumian corpus. I propose to consider the following themes:

1. The incommensurability of goods and the fragility of goodness.

2. Story, the priority of the particular and the place of rules.
3. Story, the emotions and ethical rationality.
4. The link between form and content.

Having set out and evaluated these themes I have a final section on the usefulness of Nussbaum for the biblical ethicist.

I. The Incommensurability of Goods and the Fragility of Goodness

Nussbaum's first major work on ethics was entitled, *The Fragility of Goodness*¹ (hereafter, F) In it she tells the story of the role of 'luck' in ethics from the Poets of ancient Greece, to Plato then to Aristotle. The plot line can be simplified as follows.

The Poets were the moral thinkers and teachers of ancient Greece. One of the claims of tragedy is that 'luck' can ruin good people by forcing them into moral dilemmas in which *any* choice they make involves them in performing a wrong action. The Poets also show that the attempt to insulate ourselves against luck dehumanises us (F, ch. 3).

Plato aims to insulate the human soul from 'luck' taking weighing, counting and measuring, a science closely linked to the idea of control, as his model for practical deliberation (F, p. 106). His strategy is to make all values commensurable—measurable by the same standard. On this approach any differences between values will be differences in *quantity and not in kind* (F, p. 108, 110).

Nussbaum asks us to imagine the situation: 'Just try to think it seriously: this body of this wonderful beloved person is *exactly* the same in quality as that person's mind and inner life. Both, in turn, the same in quality as the value of Athenian democracy; of Pythagorean geometry; of Eudoxan astronomy. What would it be like to look at a body and to see in it exactly the same shade and tone of goodness and beauty as in a mathematical

proof—*exactly* the same, differing only in amount and in location, so that the choice between making love with that person and contemplating that proof presented itself as a choice between having n measures of water and having $n + 100$? . . . These proposals are so bold as to be pretty well incomprehensible, from the ordinary point of view' (*Love's Knowledge*² [=LK], p. 116). We would cease to love the particular and cling only to the abstract.

Aristotle aims to do his philosophy in such a way as to respect the limits of our human perspective and to preserve our understandings of the way things are as much as is possible.³ Most importantly Aristotle, over against Plato, argued that practical deliberation is not, and cannot be, 'scientific' for values are not commensurable. Consequently when one is forced to choose in a situation in which values clash one will inevitably lose out. But the alternative of reducing all values to one is itself a loss (LK, p. 60).⁴

The question of divine-source ethics requires some comment at this point. For the Christian who accepts this view of moral authority it seems that moral goods can be reduced to one feature—namely the command or the nature of God. Is this not incompatible with Nussbaum's approach? Not necessarily. The goods which Nussbaum considers are far wider ranging than moral goods. She has in mind aesthetic goods, the goods of enjoying a tasty meal, the goods of a friendship. These goods may not be commensurable even if moral goods are. Indeed, *moral* goods need not be commensurable to the divine source theorist if morality is seen as rooted not in the commands of God so much as in his perfectly good nature from which those commands flow. Now, it *may* be possible to conceive of the divine moral attributes which ground human moral goods as *themselves* incommensurable (assuming, of course, that the doctrine of divine simplicity is false). Thus human moral goods would also be incommensurable despite coming via God's commands.

II. The Priority of the Particular and the Place of Rules

Aristotle thought that practical understanding is not a deductive scientific understanding but he did have some sympathy with parts of the scientific project. He did seek to give general accounts of the virtues and saw the wise choices of the virtuous as a 'rule' (*logos*) and thus paradigmatic for us. However, Nussbaum argues convincingly that Aristotle sees such paradigmatic choices as responsible to the particulars of the situation rather than vice versa (F, pp. 299–306). The particular is prior but without the general or universal it would be unguided (F, p. 306). Narrative deals with the particular rather than the general or the abstract. Moral rules are important to Nussbaum but the good novel reveals that the particular situation in all its nuances takes priority over the rules. General rules are not fine-tuned enough to cover every type of situation (LK, p. 37) being unable to account for:—

- a) new and unanticipated features in a situation.
- b) the context embeddedness of relevant features.
- c) the ethical relevance of particular persons and relationships (LK, p. 38).

Absolute general rules would have to have so many exception clauses built into them in order to absolutise them as to make them unusable (LK, p. 72). Practical matters are mutable and so specific situations require responses which are imaginative and sensitive. A certain amount of improvisation is called for by the wise agent (LK, p. 71) as 'the concrete ethical case may simply contain some ultimately particular and non-repeatable elements' (LK, p. 72).

