



Suffering and misery in history is not a tragic story: the ethical education of seeing differences between narratives

Natan Elgabsi

To cite this article: Natan Elgabsi (18 Mar 2024): Suffering and misery in history is not a tragic story: the ethical education of seeing differences between narratives, Journal of Curriculum Studies, DOI: [10.1080/00220272.2024.2328084](https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2024.2328084)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2024.2328084>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 18 Mar 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Suffering and misery in history is not a tragic story: the ethical education of seeing differences between narratives

Natan Elgabsi

Department of Philosophy, Åbo Akademi University, Åbo/Turku, Finland

ABSTRACT

This article brings out ethical aspects arising in Plato's classical critique of narrative and imitative art in *The Republic*, especially when it comes to reading stories about the past. Socrates's and Glaucon's most important suggestion, I argue, is to cultivate an ethical consciousness where one ought to see the distinctions between how the real and the imaginary in narratives are to be conceived, and what that insight ethically demands of the reader. Taken as an ethical insight for the reader when engaging in narrative understanding, this should be to resist the temptation to think that past suffering and misery as told in a story can be read analogously to narratives having a tragic plot. The article clarifies the meaning of Plato's critique through the ideas of Simone Weil, Emmanuel Lévinas and Iris Murdoch. These existential moral philosophers work towards having an ethical consciousness in one's personal relationship with stories of our lifeworld.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 11 October 2023
Accepted 23 February 2024

KEYWORDS



Ethics and aesthetics;
narrative; tragedy; Plato;
reading

Considered as potential elements of a story, historical events are value-neutral. Whether they find their place finally in a story that is tragic, comic, romantic, or ironic—to use Frye's categories—depends upon the historian's decision to configure them according to the imperatives of one plot structure or mythos rather than another. (White, 1985, p. 84)

Auschwitz is not a tragedy. (Murdoch, 2003, p. 93)

Expelling the poets from the city?

People familiar with Plato's *The Republic*, and also with writings such as the *Phaedrus* and the *Seventh Letter*, might experience that the dialogues are developed into what at first glance looks like an unconditional rejection of narrative and imitative art. In *The Republic*, for example, Socrates and Glaucon occasionally seem to argue that narrative imitations fill us with images of miserable characters and their deeds that speak to our emotions and gradually lead us to no longer see the difference between reality and imagination. Socrates's and Glaucon's discussion about how to bring up the 'guardians' of the state (soul) makes them conclude that imitative art, such as it has been shaped by the poetic tribe of Homer, is not good nutrition for these guards (Plato, 1937, 401b-c). If the guards were to follow the example of the mimetic poets, it would mean that 'pleasure and pain will be lords of your city' (Plato, 1942, 607a). Thus, as Socrates famously says, although people will claim that Homer 'has been the educator of Hellas', and furthermore 'that we should order our entire lives by the guidance of this poet', the truth is that we should expel the mimetic poets from the city (Plato, 1942, 606e-607a).

CONTACT Natan Elgabsi  nelgabsi@abo.fi  Department of Philosophy, Åbo Akademi University, Fabriksgatan 2, 20500 Åbo/Turku 20500, Finland

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

In this article I want to bring out some ethical insights and consequences of Plato's critique of narrative aesthetics. It is not an unconditional rejection of narrative and imitative art.¹ The Platonic critique concerns, I argue, a thorough ethical understanding of how different stories of our lifeworld (such as history, fiction, and so on) should be conceived by me as a reader (or listener). This is the ethical education that Socrates and Glaucon reach for, and it consists in the ongoing work of trying to understand what written or told stories mean in the light of the Good. Seeing what different narratives mean and how they should be conceived belongs to the cultivation of an ethical consciousness and responsiveness that is crucial, as Socrates and Glaucon say, to a proper upbringing of the 'guardians' of the state (soul).² By the means of three critics of aesthetic endeavours (Simone Weil, Emmanuel Lévinas and Iris Murdoch) who, to my mind, well exemplify aspects of the Platonic critique of narrative and imitative art, I will show what the cultivation of an ethical consciousness entails. At central stage will be a discussion of my ethical responsiveness to historical narrative, that is my responsiveness to what is real in contrast to what is imaginary. This is a difference that is crucial, yet difficult, when it comes to narrative imitation. In contrast to some paradigmatic trends in the philosophy of historical narrative (based mostly on White, 1973, 1985, 2000a, 2016; see; Partner, 2012), I show why it is *ethically important* to see that past suffering and misery is not properly characterized as a story having a tragic plot.

Plato's critique of narrative aesthetics

What then is at stake in Plato's critique of narrative aesthetics? Socrates's and Glaucon's concern in Book III of *The Republic* is, as mentioned, how to best educate the guardians of the republic (soul). They suggest that 'we make use of fable with children before gymnastics' (Plato, 1937, 377a). This means that it is especially important that 'we must supervise and compel' the poets 'to embody in their poems the semblance of the good character or else not write poetry among us' (1937, 401b; see also Carr, 2019). The, 'penalty, if unable to obey', Socrates says, is that 'of being forbidden to practise their art among us', so 'that our guardians may not be bred among symbols of evil, as it were in a pasturage of poisonous herbs', which continues 'day by day' and 'little by little' without their awareness, accumulating 'a huge mass of evil in their own souls' (1937, 401b-c).

