

## THE PRIORITY OF THE PARTICULAR IN PRACTICAL RATIONALITY

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In several papers in her *Love's Knowledge*,<sup>1</sup> Martha Nussbaum explores what she calls an Aristotelian conception of practical rationality. This conception enjoins, among other things, a commitment to the “priority of the particular.” Nussbaum sees this as an important challenge to the claim that standards that are general in scope are the basis for rational thought and action.

I find Nussbaum’s position attractive. Yet it is problematic in some respects, for it is not clear that the particular should be considered prior to the general, and Nussbaum is not always helpful in making it clear. And even if the particular is prior in *some* sense, this doesn’t mean that there isn’t some other more significant sense in which the general takes priority. The way Nussbaum tends to identify the main target of her criticism takes her wide of the mark so far as directing her challenge at a philosophically significant notion of the priority of the general.

In this paper I’ll defend, but also question, Nussbaum’s claim for the priority of the particular. In the first section I will try to sketch out a plausible understanding of this claim. In the second section I will try to meet the challenges presented by Harvey Siegel, whom I take to be a defender of a philosophically important conception of the priority of the general,<sup>2</sup> but whose sort of position is not directly or clearly confronted by Nussbaum. In the last section I will consider some of the educational implications of the discussion. Properly understood, the notion of the priority of the particular is sensible and defensible. Certainly, it is philosophically and educationally important and challenging.

### UNDERSTANDING THE PRIORITY OF THE PARTICULAR

In positing the priority of the particular, Nussbaum stresses the ethical importance of a fine-grained and sensitive responsiveness to the concrete details of people’s lives. This is needed because of several features of the ethical world: new and unanticipated features, the context-embeddedness of relevant features, and the ethical relevance of particular persons and relationships.<sup>3</sup> Giving priority to general principles in ethical thought does not allow for proper recognition and responsiveness to these features, and may actually distract us from them, Nussbaum argues. Rather, we must give priority to perception.

Nussbaum does not assert the sufficiency of perception. Actually, in some ways, she appears to give general principles more weight than others who defend a strongly contextual conception of rational judgment. For example, Nicholas Burbules argues that while general standards may have some place, “moral and affective qualities” are deeper and more reliable “since they help us decide when, how, and *if* those standards are appropriate to a given problem.” Thus, we rightly “disregard” reasons “when the moral and emotional impulses that make us endeavor to be reasonable at all leads us to paths of thought and conduct regardless of whether they coincide with the dictates of” general standards of rationality.<sup>4</sup>

Nussbaum would concur with the idea that “moral and affective qualities” of feeling and imagination are “deeper and more reliable” in some sense. Also, she endorses the idea that particular perceptions can challenge accepted standards. Nonetheless, she might still say that Burbules

exaggerates our freedom to decide if particular standards are appropriate. She says that challenging standards “never takes the form of leaping above or simply sailing around” them.<sup>5</sup> So speaking of “disregarding” reasons is too strong.<sup>6</sup> If anything, attention to the complexities of particular situations calls for even more “attentive fidelity” to standards and commitments.

But this does not adequately respond to the question of our freedom to decide if particular standards are appropriate. For what does Nussbaum’s “attentive fidelity” amount to? She refers to general standards as “rules of thumb,”<sup>7</sup> suggesting that even if we should not disregard general standards, the ethical task still is to “improvise” in response to the particulars of situations.<sup>8</sup>

This account of the priority of the particular prompts the following questions: Are general categories more than rules of thumb in that our understanding of some ethically relevant persons can only be in terms of general categories? Where is there a place for strangers in Nussbaum’s ethic?<sup>9</sup>

Nussbaum’s reply would likely be that, ideally, we should not treat strangers merely as strangers but should try to understand as much of them and their situation as we can. Surely, there is a point to that. Still, this sort of reply is unsatisfying for a couple reasons. Such an ideal seems ill-suited to the realities of moral action, where agents often, if not typically, have to act on the basis of limited information.<sup>10</sup> General categories and principles may serve us well in such situations. Nussbaum does grant the instrumental value of generalities. However, it is unclear why, given this reality of ethical action occurring in conditions of incomplete knowledge of particulars, we should think that particulars should take priority, rather than simply taking a place alongside generalities.