Nussbaum has been accused by some of her critics of having no time for rules.⁵ This criticism is perhaps understandable given Nussbaum's emphasis on the particular but is not really a very fair representation of her work as a whole. In 'An Aristotelian Conception of Rationality'

she accounts for rules as very useful rules of thumb—the distilled wisdom of generations which deserve the utmost respect. However, 'principles are authoritative only insofar as they are correct; but they are correct only insofar as they do not err with regards to the particulars' (LK, p. 69). So rules constitute *prima facie* obligations which must not be leaped over but which can be seen as not binding in particular cases (LK, p. 156).

Novels attend to the concrete and consequently embody a high evaluation of the particular. They teach the reader to pay attention to the nuances of specific situations. The moral imagination 'is subtle and high rather than simple and coarse; precise rather than gross; richly coloured rather than monochromatic. . . . the full specificity of the image is relevant. The very particular nuances of the image move us in a way which different wording would not. No paraphrase can capture it . . . Moral knowledge, James suggests, is not intellectual grasp of propositions . . . [nor] even simply . . . of particular facts; it is perception. It is seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling' (LK, p. 152).

The bible student must clearly deal with the place of the ethical rules that are to be found within the text of the Old Testament. Discussions of Old Testament ethics so very often focus on such laws often to the exclusion of anything else. The question which Nussbaum forces us to ask again is, 'how do such laws relate to the large number of stories which we find within the Old Testament?' It is a strikingly obvious, though often overlooked, fact that the laws of the Old Testament are firmly located within a narrative context. Such laws should be interpreted within that context and yet so often they are abstracted so that other *Sitze im Leben* can be suggested against which to make sense of the legislation. I would not declare such procedures illegitimate but merely inadequate. If one takes the canonical text as it stands one is forced to face the issue of the relation of laws to

stories.⁶ This issue is large and much further study is required but I have appreciated Nussbaum's drawing attention to one aspect of the issue.

The issue of divine command ethics raises its head again for would it be possible to see general⁷ divine commands as extrapolations from particular right choices? Let me make the following comments.

First, whether one can accept Nussbaum's particularist thesis all depends on the kinds of things which one believes God has commanded.⁸ If one believes that God only commanded particular actions then one could see all general rules in the way Nussbaum does. Or, if one believes that God does give general commands but only intends them as 'summary rules' then again one could accept Nussbaum's thesis. Now some, perhaps many, general biblical divine commands could be seen as generalisations of particulars and not as absolute. OT laws are not designed to cover the odd and unusual, or new situations may require adaptations of these laws (e.g. the daughters of Zelophehad in Num 27:1–11; 36:1–13 and David in 1 Samuel 21:1–6 and Mark 2:23–28).

Nevertheless, some of the divine commands in scripture *do* seem to be general *absolute* prohibitions (for example, the command not to worship any false gods). It does not seem correct to say that these rules are mere extrapolations from particular cases. A divine command theorist who is loyal to the tradition would have to put some distance between their position and Nussbaum's. Having said this, Nussbaum's attention to the particular could still be crucial though in a slightly different way. It is the case that, on occasion, divine commands clash and in such cases to obey one divine command would require breaking another. How is the believer to act in such cases? Norman Geisler⁹ proposes a system in which all the absolute divine commands are graded so that when there is a clash the higher command nullifies the lesser command. This neat thesis runs into problems however. How is one to grade the commands?

Scripture provides, at best, vague clues for doing so. How then? The more one reflects on the problem the more one sees the practical impossibility of producing an absolute grading system and it comes as no surprise that Geisler has not done so.¹⁰ Here Nussbaum may come to the rescue. Perhaps careful attention to the particularity of cases may help the believer discern which divine command is the one to follow. There can be no knowable absolute, general rule about how to settle all such disputes in advance and Spirit-inspired wisdom is called for.

In this context it is worth introducing the work of Lawrence Blum and in particular his essay 'Moral Perception and Particularity'.¹¹ Blum points out that even if, unlike Nussbaum, one accepts an ethical system which is rule-based one must recognise the role of something to bridge the rule and the particular situation (pp. 37–38). Kant referred to this 'something' as 'judgement'. After all 'it is not the rule but some other moral capacity of the agent which tells her that the particular situation she faces falls under a given rule' (p. 38). Moral living 'involves moral capacities, sensitivities, and judgement (1) to know which acts count as exemplifying particular moral principles, (2) to know how to carry out the act specified by the principle, and (3) to know when it is and isn't appropriate to instantiate given principles. These capacities go beyond possessing the principle (plus the strength of will to act on it); they are neither guaranteed nor encompassed by the commitment to the principle (plus strength of will) itself' (p. 40). But even the supplementing of the principles with 'judgement' is not enough (p. 38). Before one can get as far as bringing a principle to bear on a particular situation one must first be able to individuate the 'situation'. 'It is moral perception which does the individuating or construing of the situation, thus providing a setting in which moral judgement carries out its task' (p. 42). Blum's essay shifts its focus to the importance of sensitive moral perception of particular situations—such perception is morally valuable *in its own right* as well

as in its informing of right action (p. 43).

