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Can Fiction Offer Moral Truth Beyond Truisms?

Abstract

This paper challenges Jerome Stolnitz's view that art cannot teach us anything but merely offers truisms, which he asserts in his article "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art". The current inquiry is limited to fiction and explores the relationship between aesthetics and morality and their cognitive and emotional implications. Employing the contemporary debates surrounding the literature, I defend the view that fiction can offer us moral truth beyond truisms through the reader's interaction with the text as she employs her imaginative, moral and emotional faculties throughout the unique process of reading.

Stolnitz's first worry is that the cognitive value of fiction is superficial, and the "message" of a text hardly qualifies as knowledge. He bases his argument on the case that artistic truth doesn't exist because there are no experts who could judge the epistemic status of knowledge on arts; hence there is no such thing as artistic knowledge – and without knowledge, art cannot teach us anything. Even if fiction offers certain conceptions which may evoke moral wisdom, they are already stale truisms devoid of cognitive worth. I respond to this criticism by proposing that works of fiction contain a different type of knowledge; the type of *know-how* rather than *know-that* which alludes to moral knowledge.

Stolnitz's second worry is that the moral themes contained in fiction can fit in a sentence or two, without us having to bother to read the whole text. My response is that the act of interaction with the text is an indispensable part of enhancing our emotional and moral education which helps us cultivate our moral imagination. Similar to any thought experiment in philosophical arguments, fiction helps us direct our moral attention and evaluate diverse (moral) possibilities. The process of reading allows us to acquire a moral space or distance from which we can formulate moral responses to what happens in the text. Cultivating moral judgment takes time; and it is this time consuming act of reading the text which enables us to critically engage with the text. Learning from fiction entails an internal change we undergo in our being; and the greater the literary work is, the more we can learn from it.

Keywords

Fiction, Artistic Truth, Aesthetics, Moral Knowledge, Moral Cognition, Moral Imagination.

Introduction

The hostility between arts and philosophy has a long history dating back to Plato. Yet this paper interacts with a contemporary critic, Jerome Stolnitz, who claims that art cannot teach us anything but merely offers truisms, which he asserts in his article "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art" (Stolnitz 1992). The current inquiry is limited to fiction and explores the relationship between aesthetics and morality and their cognitive and emotional implications. I will defend the view that fiction can offer us moral truth beyond truisms through the reader's interaction with the text as she employs her imaginative, moral and emotional faculties throughout the unique process of reading. In order to do so, firstly I will give an account of Stolnitz's views concerning art's inability to teach us anything and then critique his position by drawing attention to the way fiction enhances understanding through narratives which employ a certain the type of knowledge. Lastly, I intend to show how that knowledge relates to emotional and moral education by enhancing moral imagination.

The question of artistic knowledge

As Jerome Stolnitz is the main target in this paper, my inquiry begins with presenting his views on cognition, truth and their relations to arts. Stolnitz provocatively asserts that there can be no such thing as artistic truth because without knowledge, there cannot be truth. In his conception, in order for something to be knowledge, there have to be experts who determine the epistemic status of a set of beliefs; but this condition does not apply to arts. Since there are no cases of artistic knowledge – as opposed to scientific knowledge leading to scientific truth or historical knowledge leading to historical truth -, it is implausible to think of the existence of artistic truth:

> How should there be truth without knowledge? We have scientific truth and scientific knowledge, historical truth and historical knowledge. Understandably, for once truth has been established as that and therefore accepted by a judging mind, it is knowledge. Why do we hear so little of artistic knowledge? (Stolnitz 1992:192-3)

Apart from the verifiable scientific truth, Stolnitz also considers religious truth-claims which give wisdom. After all, there can at least be beliefs if not knowledge. But arts lack these as well. There are religious believers, or even believers in science or in history, but we do not come across believers in arts. Thus, arts lack not only verifiable truth, but also the other form of truth; the wisdom associated with religion (ibid 193). Arts can confirm neither truths, nor beliefs.