The response might be that the particular still has priority as an ethical ideal. However, there may be times when giving priority to particulars is not desirable as an ideal, even if we might have the luxury of time to understand the particulars of a situation. Such an investigation might simply be intrusive; people have the right to forbid others’ attempts to “understand” them. Again, even if generalities should not take priority, it is not clear why particulars should either.

Finally, though, there is the possibility that general principles *should* take priority in that educators may have a “rule book” from which they have no moral freedom to stray.<sup>11</sup> Educators are not free to “improvise” with students’ basic rights to be protected from verbal and physical abuse, for instance. Of course, we should use judgment in acting on our moral obligations. However, this does not mean that it is up to individuals to decide “if” these standards apply. They *do* apply, even if we are unsure how. Once again, while there must be sensitivity to the demands of particular situations, and so we should not give necessary priority to the general, it is unclear why we should grant priority to the particular.

In sum, the claim to the priority of the particular is problematic if taken to demand that filling out particulars and improvising action must take precedence over action according to general principles. I do not think that Nussbaum wants to say otherwise, but it is not always clear what she does want to say. The proposal I wish to make at this point is that the priority of the particular be interpreted, in part, as requiring that each situation moral agents encounter be faced with openness *as* a new situation. Nussbaum does emphasize this sense of the priority of the particular, but to meet each situation on its own terms does not imply that “improvisation” is the proper or ideal response. Separating these claims, and seeing the former as the more basic, would permit the possibility that rule-guided action be required while also allowing that a more radical improvisation might be the proper response at times. The first order of business in either case would still be to determine what the particular situation demands, and in that sense the particular takes priority.

#### SIEGEL’S CHALLENGE TO THE PRIORITY OF THE PARTICULAR

Having advanced this understanding of the priority of the particular, we might wonder about its significance. In several places Nussbaum describes the significance of her view as being a challenge

to the idea that there can be a formula for practical judgment, the idea that general rules are sufficient.<sup>12</sup> But in Harvey Siegel's case, his claim is not for the sufficiency of general rules. Siegel might well agree to the need for sensitivity to particulars, in that arriving at and evaluating any judgment requires perception rather than a formula.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, given that a judgment is advanced, there is the question of its warrant, and that is a matter of its meeting the demands of general standards of rationality. In that sense, the particular does not take priority over general standards.

For her part, Nussbaum does not deny the need to warrant particular judgments. She could agree with Siegel's claim that the "epistemic dimensions of rationality/reasonableness are primary."<sup>14</sup> Her intention is not to replace reasons with perceptions and emotions but to show how these are themselves good reasons for belief and action, or at least essential aspects of good reasons.<sup>15</sup> Her point is that what are *not* primary among "epistemic dimensions" are general standards such as impartiality and universality.

We can discern two strands in Nussbaum's argument. On the one hand, she is not unsympathetic to intentions of impartiality and universality. The issue is whether general standards provide sufficient guidance to accomplish these intentions or whether examples of particular judgments are needed. But, on the other hand, Nussbaum carries her objections further to question the extent to which such intentions are desirable at all. I'll consider each strand in turn.

Nussbaum says that the standard for assessing the correctness of a choice or description "will ultimately be nothing harder or clearer than the conformity of this choice or description to those of agents on whom we can rely for competent judgment...."<sup>16</sup> Siegel has criticized Burbules' similar claim.<sup>17</sup> The gist of his criticism is that the judgments of particular persons must themselves be warranted in terms of impartial, universal reasons. Nussbaum might respond that, first, impartiality can be pursued by embedding the judgments of particular individuals in broader narratives or "stories."<sup>18</sup> That means, for one thing, that our sense of the competence of an individual comes through our familiarity with that person's record of judgment in the "story" of his or her life. It isn't that we simply regard people as competent; there is an important sense in which they must demonstrate that competence over time.

On the other hand, it is not the case that we uncritically accede to the judgments of people even when they do have proven track records. Even persons of proven judgment can be judged on how well they respond to the demands of particular "stories" and situations. Perceptions are not prior if that is taken to mean that there is no standpoint from which to criticize them.