Now it is easy to get very mystical about the operation of moral perception and judgement but Blum aims to bring some clarity (pp. 45ff.). He resists the notion that situational perception is 'a unified capacity' instead breaking particularity down to a sensitivity to the presence of particular sorts of moral features. 'The fact is, particular persons are better at perceiving certain *sorts* of particulars than other sorts' (p. 46). For example, a person may be very sensitive to the exemplification of injustice in a particular situation but fail to perceive the affront to the victim's dignity. This decentralisation of moral perception opens the way for an exploration of 'the ways that imagination, attention, empathy, critical reason, habit, exposure to new moral categories, and the like contribute to the formation of those sensitivities' (p. 46).

The consequence of this is that even if one resists Nussbaum's insistence on the priority of the particular one can still see that moral rules and principles are inadequate without the operations of the (partly) independent faculties of moral perception and judgement (p. 50).¹² 'It is not as if the principles themselves already fully contain the sensitivity needed to recognise their applicability, violation, and the like' (p. 51).¹³ Consequently, one can appropriate Nussbaum's observations on how stories train us in moral perception even if we wish to give a greater place to rules.

I have two further concerns about Nussbaum's focus on the particular. First, is Nussbaum's moral vision in fact too ambitious (Kalin,¹⁴ pp. 144–146)? There does seem a dream-like idealism about the practicability of making all or even most of our choices with such fine attention to particularity. It seems that a greater role must be given to defaulting to rules.

Second, particularity is important in the ethics of narrative but equally important, and underemphasized by Nussbaum, are the common features stories share: How can an action on one occasion can provide a model for a similar act

on a similar occasion? How can God's kindness to the slaves in Egypt become a model act upon which their treatment of slaves is to be based? The bible often draws attention to paradigmatic events and acts, both positive and negative. In fact, when approaching a new moral situation we *first* look for *similarities* in ethically significant features between the present situation and past situations so that we have some idea how to proceed. Only then so we look for unique features which may modify our application of the previous paradigm. This emphasis on commonality is quite compatible with Nussbaum's focus on particularity. Consider Genesis 22. Abraham's act is a paradigm of sacrificial acts in later Israelite worship¹⁵ yet it contains unique, non-repeatable features (human sacrifice being the most obvious). A narrative action can be partially paradigmatic like this because attention is paid to *both* the similarities *and* differences between the story and later partial parallels. Similar comments could be made about people and objects. We do, as Nussbaum says, appreciate them for their uniqueness and irreplaceability. However, we also value them, as Plato says, for what they have in common with other people and objects, perhaps simply their humanity or a particular skill which they share with others.

III. Story, the Emotions and Ethical Rationality

Nussbaum's essay, 'An Aristotelian Conception of Rationality'¹⁶ helpfully develops a notion of ethical rationality which has a key role for the emotions. Plato thought that emotions mislead the soul and many more recent philosophers have shared this strong mistrust of emotion and imagination. Given the role played in novel reading by emotion and imagination such a view is bound to encourage suspicion about the use of narratives in ethics. Aristotle refused to split emotions from cognition (LK, p. 78). Nussbaum sums up his view as being one in which 'a person of practical insight will cultivate emotional openness and responsiveness

in approaching a new situation' as emotion is a part of ethical 'knowing' (LK, p. 79). Indeed 'a reliance on the powers of the intellect can actually become an impediment to true ethical perception, by impeding or undermining these responses' (LK, p. 81). It can lead to inattentiveness to concrete responses of emotion and imagination to specific cases. It should be clear how this discussion on the role of emotion follows on directly from the discussion of particularity and perception.

In 'Narrative Emotions: Beckett's Genealogy of Love' a stronger claim is made. There Nussbaum argues that we learn our emotional responses from our society: not only but primarily through stories. Stories express the structure of emotions and teach their dynamics. They shape the way that life looks and feels (LK, p. 287). Thus, the grammar of emotions is informed, though not exhausted, by narratives. Emotions find their place in human lives and must be learned from other human lives whether real or fictional.¹⁷

Narratives also evoke emotions in the reader and these emotions are, according to Nussbaum, epistemologically valuable. Here Nussbaum is in line with many recent philosophers and psychologists who maintain that emotions are strongly linked to cognition and are not mere animal instincts. Emotions, according to Nussbaum, are linked to beliefs about what is valuable and the evaluative beliefs which ground our emotions are learned through early habitual exposure to complex social forms of life in which these beliefs are housed. I shall soon propose an important alternative to this claim but one which allows Nussbaum's insights on the importance of emotion to ethics to be maintained.

If emotion is crucial to living an ethical life which Henry James refers to as one that is 'finely aware and richly responsible' and if stories are foundational in learning appropriate emotions then it follows that narrative is crucial for ethical living.

