

## More Than a Logical Point: From Consciousness to Responsiveness

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To make sense of the life of someone else requires, for instance, taking into account her/his social, historical, and economic conditions, which may differ to a considerable extent from those of one's own. Moreover, it is likely that some events are very significant for an individual and that they generate particular experiences, all of which another may not be aware of. Yet, the other is of course not completely enigmatic. In most cases we share enough with our fellow humans to be able at least cognitively to understand what a particular situation may signify for them, and of course persons can enlighten us about what has happened to them and how they feel about it. Thus for instance it may be possible to appreciate how horrible a particular experience is. This does not mean that on the basis of all of that one can say that one has a full grasp of that experience: first, because one does not have that experience in the same sense as the other person (one does not lose one's son in an accident by knowing about someone's loss); second, because it is epistemologically impossible to warrant the identity relation of the experience of person A compared to the experience of person B. Yet on the basis of my own experiences and what others tell me, I can imagine what it may mean for someone else. And it is also reasonable that the more we share with someone else, the more we may be in a position to understand what s/he is going through, which will have a bearing on the way I interact with her/him.

Michael Surbaugh outlines the problems we are confronted with if the other's abilities and disabilities differ markedly from our own. He wants to develop conceptual tools for theorizing disability in a way that values art and literature and the sensory-aesthetic dimension of bodily experience. He argues for disability consciousness for all persons, as more than just a surface awareness. This may enable us to resist those strategies of thought that marginalize and degrade the personhood of those with different bodies. According to him, the aesthetic engagement that some works of literature offer may lead toward the imaginative capacity for bodily empathy. He focuses on how Joseph, who suffers from spastic quadriplegia, is categorized with labels that admit no individuality (rendered an object), having deleterious effects on his consciousness. Following Susan Wendell, he reiterates that the meaning of limitation is itself socially constructed, and combines this with Hannah Arendt's stance that identity is formed not only by what one thinks and feels about oneself, but also by how one is affected by the thoughts and feelings of others. There is plenty in the essay I agree with: the social-construction thesis about disability, the significance of others for one's identity, the use of works of literature to evoke responsiveness toward the other, and last but not least that education ought to aim at disability consciousness. However, the essay seems to be doing much more and moreover many things at the same time. Does it require a

stronger conceptual focus, does it achieve its purpose, and should it make an even more radical point?

Above I have indicated several purposes the author gives and evidently, I appreciate that he cannot do everything within the prescribed word length. What should be made clearer, however, is how he understands the nature of the envisaged use of works of literature. Is it the case that literature can do what argument cannot? Or are the life stories of the characters in a novel primordial illustrations of the points one wants to make when developing an argument? Further, is it the imaginative force that is foremost doing the work (the author deals with a novel, not with a theatre play, a movie, or a poem)? A novel surely does more than just explore autobiographical material — which could be supplied by empirical qualitative research of various kinds. There seems to be something besides its more literary qualities; namely through evocative language its helps to work on oneself — in a Nietzschean, as well as a Wittgensteinian sense — which is necessary to broaden one's mind with disability consciousness, if, for one reason or another, one did not develop this on one's own. But then there is the granted unavoidable problem of overcoming this in an essay structured along argumentative lines. Up to a point the author seems to be conscious of that. Thus he argues:

This contradiction [between what Joseph thinks and feels about himself and what others see and feel about him] provokes one's thinking and feeling, and invites comparisons and contrasts between what others say about Joseph and what he thinks and feels. Finally, one has to return to one's own point of view and judge what one thinks and feels, judging the rightness or wrongness of Joseph's rejection.

I wonder, however, whether the imaginative is correctly captured here as a choice — somewhat further in the text, following Arendt, it reads that we are driven to reconcile differing points of view, at least provisionally, which works itself out as a choice, a decision, a judgment about what is right and wrong — or whether it alternatively should be characterized as an openness which is more a kind of responsiveness. It is possible that we have reached here the limits of the evocative and can only hope that a particular situation results in another understanding, that it opens the door for truly seeing the disabled other as a fellow human being. Stressing too much that different viewpoints are at stake may after all be a too rational way to characterize how the novel speaks to us (for example, he claims that one feels inclined to reconcile different points of view).

Another purpose of the essay is to take up the moral challenge for education. I would label the analysis that is presented here “conceptual” — it follows from the ethical relationship in which one finds oneself toward every human being. The crucial question seems to be whether (raising) disability consciousness conceived as more than just (surface) awareness is the crucial operative factor, or whether acquaintance with the otherness of every other is what is more fundamental, which pushes us to the issue of how the latter is achieved. Surely, the imaginative may go a long way if one is willing to be on that road, but the issue remains of how one gets on that track. The one who is not like me (or like most of us) may also generate some sincere feelings of estrangement which require that someone or something makes

me cross the bridge that separates me from that with which I am not familiar. Does this not require an immediate and more bodily relationship, something that the author hints at when he talks about the experiences of the family in the swimming pool? Taking a shower together after a football match, or even having a drink or a meal together, are other examples to elaborate this further. Or compare this with the issue from the context of multiculturalism: that many people do not hold anything against their neighbor who happens to be of a different ethnical origin, though they generally embrace strong ethnocentric beliefs (soft racism). They cannot, it seems, imagine how the otherness of all these others may contribute to the betterment of all. I am quite confident that Surbaugh will not disagree with the point that I am making, but it leaves me with the question of whether the way he wants to raise disability consciousness really goes far enough. Is what he argues for more than a logical point that follows from a genuine ethical stance?

Finally, it remains rather mysterious how bodily or somatic empathy can be evoked if not through argument then through its milder form, that is, in literary engagement. There is more I would draw your attention to: for instance to what extent has the essay delivered the conceptual tools it promises, and whether it has made clear what it calls the sensory-aesthetic dimension of bodily experience, but for me too the limit has been reached. One may therefore want to disagree with the conclusion that the cultivation of disability consciousness among all persons may well require that educators have literary and aesthetic education to learn somatic empathy as part of self-awareness that takes into account the range of bodily experiences. It is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition; alternatively, it is a relief to observe that still many human beings show signs of what I have called “responsiveness” (Peter Strawson’s reactive attitudes may be helpful here).<sup>1</sup> But that this is neither an argument against a logical or a conceptual analysis, nor against reading literature, should by now be abundantly clear.

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1. Peter Strawson, *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974).