

ON "THE PRIORITY OF THE PARTICULAR IN PRACTICAL RATIONALITY"

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A preliminary remark is called for here, because in this response I want to ask what it is that we enact and accomplish, rhetorically and performatively, in deploying our "disciplined" discursive forms. These forms are not, I hasten to add, an individual production, nor, therefore, are they an individual responsibility. For this reason, my critical remarks should not be understood as being addressed principally to the individuals here named, but to *all of us* who participate in this discourse. As Bakhtin reminds us,¹ our discourses are already populated and indeed overpopulated with the intentions of others, and it is extremely difficult to get one's contrary intentions communicated within these forms, these "speech genres" — as indeed the present situation of interpretation and response suggests. But we shall surely not get very far unless and until we pay close attention to the forms in which and by means of which our disciplinary meanings are accomplished.

When I was given the opportunity to respond to Karl Hostetler's paper, I gratefully accepted. This would provide an opportunity to introduce myself to the work of Martha Nussbaum — someone I had wanted to read since her intriguing address at PES a few years ago. There is much that bears discussing here, and I am grateful for this opportunity to raise some questions — though I will here be able to raise only a few of these — about what Karl Hostetler has suggested.

The thought-provoking paper he has just read us constructs and responds to a problem of the role of particularity in practical rationality, and of rationality in our practical affairs. He attempts, I think, a kind of "intellectual collaboration" with Nussbaum, at once criticizing and then undertaking to clarify and to defend her arguments for the priority of the particular against significant objections he sees as being presented in the work of Harvey Siegel and Nick Burbules, in their discussions of rationality, relativism, and reasonableness. He concludes with some remarks about what educators ought to do and where they ought to look for "insight into how we should think" about the rational conduct of education.

After my initial read of Hostetler's paper, I turned expectantly to Nussbaum. What I found there was most surprising...for it was nothing like what I had expected, after having read the paper you've just heard. It was as if we had read quite different books. For me, Nussbaum's essay, and indeed even her central arguments about Aristotle on rationality, were primarily addressed to questions of discursive form, pointing out limitations of traditional philosophical form for their inability to articulate certain fundamental aspects of moral agency and responsibility. For Hostetler, what has seemed more important to talk about is the extent to which Nussbaum has stated her case clearly enough. In fact, he criticizes her lack of clarity seven times within the first five pages! Although, as he admits at the outset, he "finds Nussbaum's position attractive," still he is concerned that "it is not clear that the particular should be considered prior to the general, and Nussbaum is not always helpful in making that clear."

But Nussbaum said, very clearly, it seemed to me, that "correct choice cannot even in principle be captured in a system of rules,"² because, she says, "most of what really counts is in response to the

concrete, and this would be omitted. As well, the rule would impinge too much on the flexibility of good practice.”³

However because of Nussbaum’s purported lack of clarity, she ends up, for Hostetler, “wide of the mark” with respect to the philosophical significance of her argument(s) for the priority of the particular. My difficulty is that, far from finding Nussbaum unclear with respect to what she intends, I encountered a text which stated with admirable clarity the nature and purposes of her project, as well as its argumentative and illustrative procedures. And it was troubling to discover these clearly articulated intents nowhere mentioned in Hostetler’s discussion of Nussbaum’s work. Here, then, was (for me) a problem of representation. I found myself having to ask time and time again, “But why isn’t this clear? What is unclear about it?” And I found myself increasingly frustrated with what I cannot but see as central and critical omissions in Hostetler’s account of Nussbaum’s work, and asking, finally, with some measure of discomfort, why her voice was not being heard, when she spoke, as I felt and feel, with such lucidity about what she was doing, how, and why.

What are we to make of situations in which people speak but are not heard, in which others undertake to represent a view not one’s own, but omit the very things which make sense of that view? This, after all, is characteristic of the everyday experiences of women and the marginalized, those who have no voice of their own in dominant discourses, but are nevertheless “spoken both of and for” within those discourses, necessarily only incompletely, in terms and for purposes not their own. And women, as Dorothy Smith⁴ has so well argued, occupy the domain of the concrete, the particular, the mundane “everyday” — they have not often been granted access to the general, the universal; they have not often been accorded the right to name and to define, they have not often had their words accorded significance, philosophical or otherwise.... So it was with a disturbing sense of recognition that I read and re-read the texts, moving back and forth from Nussbaum to Hostetler, trying to detach my reading of these texts from my own experience of the world, trying to see how my response to Hostetler’s paper could be other than deconstructive, how my remarks today could be other than a critique of misrepresentation....

I want to point out that in the very first essay in *Love’s Knowledge*, Nussbaum anticipates in no uncertain terms the kind of discussion Hostetler presents, and she explicitly undertakes to explain to readers why it is misconceived, and why, indeed, it is obstructionist. All she is asking us, as readers, to do is to consider an alternative conception of moral reasoning. She is not presenting her view as the correct view, not trying to dismiss or undermine other views, and she recognizes that in the initial framing of an account, it is possible to rule out of account contending views, and she seeks to be scrupulously fair and responsible in the way she sets out her own discussion reminding us that:

no starting point is altogether neutral here...[that]...[q]uestions set things us one way or another, tell us what to include, what to look for. Any procedure implies some conception or conceptions of how we come to know, which parts of ourselves we can trust...[hence] we need to be alert to those aspects of a procedure that might bias it unduly in one direction or another, and to commit ourselves to the serious investigation of alternative positions.