In explanation and defence of the claim

that emotions play a key role in practical reasoning it will be necessary to say more about emotion, practical reasoning and the link between them.

In 'Aristotle on Emotions and Ethical Health' Nussbaum makes out a case for the strong link between emotion and propositional belief. Firstly she argues that certain beliefs are *necessary* for the experience of certain emotion. Take fear, as an example. One does not simply fear. One fears *something*. One fears some possible future unpleasantness, for example. Without being able to conceptualise the object of one's fear, to say what one fears, it seems odd to imagine that one can fear.¹⁸

Nussbaum then goes on to argue that belief is not merely necessary for the experience of certain emotions but that it is actually a *constituent part* of those emotions (TD, p. 88). She says that different emotions are individuated in terms of their beliefs not their 'feely' quality. Take painful emotions. There is not a peculiar pain associated with fear, another with grief and another with pity. These emotions are differentiated primarily in terms of their propositional content. Thus we say that grief is pain *at the thought of x* whilst fear is pain *at the thought of y*. One cannot think of the emotion without the cognitive part of it.

It seems to me that this is insightful but overestimates the role of beliefs and propositions which I would claim are not necessary (though they may be sufficient) for the experience of emotion. Although it is usual for a belief or judgement *that x* to be connected with an emotion, it is possible to have an emotion without believing that *x actually is* the case. Consider the following example: my toddler picks up my mug of hot coffee and pours it onto my lap. I am very cross with her for a short while *even though* I know that she is not morally culpable. I do not have the belief that she has wronged me yet I feel angry with her *as if* I did have such a belief. To help account for this I propose that we use an alternative to Nussbaum's account of emotion.¹⁹ The most insightful philosophical account of emotions that I have found

is, without doubt, that of Robert Roberts outlined in his article, 'What An Emotion Is: A Sketch'.²⁰ Roberts defines an emotion as '*serious, concern-based construals*' (p. 209). This will need a little unpacking. The notion of construal Roberts takes from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. It is 'a mental event or state in which one thing is grasped *in terms of*²¹ something else' (p. 190). Thus a person with whom I am tempted to be angry can be construed in various ways: 'as a scoundrel who did such-and-such to me, as the son of my dear friend so-and-so, as a person who, after all, has had a pretty rough time of it in life, and so forth' (p. 193). To each of these construals corresponds an emotion (anger, benevolence and pity respectively). This is the irreducibly propositional dimension of the paradigm cases of human emotion.²² By 'concern-based' Roberts means that the perceiver must *care* about the construal. For example, to feel guilt one must construe oneself as guilty *and* dislike being guilty. By 'serious' Roberts means that the construal is compelling; having the appearance of truth (p. 201). Now I think that it is better to say that emotions necessarily involve a construal rather than a belief because although one will usually believe one's construal one may not. In the case of my toddler I feel angry briefly because I construe her as morally culpable even though I do not really believe that she is (p. 201). I remind myself that it is not her fault and thus cease to see her as culpable. To the extent that I succeed, the anger vanishes.²³

Roberts' account of emotion may indicate another way in which stories could shape emotion. Some stories may provide readers with new ways of construing people and situations. Such new construals will shape emotional responses to people. Consider Jesus' words, 'Father, forgive them for they do not know what they are doing'. Jesus construed those who crucified him as ignorant rather than as wilfully rebellious against God. These construals are accompanied by different feelings and by making such possibilities open to readers new possibilities are

opened up for seeing situations and people in contemporary life. This puts a different slant on philosopher Paul Ricoeur's ideas about texts proposing to readers new ways of 'being-in-the-world'.

Biblical narratives do seem to consider emotion as a crucial aspect of ethical perception. Consider the reaction of David when Nathan brought home the point of his story with the words, 'You are the man!' Had David had no emotional reaction but merely said, 'Oh, yes I see your point'. We would think that he had not perceived the significance of his deed at all. Consider the rape of Dinah. For the brothers to perceive the rape as a 'defiling' and as 'folly in Israel' *is* to have an emotional reaction. If one did not feel these thoughts one has either not understood them or not accepted them. Adequate ethical perception *is* emotional perception

So the central question concerns the relation of emotion to practical reason. Emotion seems to play two conceptually distinct roles in moral living.

First, and most obviously, it has motivational power. Emotion drives action. Emotion can drive both immoral and moral action. It can send a person into a violent rage over a trivial matter or compel the prophet to speak out against an injustice. Gilman talks of how emotion involves a judgement about certain features of the world (emotional judgement) and about how it ought to be (emotional projects). Emotion is also the 'energy' linking judgement and project. 'Emotional energy, in other words, is the spark that ignites and drives humans to actualise the projects engendered by emotional judgements' (p. 225).²⁴ The power of emotion to drive action raises the critical issue of the education of the emotions to which we shall return shortly.