Furthermore, even if the judgment is offered in the context of a particular story, this does not preclude it being offered as universalizable. The suggestion may well be that any persons who found themselves in relevantly similar circumstances would be obliged to judge in the same way.<sup>19</sup>

Of course, the objectivity possible here is accomplished primarily through confrontation with alternative perceptions, and there may be doubts about the quality of it if it relies solely on those whom we happen to acknowledge as competent. The outcome, Siegel might suggest, would still be to equate knowledge simply with what particular people happen to believe. However, we should distinguish the empirical community from an ideal one. What Gadamer says about "taste" could just as well be said about Nussbaum's notion of perception:

Taste operates in a community, but is not subservient to it.... Thus taste is not a social sense — that is, dependent on an empirical universality, the complete unanimity of the judgments of others. It does not say that everyone will agree with our judgment, but that they should agree with it.... Against the tyranny exercised by fashion, sure taste preserves a specific freedom and superiority.<sup>20</sup>

Our examples of good judgment are not confined to any particular empirical community. They are drawn from real historical and cultural communities outside our own, and, as Nussbaum stresses,

from stories presented in literature. We learn from these examples, not primarily in the sense of developing ever more refined principles, but in the sense of developing ever more refined discernment and perception. This is the way to oppose the tyranny of fashion that Siegel rightly criticizes.

However, in Siegel's view, this is not sufficient to secure impartiality and universality. We need more than examples; we need theory. To some extent, Nussbaum agrees. But she contends that judgments are prior to theory in the sense that theories are valid "only to the extent to which they correctly describe good concrete judgments" and are "assessed, ultimately, against these [judgments]." <sup>21</sup> And she also questions the desirability of theory. Her criticism takes two routes. One, which I will deal with more briefly, is to question whether theories of impartial reasons really accomplish their intended aim. The keener our perception, the greater the chance we will attain a full and accurate understanding of any particular case and avoid bias. Theory may actually lead us astray, or at least be more likely to allow us to stray, because of its generality. Statements that are particular are more correct than general ones because correctness depends on getting particulars right, and "it is not possible for a formulation intended to cover many different particulars to achieve a high degree of correctness." <sup>22</sup>

However, Nussbaum's second, and more basic, response would be to question the place of objectivity, impartiality, and related notions in practical rationality. This is not to give up the notion of rationality, but is to offer a view of rationality in which impartiality and so on do not have a privileged place. Rather than seeing rationality as primarily a matter of adjudicating conflicting views, the call is to see it as first of all concerned with helping people live good lives, and impartial adjudication of conflicting views has only a limited place in that.

From an Aristotelian point of view, friendship is essential for pursuing a good life. Gadamer speaks of the requisite friendship as based on a common search for what is right, where "the person who is understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected but rather he thinks along with the other from the perspective of a specific bond of belonging, as if he too were affected." <sup>23</sup>

Such friendship is not inconsistent with openness to questions about the quality of community beliefs. Still, one *is* to think along with another "from the perspective of a specific bond of belonging." Hence, agents must be non-neutral in a way that is unsatisfying under a conception of practical rationality that puts priority on impartial adjudication. However, perhaps adjudication is not the first concern in the rational pursuit of a good life. We might think, as Bernard Williams does, that, regarding ethical discourse, "[t]he aim is not to control the enemies of the community or its shirkers but, by giving reason to people already disposed to hear it, to help in continually creating a community held together by that same disposition." <sup>24</sup> This does not say that we cannot or should not respond to enemies or shirkers. It does say that our confidence in the rational warrant for our opposition to them need not, and likely cannot, rest on our ability to show ourselves to be ethically superior through some neutral process. Our position, if it is to be deemed reasonable, must be warranted by good reasons, as Siegel would no doubt insist. Nussbaum does not say otherwise. But the warrant will be in the form of judgments that community members are already more or less disposed to hear. <sup>25</sup> The key to avoiding narrow parochialism is not to have a community guided above all by general standards of rationality, but a community disposed to be open and responsive to the challenges of newness and surprise provided by particular situations.

## EDUCATIONAL IMPLICATIONS

These suggestions about community and openness lead to educational questions of how they can be fostered and maintained. I would like to make just a few suggestions in closing.