It seems that as long as truth can merge into a body of knowledge, Stolnitz is happy to accept it, be it science, history or religion. As long as there are experts or specialists on the topic who turn it into a "discipline", any sort of truth is legitimate. Yet, there are no specialists in arts or fiction because artists or writers are not specialists. The only type of people that may qualify as experts in arts would be the people trained in the subject; such as art historians, literary critics or people working academically on the philosophy, sociology or psychology of art. Only they can confirm "artistic truths" related specifically to arts in general - rather than truths about life revealed in arts (ibid 198). Yet, truths expressed in arts, which Stolnizt insists are only

truisms anyway, can systematically be developed in other disciplines. Thus he claims that artistic truths are "distinctly banal" (ibid 200).

However, if Stolnitz's main concern is to equate knowledge with propositional statements, it seems incoherent to approve scientific truth as "justifiable" on the one hand, and tolerate religious truth-claims or wisdom on the other hand, not because they are scientifically justifiable but just because there happen to be "experts" on the subject and people who believe in religion. He uses completely different means of justification for each case. Even though religious claims are not scientifically provable or falsifiable, he nevertheless refers to them as a form of knowledge because religions have "followers" or "experts", which arts lack. However, the comparison between religion and arts is implausible because religion is basically a systematic body of thought that relies on divine-revelatory information and people follow a certain religion due to its normative or ideological nature. Arts, on the other hand, do not tell people what to do; nor does it aim at building an exclusive system according to which people will be rewarded or punished based on their compliance. For this reason, having followers or believers as a criteria for something to qualify as knowledge seems is ungrounded.

Also, Stolnitz's emphasis on the significance of experts seems arbitrary. In the case of fiction, storytelling is an ancient way of human communication which have been helping people learn things from time immemorial. The notion of the "expert" is a modern phenomenon yet the process of learning through representations predates the emergence of any formal expertise. People did not have experts to rely on before modernity, one of whose chief characteristics is the compartmentation, hence the institutionalization of diverse bodies of knowledge. If we take Stolnizt's argument that we need specialists to justify any kind of knowledge at all, we imply that people living before the age of experts did not know anything at all. Stolnitz's over-emphasis on expertise for the validity of knowledge is implausible. Learning from representations happens with and without experts.

R. A. Sharpe conveys that since we learn from representations, story-telling is central and indispensable to human life as it makes knowledge intelligible and familiar to us (Sharpe 1992:155). This knowledge obtainable from narratives is usually of moral nature, and can be very vivid in religious stories. In his article, Sharpe gives the example of King David who kills Uriah in order to have his wife Bathsheba and only realizes the wickedness of his action when his own story is *told* to him; represented to him through a narrative. The story works like a mirror which enables him to recognize his own image – his evil deed, his mistake - and only afterwards does he begin to suffer and to *learn*.

Stolnitz entirely neglects the role of representation in cognition. However, representation is crucial to cognition as it enhances imagination by enabling us to regard an action from various perspectives. Normally, an agent only has a limited perspective whilst engaging in a certain act - as in the example of David. But when his action is represented to him, he disengages from his act and having taken the necessary distance, he becomes able to burrow different points of view from which he can re-evaluate his act. He gains access to points of views different from his own: "he (David) now sees himself as others might see him" (Sharpe 1992:159). Imagination enables us not only to

vivify the consequences of our actions but also to improve our capacity to animate possibilities (ibid 158). Narratives help us develop our moral imagination, be it religious, historical or fictional. However, a fictional text is much more effective in conveying moral messages than a historical text because it has an aesthetic component which has a much greater capacity to affect the reader by stimulating her imaginative and emotional faculties at greater levels.

Stolnitz does not regard fictional narratives as self-sufficient entities containing imaginative possibilities but rather as clear-cut rigid schemas whose messages we should be able to extract and directly apply into real life scenarios. Failing to see the absurdity of his position, he gets frustrated by noting the confusion over which historical figure we are supposed label "the tragic hero": Bismarck, Alcibiades or Sir Winston (ibid 194). His basic worry seems to be the matter of designation rather than imagination, which is explicitly stated in his statement: "Do the statements of psychological truth refer to all or most or a few of the flesh-and-blood beings they designate? How can we know? The drama or novel will not tell us." (ibid).