Second, emotional acknowledgement of certain features of a situation is the appropriate human acknowledgement of those features. A detached assent to the relevant propositions is an inadequate assent. To perceive a situation with one's moral perception is necessarily to engage

one's emotions. One cannot be looking right if one does not feel as one looks.

Given the importance of emotional perception to moral perception and the importance of emotional education as part of one's moral education we must ask about the role of story in one's emotional education. Story can shape emotion in at least four ways.

First of all the worldview which underpins the value beliefs upon which emotions are parasitic is (always?) narrative in framework. N. T. Wright in his book *The New Testament and the People of God* has written very insightfully here. As far as the bible goes the meta-narrative is absolutely crucial to spinning the worldview. Individual stories find their place in the bigger story. However, the individual narratives will play their role. A worldview and its values cannot be conveyed in a single narrative but a single narrative can reinforce a worldview or challenge aspects of a worldview. It can strengthen a reader's ethical conceptions, stretch them or shatter them. This is the importance of story at the level of the grammar of belief.

Second, and related to this point, is the way in which stories can play a role in the grammar of emotions.

Third, narratives offer models of appropriate and inappropriate emotional responses which can shape those responses in the reader. Of course, many factors influence the emotional life of a person and it would be folly to suggest that simply hearing a story will instantly mould the emotionality of the hearer. Nevertheless, we do learn our emotions *partly* from the emotions displayed by role models in narratives.

Fourth, stories engage the reader's emotions and give them the equivalent of an emotional work-out at the gym. Stories, both fictional and factual, can stretch and mould the emotional responses of the reader so as to shape them for better or for worse. This is not done by informing the reader or hearer (or viewer) how to feel on given occasions but by *eliciting* the feelings themselves. Stories thus become like practice for

facing situations in life and the closer we see the parallel between our lives and the story the more impact they will have on us (consider the parable Nathan told David). Story encourages the reader to enter into the lives of the characters and to learn to perceive the best way forward in specific cases. The reader is encouraged to identify with the characters and thus to become more responsive in their own actual lives. We readers care for the particularity of the characters and in so doing become better perceivers in the situations in which we are embedded (LK, p. 162). Literature thus trains the moral imagination.

IV. Summary: The Link Between Form and Content

It should be clear by now that Nussbaum sees a link between form and content. She maintains that

- (a) 'Any text carefully written and fully imagined [has] an organic relation between its form and its content' (LK, p. 4);
- (b) 'Certain truths about human life can only be fittingly and accurately stated in the language and forms characteristic of the narrative artist' (LK, p. 5).

Philosophers have often thought that ideas that are communicated are separable from the form in which they are communicated. The form of a text is thus no more than a pretty decoration in which to dress up ideas. Plato more than anyone saw the link between form and content. Nussbaum argues that prior to Plato the philosophical and the literary were not divided (F, p. 123). Texts of many kinds could offer instruction in practical wisdom (p. 123). However, the tragedies engaged the audience's intellectual *and emotional* faculties in reflection on ethical matters (LK, p. 16) and Plato strongly distrusted the emotions. Consequently he devised a new form of philosophy—the dialogue. His dialogues are like the works of tragic theatre in that they contain more than one voice and in that the reader

must enter into the dialogue and engage in the debate (F, p. 126). However, it is an *anti-tragic* theatre—a theatre ‘constructed to supplant tragedy as the paradigm of ethical teaching’ (F, p. 129). Our mind is engaged but the ‘dry and abstract tone positively discourages the arousal of emotions and feelings’ (F, p. 131). There is a move from the particular to the general; from emotions to the intellect (F, p. 131). Narrative form presents a certain kind of ethical vision and it is one which conflicted with the Platonic ethical vision. Narrative form pays attention to particulars and stirs the emotions and this is why Plato hated the Poets and would have banned them from his Republic.²⁵ Nussbaum argues then that novels by *their very form* express a commitment to:

- (a) the ethical significance of uncontrolled events—‘fate’.
- (b) the epistemological value of the emotions
- (c) the variety and non-commensurability of goods and values (*Love’s Knowledge*, p. 26).