As I have tried to show throughout this discussion, asserting the priority of the particular does not imply dispensing with general standards and principles. I've even suggested that the particular and general may need to be granted comparable status in some ways. However, it is one thing to say that concern for general principles poses no problem for particularity with people whose sensitivity to particularity is well developed. It is quite a different thing to stress general principles with youngsters who are only growing into a sense of ethical life. Priority must be given to cultivation of sensitive, emotionally engaged responses in children. Rather than make "the study of reasons" the "primary focus" of learning in science and other subject matters, as Siegel suggests,<sup>26</sup> the priority should be studying lives, circumstances, attachments, emotions — particulars. If we are concerned to promote critical practical judgment in school and in life generally, we should not first or primarily teach the reasoning processes exemplified by people, but rather foster awareness and feeling for the complex particulars those people faced and in relation to which their reasoning is to be judged as adequate or not.

Let me be clear that the priority is not simply one of curricular emphasis at a particular time. If I understand Siegel correctly he could agree that, as a practical pedagogical matter, study of particulars could, or even should, be preferred to the study of reasons at times. Yet the study of reasons remains primary for him in that it is the aim and justification of instruction. My contention is that while the study of reasons (and particularly "reasons" in the broad sense Nussbaum conceives them) is necessary, it is the cultivation of taste — good judgment in particular situations — that is primary, such that the study of particulars is the justification for the study of reasons, rather than the reverse.

To indicate just how far this emphasis on the particular might take us, let me turn to some remarks made by Burbules. He too denies the priority of general standards, but he wishes instead to give priority to general virtues of reasonableness such as tolerance for other views.<sup>27</sup> Burbules does say that what is to be counted as reasonable may differ, depending on particular persons and circumstances.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it would seem that there may be times when intolerance is reasonable, given particular people and circumstances. But this can be explained by saying that there are exceptions to every generality, and/or that, in the manner of Aristotelian virtues, intolerance may be understood as a proper mean between empty-headedness and complete closed-mindedness. In either case, the general virtue serves as the norm. Again, Nussbaum argues that we cannot treat the question of rationality as only concerned with instantiation of general dispositions assumed to be rational.<sup>29</sup>

This isn't to say that educators shouldn't be guided by ideals. A reasonable classroom community may not be one we wish to rest with. A reasonable classroom might well be one where reticence and resistance to free questioning reign because of dangers posed by openness. Teachers aiming to foster practical rationality would have to be concerned to work for openness inside and outside the classroom, and would at least be concerned to get students to recognize and discuss their situation, to see it *as* reasonable or not, rather than simply exist with it. But those concerns would have to be guided by concern for the particular — for the resources and obstacles present, for what can be lost as well as gained, for the particular individuals involved in their particularity. We are likely to be led astray if we place priority on general virtues. While tolerance may indeed be a worthy virtue, the teacher's first and ultimate task in educating youngsters growing into ethical personhood is not to foster general virtues but sensitivity to the particularity of life.

Clearly, asserting the priority of the particular prompts us to see the task of educating for practical rationality as a very complicated and fragile affair. However, it also allows for optimism to the extent that it helps us recognize that people may not be devoid of rationality even if some, or even most, of their actions and beliefs do not conform to generally accepted standards or virtues of rationality. And it holds promise for progress if we see the essence of learning not as an "outside in" task of teaching generalities which may have little practical relevance to young people's lived lives, but as an "inside out" task of building upon these people's concrete lives such that they come to have finer, richer perception. This may fall significantly short of a universalistic, impartial



perspective, but if Nussbaum is right, this sort of progress is no mere second best; rather, achieving such discernment is the consummation of education for practical rationality.

In conclusion, while Nussbaum's conception of the priority of the particular is one we must be careful with, it does present an important and defensible role for particularity in practical rationality. It stresses the importance of rationality in our practical affairs, while showing how our practical rationality must be informed by and responsive to the complexities of life and educational practice. While the potential educational implications are many, let me suggest in closing 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.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). Unless otherwise noted, references to Nussbaum's work are to papers collected in this book.