T.J Diffey offers a reasonable response to this worry by noting that in art, reference is suspended; what we see in art is mainly the intimation of reference but not the precise reference *tout court*. The suspension of reference enables us to contemplate, scrutinize and evaluate the matters at much deeper levels (Diffey 1995: 208). The problem of designation does not need to pose a genuine problem; to the contrary, the vagueness of reference can even help us rethink and reconsider the themes explored in fiction every time we go back and reread the work and hence refresh our view points. There is nothing wrong with associating the tragic hero with Bismarck at one reading; with Alcibiades at another; or Sir Winston when we read the exact same work at a later reading. Fiction allows that. Moreover, fiction encourages that. As Diffey remarks, one of the most remarkable rewards of fiction is to make us revisit our stock responses, biases, prejudices and challenge and shift our rigid views (ibid 206). In this way, the vagueness of reference can be a brilliant strategy for avoiding simplistic over-identification between real life and fiction.

Fiction and the exploration of moral possibilities

What should be noted is that the facts conveyed by science and history, the ones favored by Stolnitz, are always truths in isolation. That is why, he thinks that there is no fact we can learn from fiction which is not already under exploration within the scope of psychology – if so, then why bother with fiction instead of studying psychology? In his attempt to ignore the artistic power of fiction, Stolnitz caricatures common themes of ancient tragedies, such as "Pride goeth before a fall" and asserts that we do not need great art for such commonplace knowledge (ibid 195).

However, Peter Mew suggests that truths offered by fiction are always contextualized and hence are always in relation to other truths such as psychological insights concerning human behavior; motivation, action and social structures (Mew 1973:335). While the artistic truth may not be informative in terms of telling us something we do not already know, it may nevertheless be revelatory in terms of

portraying a large context in which various factors affecting human behavior are dynamically at play. Sciences only present us one very specific but fragmented fact about life – or human nature, if we consider a field like psychology. However, arts – similar to philosophy - aim at presenting a more unified picture of reality instead of analytically dissecting a segment of life in a detached manner. The revelatory power of arts manifests itself not only in expressing a certain truth but particularly in expressing it "so well", which constitutes the artistic element – which is why, artworks cannot be paraphrased (this issue will be explored below, in relation to Olsen & Lamarque's and Nussbaum's ideas, towards the end of the paper).

That is why we do not relate to themes in fiction in the caricatured way Stolnitz suggests but rather see the inspirational vividness in them which makes them so alive and relevant to our lives, Moreover, those themes or statements offered by fiction can step outside the text and reach out for our evaluation where we can test their relevance for ourselves. They can be true or false; applicable to our own experiences or not; but in either case, we end up learning something – even if false, we learn that it does not apply to us personally. According to Mew, fiction can also serve us in that respect; we never have the possibility to test scientific facts as we are not - for most of the time – experts in the field; thus, the facts obtained from science are always "second-hand knowledge" to us, like blind factual statements whereas knowledge gained from literary works are "first-hand" knowledge because each one of us can at least test them for themselves. We can first treat those statements as hypotheses, and if accurate to our own experiences, then we can consider them as "true". Despite not being scientifically verifiable knowledge, we can nevertheless engage with artistic truth in much more personal and authentic ways - whose revelatory power usually affects us at much deeper levels than impersonal scientific facts (ibid 336)[1].

The possibility that there can be different types of knowledge is remarked by Peter McCormick as well. Adopting from Gilbert Ryle, he notes the distinction between *knowing-that*; the propositional knowledge, the "justified true belief" and *knowing-how*; not having a belief but having a skill, an ability to perform in certain ways (McCormick 1983:400). This distinction between *knowing-that* and *knowing-how* is crucial in terms of understanding the major conflict between Stolnitz's position and the idea that fiction has value in offering moral truth. Stolnizt's standpoint basically regards all knowledge as encyclopedic *knowing-that*; ignoring either completely or partially the importance of *knowing-how*. By considering art as cognitively trivial, Stolnitz overrates *knowing-that*. Unless fiction gives us true statements or accurate designations, it does not merit our attention. However, adopting McCormick's view, we can treat literary works or fiction as potential sources of *knowing-how* because they enable readers to acquire certain skills (ibid 401).