Now Anglo-American philosophy tends to see its abstract prose as value-neutral (LK, p. 19). This is an illusion, claims Nussbaum, because any style makes a statement (LK, p. 7). Philosophical prose appeals to the intellect alone and in so doing *assumes* and *communicates* a certain view of rationality (that it is purely intellectual), of the human person (see ‘Fictions of the Soul’ in LK) and of epistemology (that truth can be perceived by the mind alone). Here we see the second thesis of Nussbaum being displayed for suppose that one wishes to claim that some truths cannot be grasped by reason alone—that emotion is needed also. In that case, if this claim is put into standard philosophical prose then the form undermines the claims that are being made (LK, p. 7, p. 21). This claim actually seems to be false for the assertion that not all truths can be grasped by the intellect alone need not itself be one of the truths so designated. However, perhaps what Nussbaum is actually getting at is that

her claims can only be presented most *fittingly* and *fully* in conjunction with careful reading of narrative texts. Indeed their truth (rather than their meaning) can only be perceived by engaging in the recommended practices. Kalin writes, ‘what literary and narrative forms do that is perhaps impossible to do otherwise is to make *apparent* the value of what is presented. Nussbaum is right to argue that there are forms of appreciation that involve their readers in the act of appreciating itself and, as such, are indispensable to moral philosophy’ (²⁶ p. 142, italics mine). Literature can involve its readers in a kind of moral activity that an analytical discussion cannot. Thus it can play a role in moral character formation which philosophical texts cannot.

V. Appropriating Nussbaum

It is to be doubted that Nussbaum herself would see biblical narratives as being of much ethical value. This is so for two reasons:—

i) Biblical narratives are narrated by a narrator who cannot be mistaken, seemingly having a super-human perspective, and this appears to be a narration that speaks from ‘nowhere’. If it is the humanness of the narratorial view which gives it its ethical value for us then a God’s-eye view is of no ethical interest.

In reply one could point out that biblical narrators do not have a view from nowhere. They can be clearly located in time (see comments in which narrators break frame to link past events to their contemporary situations, e.g. Josh 6:25), rely upon Israelite sources for their information (as the Deuteronomistic narrator often reminds us, e.g. 2 Kg 14:18) and very occasionally identify themselves as Israelites (Josh 5:6 and 1 Kg 8:65). However, these features must not be overplayed. The anonymity of biblical narration does *perhaps* contribute towards seeing their narration as divinely inspired. So the second thing to say is that the authoritative narratorial voice with its privileged access to the humanly ‘inaccessible’ is no threat to *Christian* ethics.

Nussbaum makes the mistake of identifying a divine perspective of human behaviour with behaviour that is appropriate to the divine. God's view on appropriate *human* behaviour could be of great interest even if God's view on appropriate divine behaviour is of little value in guiding our behaviour.²⁷ Here I simply take issue with Nussbaum's anti-theistic starting point.

ii) Biblical narratives are famously brief and lack the meticulous attention to detail that Nussbaum values so much. If it is this detail that emphasises the value of the particularity Nussbaum so cherishes (and consider the detail of the authors she favours—James, Proust, Dickens) then biblical narrative falls short again.

The nuancing and detail of biblical narrative must not be underestimated though. Biblical narrators are like expert cartoonists who communicate amazing depth with very few strokes. Their ability to delicately contour their stories is justly celebrated. Nevertheless, they do not give the kind of depth that Nussbaum would seek. There is much that is not told that we may wish had been told. However, some of the moral power in biblical narrative comes from its silences and 'gaps'. Sternberg demonstrates how in the David and Bathsheba story the moral effect on the reader comes from our ignorance as much as our knowledge.²⁸ This is something which Nussbaum does not consider (and possibly may not like). The moral insights of biblical narrative form may not be the same as those of James and Proust.

Nussbaum is very interested in stories which trace the lives of particular characters but, so far as I have read, does not comment on stories which span generations. It is very important when reading biblical narratives that one does not isolate them from their place in the whole biblical meta-narrative. One can only read a particular story adequately when one sees how it fits into the big plot.

In conclusion, it should be clear that I do not think Nussbaum's work will provide the Christian ethicist with a *balanced* approach to ethically opening up biblical

stories. I see her work as more of a prophetic counter-balance to tendencies typically found among bible readers. Her relevance is not so much at the level of hands-on exegesis as at the higher level of readerly orientation. In the first place, Nussbaum's recognition of the value of stories which lack clear-cut moral answers opens the biblical ethicist to examining again stories which are often seen as ethically unhelpful. Second, Nussbaum counters the tendency to only see moral value in stories in which characters act in easily universalizable ways. The recognition of the importance of particularity allows us to learn from stories even when we are not, or are never likely to be, in analogous circumstances. One need not see one's own situation in a story to be morally enlarged by it. Third, Nussbaum's recognition that 'objectivity' is not always a desirable reading strategy calls the Christian ethicist back to an emotional openness to biblical stories. The challenge is to deliberately position oneself so that one can be moved and academics more than most need to take up this gauntlet. Finally, a considerable percentage of scripture is constituted by stories and even the non-narrative parts of the bible usually rest upon a story foundation. Nussbaum's work could be used to issue a call for the restoration of biblical narrative to the heart of biblical ethics and to put law back in its proper place within a narrative frame.