<sup>2</sup> In one sense, Siegel is not an advocate of the priority of the general, if that is taken to mean that standards of rational thought and action must apply to all possible cases. This is different from a universalist claim that standards need apply only to all cases that are relevantly similar in some way(s). Siegel endorses that latter notion, and Nussbaum grants a place to universalistic claims. (But she is also concerned to qualify their role. We'll consider this below.) Yet, at another level, Siegel does assert the priority of the general in his claim that these lower level standards must conform to such general requirements as impartiality and universality. These are the hallmark of rationality, Siegel argues, and it is this sort of argument that Nussbaum challenges. See Nicholas C. Burbules, "Rationality and Reasonableness: A Discussion of Harvey Siegel's *Relativism Refuted* and *Educating Reason*," *Educational Theory* 41 (1991): 251. Another issue in understanding Siegel: In personal correspondence he stresses that his claims are primarily epistemological, rather than practical, and so I must acknowledge that where I assert certain practical implications of Siegel's view I am making some inferential jumps. Siegel does say that he can agree with some number of my claims for the importance of the particular, so long as these are construed as practical claims rather than epistemological ones. Still, the educational practice Siegel's epistemology suggests or can justify diverges substantially from the sort of practice I endorse in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Nussbaum, "Introduction," 38-39.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas C. Burbules, "Two Perspectives on Reason as an Educational Aim: The Virtues of Reasonableness," in *Philosophy of Education 1991*, ed. Margret Buchmann and Robert Floden (Normal, Illinois: Philosophy of Education Society, 1992), 220. Actually, Burbules refers here to the dictates of "formal rationality." I'm not sure that the objects of his attack are "formal" standards (things that Siegel also finds inadequate) so much as "general" standards, which can have some amount of substance, but which lack the concreteness and detail Nussbaum and Burbules desire. However, toward the end of this paper I'll suggest that Burbules himself asserts a variant of the "general-is-prior" position in his claim for the priority of general virtues of rationality.

<sup>5</sup> Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible," 156.

<sup>6</sup> Nussbaum objects to the idea that when one reason overrides another the latter "vacates the field" and so can be disregarded. She argues that, at least in cases of moral obligation, the reason or obligation overridden still is relevant and merits an appropriate response. See her *The Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 30-32.

<sup>7</sup> Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception," 68.

<sup>8</sup> Nussbaum, "Perceptive Equilibrium," 181.

<sup>9</sup> Jesse Kalin, "Knowing Novels: Nussbaum on Fiction and Moral Theory," *Ethics* 103 (1992): 144.

<sup>10</sup> Kalin, "Knowing Novels," 145.

<sup>11</sup> Kalin, "Knowing Novels," 143-44.

<sup>12</sup> For example, "Introduction," 38; and "Finely Aware," 156.

<sup>13</sup> Harvey Siegel, *Relativism Refuted* (Dordrecht, Holland: D. Reidel, 1987), 112.

<sup>14</sup> Harvey Siegel, "Two Perspectives on Reason as an Educational Aim: The Rationality of Reasonableness," in *Philosophy of Education 1991*, 230.

<sup>15</sup> Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception," 75-84.

<sup>16</sup> Nussbaum, "Perceptive Equilibrium," 182.

<sup>17</sup> Siegel, "The Rationality of Reasonableness," 231.

<sup>18</sup> Nussbaum, "Finely Aware," 160.

<sup>19</sup> Nussbaum, "Finely Aware," 166.

<sup>20</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Crossroad Press, 1989), 37. In some ways, I prefer Gadamer's notion of "taste" to Nussbaum's "perception." The former does more to suggest a capacity that has a place for standards.

<sup>21</sup> Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception," 68.

<sup>22</sup> Nussbaum, "The Discernment of Perception," 69.

<sup>23</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 323. It seems to me that Nussbaum overemphasizes the intimacy required in such a relationship. One does not get the same sense from Gadamer.

<sup>24</sup> Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 27.

<sup>25</sup> Of course, we should be careful to distinguish this non-neutrality in the ethical realm from political non-neutrality toward particular conceptions of human good. To advance the former is not to condone the latter.

<sup>26</sup> See Burbules, "Rationality and Reasonableness," 248.

<sup>27</sup> Burbules, "The Virtues of Reasonableness," 219.

<sup>28</sup> Burbules, "Rationality and Reasonableness," 249.

<sup>29</sup> I endorse Nussbaum's point, but it makes one wonder about her claim to be an Aristotelian.

<sup>30</sup> My thanks to Nicholas Burbules and Harvey Siegel for their generous and helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.