Differently from *knowing-that*, *knowing-how* implies a process, a duration to be attained, and that duration is to be found throughout the interaction between the text and

[1] However, there does not need to be mutual exclusivity between sciences and arts; a good fiction can employ striking psychological insights whilst unfolding its story. The close relationship between fictional possibilities and psychological insights will be examined below, with reference to Stock's ideas.

the reader. Influenced by the reader-response theory, Noel Carroll advocates that fiction can deepen and "clarify" our moral understanding by letting us "fill the gaps" left in the text (Carroll 1998:138). No matter how descriptive and clear the text is, no writer can include every single detail in it; she presents coherent guidelines, and leaves the rest to the readers. In a way, every text is incomplete at some levels, and becomes actualized only through the reader's interaction with it. In filling the gaps, we, as readers exercise our cognitive, emotive and moral skills (ibid 139).

In order to get a coherent grasp of the text, we end up having to follow the line of thought of the text and imaginatively complete not only the descriptions of actions and characters but also the themes depicted in the text. In his article, Carroll gives the example of the movie *Schindler's List* in which we have to be able to be disgusted with the Nazis in order to get the moral theme of the movie (ibid 140). Expanding not only our cognitive and psychological but also moral understanding helps us improve our moral knowledge because by imagining the "moral atmosphere" of the text, we exercise and expand our moral cognition. Filling the gaps is a good example to demonstrate the way we can improve our cognitive skills in relation to our moral understanding. And the knowledge obtained from such an act is an example of the *knowing-how* type of knowledge in which we do not aim to produce or spot propositional statements but rather recognize and learn to follow a certain pattern offered within the text to reach the moral truth implied. It is only by succeeding to fill and complete the text with our own imagination that we fully come to understand the text[2].

In agreement with Stolnitz that art cannot –or is not supposed to - teach us anything, Diffey argues that "mediums of art show something without saying or asserting it" (ibid 208), except in the special case of utopian literature (ibid 209). Even though a utopia is essentially about "possibilities" with moral connotations, we do not find utopian elements solely in established works of the genre but also in many works of fiction, at various levels, in implicit, subtle or microcosmic ways. One literary genre that employs utopian – or for the same reason, dystopian - elements is satire. Satire is about what is right or wrong; what should or should not be done. Owing to its critical

[2] Oliver Conolly and Bashar Haydar, in their article "Narrative Art and Moral Understanding" (in *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 41, No. 2, April 2001, pp.109-124) problematize Carroll's "clarificationist" view by suggesting that in understanding the text, what matters most is whether the moral concepts are "challenging" or "unchallenging" the audience's already established moral beliefs; because if they are not challenging in any way, claiming that such a text enhances moral understanding is not plausible because there cannot be genuine improvements in moral positions if they are not challenged in any notable way. However, although I agree with Conolly and Haydar, I do not think that their criticism can trouble Carroll's view in this paper as I basically focus on his *fill-in-the-gaps* idea adopted from the reader-response theory. Below I will touch on the "unparaphrasibility" of the text – as advocated by Graham and Nussbaum – so I think that every great text is unique in offering unique schemas to fill the gaps in unique ways. Since no two texts are identical, the reader cannot apply the same moral position because creative texts with high artistic and aesthetic value demand different and new viewpoints from the reader – of course the level of the sophistication of the response depends on the intellectual and moral creativity of the reader as well). Thus, my idea is that there will always be challenges in great texts, as long as those challenges can be recognized by the competent reader.

nature, it explores various moral possibilities. From Diffey's argument, it follows that satire may not qualify as good art as it blatantly aims to teach us and thereby loses its aesthetic value. As noted above, Diffey adopts the view that the aesthetic response requires the suspension of reference, and for the purity of contemplation, we should bring nothing from the outside into the work of art because the motive of learning spoils the aesthetic stance (ibid 208).