Notes

- 1 M. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, CUP, 1986.
- 2 M. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*, OUP, 1990.
- 3 See 'Saving Aristotle's Appearances' in *Fragility*, ch. 8
- 4 The Aristotelian agent 'scrutinises each valuable alternative, seeking out its distinct nature. . . . seeing each value as, so to speak, a separate jewel in the crown, valuable in its own right, which does not cease to be separately valuable just because the contingencies of the situation sever it from other goods and it loses out in an overall ra-

- tional choice. The emphasis on the recognition of plural incommensurable goods leads directly and naturally to the perception of a possibility of irreconcilable contingent conflicts among them' (LK, p. 63). Aristotle draws attention to how fate can impede our efforts to live well in the world and certain modern novels also highlights this. Nussbaum is particularly drawn to the work of Henry James among other modern writers. In her interpretation of *The Golden Bowl* she sees Maggie as attempting to live in such a way as to remain morally pure but such an attempt results in cruel behaviour. 'The world of *The Golden Bowl* is a fallen world—a world, that is, in which innocence cannot be and is not safely preserved, a world where values and loves are so pervasively in tension with one another that there is no safe human expectation of a perfect fidelity throughout life' (LK, p. 133). Maggie must hurt her friend Charlotte in order to love her husband but, unlike Agamemnon, in doing so she must never 'cease to be richly conscious of Charlotte's pain and to bear, in imagination and feeling, the full burden of [her] guilt as the cause of that pain' (LK, p. 135). The novel can explore the length and breadth of a particular life—we must value 'texts which display to us the complexity, the indeterminacy, the sheer *difficulty* of moral choice, and which show us . . . the childishness, the refusal of life involved in fixing everything in advance according to some system of inviolable rules' (LK, p. 142).
- 5 Even her good friend Hilary Putnam talks of her 'derogatory attitude towards rules' (H. Putnam, 'Taking Rules Seriously: A Response to Martha Nussbaum' in *New Literary History* 15, 1983, p. 193) and his concern that her approach may degenerate into 'an absolutely empty "situation ethics"' (ibid., p. 93).
 - 6 Ricoeur's essay 'Biblical Time' (in P. Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative and Imagination*, Fortress Press, 1998) is very suggestive here. I am presently working in this area.
 - 7 Many divine commands are context specific and are not general or generalizable.
 - 8 My thanks to Philip Quinn and Daniel Hill for helping to clarify my thought in what follows (the errors are mine not theirs).
 - 9 N. Geisler, *Christian Ethics*, Apollos, 1989.
 - 10 This is not to say that an omniscient God could not know in advance (logically not temporally) such a general set of rules on how to resolve clashes of rules. But God knows every actual and possible state of affairs and what is right in every actual and possible situation. We do not and cannot as the set would be far too complex. So perhaps what I mean to say is that such knowledge is not possible for *us* and we thus need to develop Spirit-inspired wisdom and perception.
 - 11 Chapter 3 in Blum, L., *Moral Perception and Particularity*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.
 - 12 As a matter of fact Blum does want to move further from an ethics of rules than I indicate here (pp. 53ff.).
 - 13 In a postscript to the original essay Blum sets out seven steps that take a person from a given situation to an action based on moral principle. (1) The accurate recognition of the situation's features. (2) The recognition of the *moral significance* of those features. (3) Asking oneself whether one should act. (4) Deciding whether one should act. (5) Selecting the rule or principle that seems applicable. (6) Determining the act that best instantiates the principle one has selected. (7) Figuring out *how* to perform the act specified. It is clear how crucial perception and judgement are in working with general principles.
 - 14 J. Kalin, 'Knowing Novels: Nussbaum on Fiction and Moral Theory' in *Ethics* 103, 1992, pp. 135–151.
 - 15 See esp. G.J. Wenham, 'The Akedah: A Paradigm of Sacrifice' in D. Wright, D. Freedman & A. Hurvitz (eds.), *Pomegranates and Golden Bells*, Eisenbrauns, 1995.
 - 16 *Love's Knowledge*, ch. 2.
 - 17 Nussbaum is certainly not claiming that emotion cannot lead us morally astray for it obviously can. If one's foundational beliefs are out of order then one's feelings will be also. Emotion is open to rational assessment but a rational assessment of an Aristotelian sort. That it to say that there is no Archimedian point from which to assess our beliefs and emotions. Such an assessment must be performed from within our human perspective. Our aim is to establish coherence among our beliefs, emotions and experiences. 'The participants look not for a view that is true by correspondence to some extra-human reality, but for the best overall fit between a view of what is deepest in human lives . . . They seek for coherence and fit in the web of judgement, feeling, perception, and

principle, taken as a whole' (LK, p. 26). Nussbaum trusts that our common humanity provides a sufficient basis for such a task to have hope of genuine progress. Thus 'knowledge conveyed in emotional impressions must be systematised and pinned down by the activity of reflection' (LK, p. 285).