This commitment, she argues, is greatly aided by “the inclusive dialectical method first described by Aristotle, as one that...can provide an overarching or framing procedure in which alternative views might be duly compared, with respect for each.”⁵

Significant here is Nussbaum’s careful attention to fairness and her acknowledgment of the constraints of form in the articulation and thence the representation of the views of others. I could not help but think that this is not a courtesy which was repaid to her, however. For instead of situating Nussbaum’s discussion of “the priority of the particular” in the context of her central purposes — that is, most simply to explain and to illustrate the ways in which forms of articulation have significant bearing upon what can be expressed and understood about the richness and complexity of moral life — Hostetler’s discussion excises one strand of her larger argument, and resituates it within a discourse in which she has specifically declared she is not a participant. On one

side, Hostetler places Harvey Siegel's defense of what he calls absolutism, amounting at the very least to a sustained philosophical argument in defense of general and universal standards of rationality. On the other side, he marshals Nick Burbules, whose concern is to criticize formal rationality and to articulate a substantive conception of rationality as 'reasonableness'. Both Siegel and Burbules seek to make conclusions about which conception of rationality is most defensible, about what are the proper standards to which judgments ought to appeal for rational warrant. Both Siegel and Burbules engage with traditional philosophical questions about rationality and the dangers of relativism, and both are willing participants in what is recognizably traditional philosophical discourse. Nussbaum is pressganged in to the service of this debate, and made to speak in a language not of her own choosing, about matters upon which she does not pretend to speak. Hers is an argument for intellectual pluralism, for cognitive richness and diversity, not that one conception is *better* than another, but that there is very likely to be something in a variety of ethical conceptions which can add to our moral understanding, as each illuminates aspects of human practical life, even as it obscures other aspects.

In this paper, Nussbaum is being disciplined by Hostetler, with Siegel and Burbules as right- and left-hand men respectively. The topic, ironically enough, is not Nussbaum's particular argument, but the standpoint epistemologies associated with feminism more generally. Nussbaum's is a revisionist project, "re-visioning" Aristotle in a way seen as both seductive and dangerous. The position endorsed is a traditional one, resisting such incursions into the domain of masculinity.

On Hostetler's reconstruction of what Nussbaum could, would want to, and indeed should say, her own voice has been re-allocated to a secure and orderly location within the relations of ruling.⁶ She has, in effect, been silenced, such that even the faintest, most muffled calls emanating from the shadows can scarcely be heard. She has been disciplined. And sent back to the cave, from whence she may now speak, but only in muted tones, and only of the kinds of platitudes appropriate to a woman under the regime of rationality. Here's Hostetler's conclusion, purportedly a product of his intellectual collaboration with Nussbaum, who, suitably recuperated, has seemed to suggest to Hostetler that "a principal consequence is that if we are looking for insight into how we should think about the rational conduct of teaching, learning, and teacher-education, we should learn first of all from ordinary human life with all its imperfections, surprises, attachments and wisdom."

But who is speaking here?, to repeat Bakhtin's question. For here is Nussbaum herself, from her discussion of "Novels, examples, and Life":⁷ she asks why questions about how we should live need involve us in the study of the novels she commends. "Why novels and not plays? biographies? Histories? lyric poetry? Why not philosopher's examples? And above all, why not as James Strether says, "poor dear old life?" And here again, at once stressing the need for a diversity of kinds of study in order to develop a diversity of kinds of understanding, because we have here, she says, "a family of questions, and not all our questions, even about how to live, will be well pursued in exactly the same texts," she reminds us that "my choices of texts express my preoccupation with certain questions and do not pretend to address all salient questions."⁸

Adhering closely to his analysis of Nussbaum's account as "unclear," Hostetler concludes from his specific objections that, in sum, "the claim to the priority of the particular is problematic if it is taken to demand that filling out particulars and improvising action must take precedence over action according to principles. "I do not think," he goes on, "that Nussbaum wants to say otherwise, but," Hostetler persists, "it is not always clear what she does want to say." And again, I am struck by the question, "Why not? Why is it not clear to him?" Here, after all, is Nussbaum:

Perception, we might say, is a process of loving conversation between rules and concrete responses, general conceptions and unique cases, in which the general articulates the particular and is in turn further articulated by it. The particular is constituted out of features both repeatable and non-repeatable; it is outlined by the structure of general terms, and it also contains the unique images of those we love. The general is dark, uncommunicative, if it is not realized in a concrete image, but a concrete image or description would be inarticulate, in fact mad, if it contained no general terms. The particular is prior for reasons and in the ways

that we have said; there are relevant, non-repeatable properties, there is some reversibility. In the end, the general is only as good as its role in the articulation of the concrete."