This concern about the contamination of the contemplation through external reference may stem from the worry that satire is too contextual. In other words, as Peter Lamarque and Stein H. Olsen distinguish, it may offer themes that are too "topical" as opposed to "perennial". However, according to Lamarque and Olsen, satire does not have to lose any of its aesthetic value. It is possible to criticize and still maintain generality as long as it deals with general themes such as human nature; the example Lamarque and Olsen give is *Gulliver's Travels*, in which perennial concepts like pride and sexual passion are explored (Lamarque & Olsen 1997:424). This suggestion also resolves Stolnitz's worry over designation; general themes apply to everyone, not solely to one particular character. Through the work, the reader does not need to be interrupted by the referential components and step outside the text because the text –such as *Gulliver's Travels* - may already employ general concepts in itself. It may both "show" and "say" something substantial about human nature.

As suggested above, utopian elements can also be found in microcosmic versions in fictions in indispensably subtle ways. According to Colin McGinn, a character with a good soul in a fiction is a microcosmic version of a good, decent, idyllic possible world whereas a villain is a microcosmic version of an apocalyptic, evil, "counter-ideal" world (McGinn 1997:112). When confronted with an evil character, we feel disturbed and terrified because we cannot help but wonder what it would be like if the whole world were populated with people of this sort; in that respect, the evil character hints at an "evil possible world" (ibid 113). Thus fiction always has the potential to go beyond from what *is* to what *should* be by alluding to a *what if.* After all, what constitutes fiction is the existence of various possibilities which always already evoke moral implications.

In evaluating fictional possibilities, psychological insight is intricately linked with moral judgment. As Kathleen Stock argues, when an agent's motivational set is made intelligible to the reader, an act such as killing one's own child – as in *Beloved* – can be made morally intelligible within that particular fictional context (Stock 2007:59). However, even if the reader does not necessarily agree with the agent on that certain act, she still sees the point and the motivating reasons in the agent's action (ibid 60). Without identifying with the agent, the reader nevertheless realizes that it is possible to act in a certain way under certain circumstances. Whether the reader shares the same set of moral beliefs and motivations or identifies with the agent or not does not matter. The fact that the agent is fictional does not concern us either because we apply the same line of reasoning to fictional characters as we do to real people (ibid 63). In that respect, we can appropriate fictional situations into real life experiences because our understanding of fictional contexts provides us with the psychological insights that help us with real life situations and real life people.

Thus, the psychological insight gained through reading a fictional text influences our moral judgments as we learn to acknowledge the wide range of the possible motivations and their relations to actions. The fact that we do not need to share the same set of beliefs or motivations with the agents in order to understand the action conveys that fiction enables us to step outside of our rigid personal view-points and develop diversely possible "other" viewpoints that belong to other people and enhance our moral imagination - as noted above, in the case of King David. As a matter of fact, a great reward of literature is to be able to see things from the point of view of the "other"; the marginal, the disadvantaged. Stock's example of Sethe in *Beloved* helps us understand not only why one would like to kill her child but also how it feels like to be a slave in the first place. The novel gives the reality of slavery so vividly that we come to understand why the character kills her child. That said, the novel cannot be blamed for being only a political novel either; because whilst portraying the era of slavery, it successfully moves from the particular to the general and depicts – among other themes, such as the universal experience of motherhood - the universal human condition of being the "other".

Fiction, emotions and moral cognition

So far I have tried to explain how fiction relates to knowledge and moral understanding; for the rest of the paper, I will explore fiction's relation to emotions and how this emotional aspect plays a role in deepening our moral understanding. Lastly, I will elaborate on Stolnitz's inclination to associate moral themes with truisms and illustrate the limitations of that attitude.

In his attempt to summarize *Pride and Prejudice*, Stolnitz simplifies the plot and reduces the novel into a raw statement like "Stubborn pride and ignorant prejudice keep apart two attractive people living in Hertfordshire in Regency England" (Stolnitz 1992:193). Stolnitz's main aim seems to be to strip the text off its emotional content and suggest that once we extract its message, we no longer need to bother to read the novel. By asserting his conclusion as a substitute for reading the full text, he implies that it is possible to subtract the process of reading from the experience of the text. Reading could even be a waste of time if we want to get the knowledge from it.