- 18 *The Therapy of Desire* [TD], (Princeton University Press, 1996) 86. A possible counter-example to Nussbaum's claim is emotions such as angst which do not have an object. This calls for some nuancing of Nussbaum's view. One *may* have a sense of angst (say) without having any *conscious* object for that fear. However, my amateur knowledge of psychology would lead me to suggest that such 'fear' *would* have a *sub-conscious* object. It is the experience of psychotherapists that they can often help clients to recognise the unconscious objects of such feelings. Consequently, the counter-example fails.
- 19 There are several clear cases which cause problems for Nussbaum's belief-centred account of emotions. One of these is, surprisingly, given Nussbaum's interest in literature, the emotion experienced during engagement with fiction. Nussbaum speaks as if to experience an emotion, fear say, one must believe that such and such *is the case*. However, it is a common experience for those reading fictional novels or watching a good film to feel emotionally moved. When we feel sad at the death of a fictional character we do not believe that the character is a real person who has actually died. When we feel fear as the slime creature approaches we do not think that such things even exist. So how are we to account for our emotional engagement with literature? Kendall Walton (Robin le Poidevin, *Arguing for Atheism*, Routledge, 1996, pp. 116–117) attempts to hold onto a belief-centred account of emotion by arguing that 'emotions' experienced during engagement with fiction are not *real* emotions. He argues that when we become involved in a fictional story, we engage in a game of make-believe. Just as a child may make-believe that the blanket spread over the chairs is the operating theatre of a hospital so we make-believe that a novel is reporting the truth. Now in a game the child may have the same or similar physiological responses as the real doctor trying to save someone's life. However, there is a crucial difference. The child does not *really* believe

that the patient is dying. Thus, Walton says, the belief component of their 'emotion' is different than in cases of real emotion. The child does not experience *actual* fear but *quasi-* fear. In just the same way, the person who engages with fiction experiences quasi-emotions. This account will not appeal to anyone unless they are already committed to a belief-centred theory. On Roberts' account we can construe the situation as X without actually believing that *is really is* X. Thus, the emotions experienced in fiction are *real* emotions. Granted, they are in important ways shallow emotions, for the construals 'are bracketed, by the normal reader, with a proposition to the effect that this is fiction', but they are not second rate emotions. It seems to me, somewhat ironically, that we can give a better account of how stories impact us emotionally, if we abandon Nussbaum's hard-line on the propositional core of emotions.

- 20 *Philosophical Review*, Vol. XCVII, no.2 (April 1988), pp. 183–209. Roberts has a book-in-progress on the analysis of emotions which develops his account in considerable detail. I am very grateful to him for sending me large sections of it for consideration.
- 21 'In terms of' can have a perception, a thought, an image or a concept as its object (p. 190).
- 22 Roberts' book-in-progress will explain in some detail that although the paradigm cases of emotion have a propositional structure this does not entail that all emotions are propositional. And some classes of emotion such as moods and emotions experienced through music are only analogically, at best, related to propositions.
- 23 I have argued that belief is usual, though not *necessary*, for the feeling but is it *sufficient*? That is to say, would the presence of the belief *entail* the presence of the feeling? On this issue Nussbaum finds Aristotle unclear but she herself thinks that if a person truly believes that their friend has been treated unjustly *and* truly cares for their friend, then it follows that they *will* feel anger. If they do not feel anger one may question whether the appropriate beliefs were actually held. It seems to me that Nussbaum is correct here. However, she wants to go even further than this and she finds the reflections of the Stoics on emotion to be the most profound in the history of philosophy (on Stoics see

• **Greeks Bearing Gifts? A Christian Approach to Old Testament Narrative Ethics** •

- TD, chs. 9–12). Their view is very strong and (in her view) correct. According to Nussbaum, not only did the Stoics think that beliefs were sufficient for emotion but also ‘judgements are *all* that passions are’ (TD, p. 367 italics mine). This is not to deny the ‘feely’ dimension of emotion but that ‘the thing that feels like this is an act of assent’ (TD, p. 387). It should be clear why I think that Nussbaum goes too far here.
- 24 Of course, the role of judgement will be recast in terms of construal on Roberts’ account. Many construals are judgements but they need not be.
- 25 It is also interesting to note that after his apparent ‘conversion’ to emotion and particularity later in life (see the *Phaedrus*) Plato found a role for poetry (*Fragility*, p. 223ff.).
- 26 See n. 13.
- 27 The biblical emphasis on the imitation of God ought to make the Christian very uneasy about Nussbaum’s claim that God’s behaviour is irrelevant to ours. But we can waive that point for the sake of the main argument.
- 28 M. Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative*, Indiana University Press, 1987, ch. 6.