Very far indeed from Hostetler's representation as "filling in particulars and improvising action," or so I would have thought.

Nussbaum does not "adequately respond," says Hostetler, "to the question of our freedom to decide if particular standards are appropriate." And he challenges Nussbaum's reference to general standards as "rules of thumb." The "rule of thumb" discussed by both Nussbaum and Hostetler has an instructive history: it permitted a man to beat his wife, so long as he used for that purpose a stick no wider than the width of his thumb. And indeed it serves rhetorically the same end in this discussion. In conceding some practical utility to the "rule of thumb," Nussbaum hands Hostetler a conceptual stick to beat her with. But she need not have. The other rule, which Nussbaum discusses but Hostetler does not, is the "lesbian rule," the first discussion of which occurred, incidentally, in *Philosophy* in about 1955,¹⁰ and which refers to a flexible ruler said to have been used by the builders of Lesbos, a flexible strip of metal which as Aristotle reported, "bends to the shape of the stone and is not fixed."¹¹ Nussbaum comments:

this device is still in use, as one might expect. I have one. It is invaluable for measuring oddly shaped parts of an old Victorian house. It is also of use in measuring parts of the body, few of which are straight.... Good deliberation, like the Lesbian rule, accommodates itself to the shape that it finds, responsively and with respect for complexity.¹²

If we do, as Nussbaum very clearly concedes, sometimes have to resort to rules, "if there is not time to formulate a fully concrete decision in the case at hand, it is better to follow a good summary rule or a standard decision procedure than to make a hasty and inadequate contextual choice." Much better indeed to turn to the Lesbian rule than the rule of thumb. The latter, after all, has far greater constancy, while being demonstrably more flexible in its actual use. Nevertheless Nussbaum clearly points out that, for Aristotle, "in all...cases...the rule or algorithm represents a falling off from full practical rationality, not its flourishing or completion."¹³ So it then seems to me less of a collaboration is finally achieved than Hostetler has hoped for, and indeed that Nussbaum's work has been domesticated and subordinated to purposes not her own — and very *clearly* not her own.

What might such an outcome mean more generally (if I may!) for our abilities to read and to learn from those others with whom we do not, at least at first, seem able to agree? It means, I think, that we must be terribly cautious, aware of our own discourses and their relations to power, particularly the power to silence other voices, to inhibit and impede understanding. We must understand that our discourses, and particularly our disciplinary discourses, are not transparent, they are not even opaque. We may not be able even to discern the designs of others from behind the screen of our own, just as I found myself unable to grasp Hostetler's designs, to be fully attentive to his purposes, and had simply to confess this to myself, to him, to you.

Human life is not, after all, a search for perfection, and our questions about "how best to live" therefore cannot be questions about what knowledge is needed in order to "free a man's conduct from wrong," about how to do the right thing, be correct, be ethical, be honest. Instead, as Aristotle recognized, and as Nussbaum so beautifully illustrated in her essay, "Flawed Crystals," let us ask instead how to go on living in the full knowledge of the inevitability of our own complicity in evil, and let us ask what education might be able to do to address the tragic inescapability of unethical conduct, given that the very artifacts and practices we value most have been produced and continue to be produced in and through the oppression and exploitation of others: in the case of this conference, the women of color who have come early this morning to clean for us, who right now are working in the background away from the illuminated center of our discourses to feed and water us, to tend to our grosser bodily functions — and all the other people whom our discourse make invisible but upon whose backs we very directly and very hypocritically "work." If we are seriously concerned with the ethical, let us then ask what it would make of our discipline if we were honest

enough and courageous enough to bring these people into our consciousness, into our practice, if we were actually to permit their particular voices to be heard? My argument is for rhetorical responsibility — importantly, as Nussbaum helps us to see, a matter of form which *is* a matter of great ethical substance. Because even if, as I would urge, our discourses do not yet — perhaps not ever — permit us to tell “the truth,” at least we may, in time, learn not to lie.

¹ Martha Nussbaum, “The Discernment of Perception: An aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality,” in *Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 70.

² M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, trans. Vern W. McGee, ed. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

³ Nussbaum, “Discernment,” 72.

⁴ Dorothy Smith, *The Conceptual Practices of Power* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

⁵ Nussbaum, “Introduction: Form and Content, Philosophy and Literature,” in *Love’s Knowledge*, 5.

⁶ See especially Dorothy E. Smith, “Whistling Women: Reflections on Rape and Rationality,” The Hawthorne Lecture, Presented at the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Sociology and Anthropology Association, University of Victoria, 1990.

⁷ Nussbaum, “Form and Content,” 45-50.

⁸ Nussbaum, “Form and Content,” 45.

⁹ Nussbaum, “Discernment,” 95.

¹⁰ J.R. Lucas, “The Lesbian Rule,” *Philosophy* 30 (1955), 195-213.

¹¹ Nussbaum, “Discernment,” 70.

¹² Nussbaum, “Discernment,” 70.

¹³ Nussbaum, “Discernment,” 73.