However, reading makes all the difference because it is only through the process of reading that we acquire whatever we are capable of. As Jenefer Robinson notes:

If we do arrive at beliefs about what we have read after we finished reading, those beliefs depend essentially upon the emotional experience of reading the novel. We cannot abstract the 'message' of a great novel, because it is only through experiencing it that one can learn from it. (Robinson 1995:213)

Stolnitz's account of reading lacks the component of emotions in fiction. However, as Robinson remarks, the emotional aspect is crucial for learning from fiction because the emotional experience requires the "focus" of our attention. We acquire emotional education from fiction by forming new conceptions and points of view and entertaining new thoughts – even if not necessarily new beliefs (ibid 219). Robinson's

emphasis on the focus of attention is a completely opposite suggestion from Stolnitz's attitude to decontextualize the moral truth.

Stolnitz's strategy to decontextualize the moral truth occurs in two ways: firstly, by arguing that the text is too specific to be universalized; meaning that the events taking place in a specific time and place between specific fictional characters cannot relate to our real lives. And secondly, by arguing that the text is too universal to be specific; meaning that classic texts like tragedies convey themes so broad that they reach our lives having already turned into mere truisms which hardly mean anything at all (Stolnitz 1992:193-4). Adopting Robinson's theory on emotional content, we can refute both arguments.

As for Stolnizt's first worry, we do not need to concern ourselves with relating the fiction to reality simply because we do not have to believe the fiction in order to be affected by it. We can still learn from fiction even if we do not take those events as real. After all, according to Robinson, what we get from the fiction is not a set of beliefs but emotional conceptions. We do not have to "believe" anything to be true about Anna Karenina in order to be able to emotionally respond to the situation and gain insights about the situation (Robinson 1995:213). Stock also responds to this worry by noting that as long as the story can be made coherently "intelligible within its context", the situation is "redescribable" and "repeatable" elsewhere, and it cannot be entirely irrelevant to real life because there may always be potential real life circumstances for which the characteristics of the fiction may apply (Stock 2007:65).

As for Stolnitz's second worry, following Robinson, we may argue that there is no need to worry about truisms because the most rewarding aspect of fiction is the process of reading itself rather than the reductive messages forcefully extracted from the text. Translating the experience of reading into discourse is already a problematic issue on its own. If we adopt Stolnitz's view, we can skip reading the novel and type "Anna Karenina" in Wikipedia and get the moral theme of the novel, and brag that we already know those themes about life and human character and rule them out as truisms. Moreover, we can mock the people affected by reading the novel for being affected by something that does not even exist. His position ignores the dynamic experience of reading and only cares about producing an overall summarizing and concluding remark, treating the text merely as a "finished" product. Truisms are reductive statements that pretend to be "complete" within themselves; without the need of any specific context or experience, they are like rhetorical statements expecting no response or any further stimulation in the intellect.

If we adopt Robinson's view, on the other hand, concerning developing conceptions and diverse points of view, we can argue that what we acquire from the novel is more like a methodology than a set of empty statements. This methodology is about emotional education; in particular, concerning the development of our skills in focusing our attention and seeing the situation in certain ways. We develop those skills first by observing how the characters focus their own attention; how their conceptions are formed; how those conceptions reflect their values, desires and motivations; and how their physiological states serve to maintain those conceptions. As the reader

witnesses the characters' emotional education, she herself eventually learns to focus her own emotional attention and develops diverse viewpoints (Robinson 1995:219).

As we can see, we have to undergo that long, time and energy consuming process of reading in order to be able to observe the characters' gradual emotional education. We also have to allocate ourselves the time to develop the ability to cultivate the moral space – or the distance from which - to develop our own critical and emotional responses to the text. We have to have the full context for our own emotions to emerge as well. In addition, as argued above, we need the process of reading in order to be able to contribute to the text as well, by way of filling the gaps in the text – the strategy suggested by Carroll above – for developing our own emotional and moral positions. Wikipedia cannot do that for us.

As Stolnitz is much more concerned with the final outcome than the process of involvement in evaluating fiction, it is also important to understand what he presumably has in mind whilst blaming fiction for offering truisms in order to expose the implausibility of his approach. As noted above, he underestimates the moral truths inferred by tragedies as he states: "What remains of the truth(s) inferred from classical tragedy? We might as well settle for 'Pride goeth before a fall'. For such rewards, who needs great art?" (Stolnitz 1992:195). His point is valid in suggesting that the theme is blatantly obvious as saying that "too much pride is a bad thing". However, the point he misses is that, as noted by Lamarque and Olsen, what determines literary appreciation is not the originality or the novelty of the theme but "how a work *interprets and develops* general themes which the reader identifies through the application of thematic concepts" (Lamarque & Olsen 1997:402).

Lamarque and Olsen accept the fact that by themselves, thematic concepts are empty; that is why "they cannot be separated from the way they are 'anatomized'" in the text (ibid). Having read the text, if we try to come up with an overall or summarizing statement, of course it will look as if we are stating the obvious. In this case, what is crucial is to be able to recognize the theme in that specific organization of the text in which any other way to paraphrase it would be impossible (ibid 403). As we can see, when taken out of their contexts, thematic concepts and statements are pointless; if they weren't, it would be possible for us to equate many Greek tragedies with the statement "too much pride is a bad thing". It is the clarity of this commonplace theme, this "truism" which prompts Stolnitz to claim that in order to be able to say such a statement we do not need art at all. However, saying or inferring such a statement does not mean that we understand *how* and *why* that is the case. Taken out of its context, the statement, the truism fails to convey any sort of experience or imagination to stimulate moral judgment. In order to understand the *how* and the *why*, we need to pay close attention to the way the text is written; how it is put in the specific context of the literary work.

If an artwork tries to convey its content in a different version, it loses a lot of its value. Artistic insight and understanding cannot be paraphrased without being destroyed. Gordon Graham states that there is not a way to isolate the thought other than in its expression and suggests that "the 'truth' in art eludes us every time we try to explain it" (Graham 1995:30). In other words, fiction does offer truth but it does so only

through the actual act of reading; the truth is actualized through the process of actual involvement in the text. It is as if outside the text, the truth is somewhat dormant as a truism or a cliché; it is only owing to the reader performing the reading that the moral truth becomes attainable.

Martha Nussbaum emphasizes the relation between creative imagination and moral imagination and contends that what makes fiction valuable is its inability to be paraphrased because the quality of moral imagination depends on the quality of artistic imagination (Nussbaum 1985:516). Adopting Henry James's views on the moral significance of novels, she agrees with him on the idea that moral knowledge is not merely a matter of intellectual grasp of propositions or facts but of perception; imagination and feelings, which can only be achieved through moral effort and moral communication (ibid 521).

According to Nussbaum, a text cannot be paraphrased because that way, the specificity of the feelings and perception and thereby the moral attention will be diverted, distracted or lost. It is crucial to maintain the moral concentration because moral value is reducible not only to action alone, but also to descriptions. When we try to summarize or paraphrase, we leave a gap between the "action" and the "description" by violating the context, which must be avoided because paraphrasing James, Nussbaum states that "a responsive action is a highly context-specific and nuanced and responsive thing whose rightness could not be captured in a description that fell short of the artistic" (ibid 522). Following Nussbaum, we can say that when we try to give a summarized or paraphrased account of the text, we end up giving a different description of the text; and that different description conveys a different "act" which inevitably creates a different "effect". The difference of the effect caused by the diminishing of the artistic value signifies a lessening in the aesthetic appreciation. And the change in the aesthetic value would eventually lead to a change in the moral focus and attention. Thus, the precision of expression is indirectly but strongly and undeniably a moral issue.

Conclusion

In claiming that fiction can offer moral truth beyond truisms, I basically attempted to challenge and refute Stolnitz's view that art is cognitively insignificant by relating cognition to moral understanding and explaining how thematic concepts can surpass mere truisms. I find Stolnitz's view implausible mainly because he neglects the emotional factor and the interactive experience between the reader and the text whilst trying to reduce moral truth to truisms. However, I do not mean to suggest that all works of fiction have to conform to revealing moral truth. Of course there are some works that may have no moral concerns at all; and also, not all fictional works have the same aesthetic value. Yet, what needs to be acknowledged is that fiction, by nature has the capacity to deepen our moral understanding by enhancing our emotional and imaginative capacity and convey moral truth through the unique act of reading. The greater the literary work is, the more capacity it has for our moral illumination.

Kurgusal Metinler Basmakalıp Önermelerin Ötesinde Ahlaki Gerçekler Sunabilir mi?

Öz

Bu çalışma, Jerome Stolnitz'in "On the Cognitive Triviality of Art" / "Sanatın Bilişsel Önemsizliği Üzerine" adlı makalesinde savunduğu sanatın bize herkesçe bilinen basmakalıp önermelerden öte hiç bir şey öğretemeyeceği fikrini eleştirmeyi amaçlar. Bu araştırma kurguyla sınırlıdır ve estetik ile ahlakın ilişkisini ve bunların bilişsel ve duygusal çıkarımlarını inceler. Güncel literatürdeki tartışmalardan da faydalanarak kurgunun bize basmakalıp önermelerin ötesinde ahlaki gerçekler sunabileceğini; bunu da okuyucunun metinle kurduğu etkileşim sürecinde harekete geçirdiği imgesel, ahlaki ve duygusal yetilerini geliştirerek sağladığını savunacağım.

Stolnitz'in kurguya yönelik temel eleştirisi kurgunun bilişsel değerinin yüzeyselliği üzerinedir; O'na göre, metnin mesajı bilgisel nitelikte sayılamaz. O'na göre, sanatsal gerçek diye bir şey yoktur çünkü sanatın epistemik statüsünü değerlendirebilecek uzmanlar yoktur; dolayısıyla sanatsal bilgi olarak nitelendirilebilecek bir şey yoktur – ve bilgi yoksa, sanat da bize bir şey öğretemez. Her ne kadar kurgu bize ahlaki bilgeliği anımsatan bir takım kavrayışlar sunsa bile, bunlar da içi boşaltılmış beylik sözlerden ileri gidemez; dolayısıyla bilişsel değerleri yoktur. Bu saptamaya karşılık olarak, kurgusal metinlerde teknik bilgiden ziyade ahlaki yetkinliği çağrıştıran daha farklı bir bilgi türünün bulunduğunu öne süreceğim.

Stolnitz'in kurguya yönelttiği bir başka eleştiri ise metinlerin içerdiği ahlaki temalar üzerinedir; buna göre, bir metnin içindeki mesajları bir iki cümleye sığdırabiliriz, bu yüzden metnin tamamını okumaya gerek bile yoktur. Bu görüşe karşılık ise, metinle kurulan etkileşimin, ahlaki hayal gücümüzü geliştirmeye yarayacak duygusal ve ahlaki eğitimimizin vazgeçilmez bir boyutu olduğunu savunacağım. Tıpkı felsefi argümanlardaki düşünce deneyleri gibi, kurgusal metin, ahlaki dikkatimizi odaklamamıza yardımcı olarak birbirinden farklı bir çok (ahlaki) olasılığı değerlendirmemizi sağlar. Okuma süreci boyunca metinde anlatılan durumlara yönelik ahlaki tavırlar belirlemizi mümkün kılan ahlaki alan ve mesafe edinmiş oluruz. Ahlaki yargı geliştirmek zaman alır; bu zamanı ise bize ancak metne eleştirel bir mesafeden yaklaşmamızı sağlayan ve dolayısıyla zaman alıcı bir edim olan okuma eylemi sunar. Kurgudan bir şeyler öğrenmek benliğimizi dönüştürür, ve metnin edebi değeri ne kadar yüksekse, bize katacağı değer de o kadar fazla olur.

Anahtar Sözcükler

Kurgu, Sanatsal Gerçek, Estetik, Ahlaki Bilgi, Ahlaki Biliş, Ahlaki Hayal Gücü.

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