What is particularly harmful in the imitative art of poetry, Socrates and Glaucon conclude in Book X, is on the one hand the tendency to speak to 'the part of us that leads us to dwell in memory on our suffering and impels us to lamentation, and cannot get enough of that sort of thing'—in other words, 'the irrational and idle part of us, the associate of cowardice' (1942, 604d). This is not healthy nutrition for a guardian of the state (soul). And on the other hand, the poetic imitators show a dishonest tendency to not be transparent with regard to what their imitations truly are, namely imitations. Thus, 'all the poetic tribe', Socrates says, 'beginning with Homer, are imitators of images of excellence and of the other things that they "create", and do not lay hold on truth' (1942, 600e-601a). They neither lay claim on truth nor show it although they know it very well, the truth that they create an imitative image of a craft or character they have no primordial insight into, and that they do this by speaking to our emotions. Socrates concludes:

And so we may at last say that we should be justified in not admitting him [the poet] into a well-ordered state, because he stimulates and fosters this [irrational and idle] element in the soul, and by strengthening it tends to destroy the rational part, just as when in a state one puts bad men in power and turns the city over to them and ruins the better sort. Precisely in the same manner we shall say that the mimetic poet sets up in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality and by currying favour with the senseless element that cannot distinguish the greater from the less, but calls the same thing now one, now the other. (1942, 605b-c)

In order to fully understand Plato's critique, however, it would be important to see what ideas about narrative imitation it historically belongs with. A quite different idea of narrative imitation comes forward in Aristotle's *Poetics*, a text that largely permeates the philosophy of historical narrative today (some prominent examples are Barthes, 1975; Partner, 2012; Ricoeur, 1990, 1994; White, 1973, 1985, 2000a; see also commentaries such as Carr, 1986; Lindén, 2018; Lindén, 2018; Meretoja, 2014;

van den Akker, 2018). In *Poetics* Aristotle famously praises the poets of tragedy for the philosophical insights of their craft. This is because the art of poetry (*poiesis*) concerns the possible whereas the art of historiography (*historia*) is confined to the actual. Aristotle argues:

The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose. The work of Herodotus might be put into verse, and it would still be a species of history, with metre no less than without it. The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. (1902, 1451a39-1451b5)

Aristotle further holds, quite contrary to Plato, that 'poetry therefore is a more philosophical and higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular' (1451b5-7). For him, tragic imitations are the highest form of *poiesis* because of their perfect use of order shown in a story, also called emplotment (*mythos*). The plot (*mythos*), which consists in a beginning, a middle, and an end as elements of a story, is in the case of tragedy carefully orchestrated in order to unleash 'a tragic effect that satisfies the moral sense' (1453b17-21 and 1456a19-21). This *katharsis* lets loose the emotions of pity and fear in the spectator and purges the 'moral sense'. Such an effect aroused as a direct consequence of the plot, to which the imitated action or character is intrinsically connected, is the mark of a good tragic imitation (*mimesis*). Aristotle then suggests that the tragedians' narrative craft, through its affective orchestration, can have the kind of philosophical import for our ethical lives that historiography will never have. But he is interested exactly in the difference between the arts of *historia* and *poiesis*, which means that he does not consider further whether it is possible for historiography to conform to these artistic constructions. Nevertheless, Aristotle argues that as long as one imitates and action by the means of a plot, as is done in epic and especially in tragedy, it will mean that if something in the story is displaced or removed 'the whole will be disjointed and disturbed' (1451a30-4). In other words, if *historia* were to be dependent on emplotment (*mythos*) as some philosophers of historical narrative hold (Barthes, 1975; Partner, 2012; White, 1985, 2000a), it would mean that the suffering and misery of history is to be taken analogously to a tragically constructed story.

To my mind, Socrates's and Glaucon's concern in their critique of narrative aesthetics does not consist in a rejection of narrative as such, but rather in avoiding certain inclinations in our confrontation with narratives. The temptations can be of various sort, for example being ignorant of the ethical import of how different kinds of stories claim the reader in different ways (see also Meretoja, 2018; Pihlainen, 2002). To have an ethical understanding of narratives could mean, for example, to see the different directions into which stories such as *historia* and *poiesis* lead us in life and what they ethically demand of me as a reader. This is to be able to understand what the stories implicate, which is an ethical consciousness that, according to Socrates and Glaucon, is not disclosed by what the tragic fable exemplifies through its suffering and emotions (compare with Carr, 2019). This is why the tribe of Homer are not good educators of Hellas (Plato, 1942, 606e-607a).

The alternative, however, is that we can only cultivate an ethical consciousness under the light of the Good, which consist in continuously searching for the ethical meaning of the stories we are told. This is a light that has no particular content (see Murdoch, 2003, 37-38; Kronqvist, 2019, 989-991; Larson, 2009), yet is a light that enables us to see at all, whereby we lead a life in which we distinguish contrasts and contours. As Socrates says, "when the eyes are no longer turned upon objects upon whose colours the light of day falls but that of the dim luminaries of night, their edge is blunted and they appear almost blind, as if pure vision did not dwell in them" (Plato, 1942, 508c). In the cave everything is dim or dark and looks almost the same, as if we had no sense of judgement. The light enables us to see, or to distinguish one thing from another. The analogy for this source of light is the sun (the Good), which cannot be directly looked into, because if someone were 'compelled to look at the light itself, would not that pain his eyes'; 'his eyes would be filled with its beams so that he would not be able to see' (1942, 515e and 516a. The complete discussion is in section 507d-509e.). Thus, in the quest for ethical education of the guardians of the state (soul), Socrates and Glaucon say that we must turn the whole body towards being in the brightest region, on the assumption that we already possess vision but do not rightly direct it (1942, 518d). Exactly how to direct our vision in order to

understand what is done and what is told under the light of the Good is an ongoing question of ethical thought, scrutiny, and education.

Distinguishing between reality and its shadow

What then is the cultivation of an ethical consciousness in our relationship with narratives? How can this development be concretely brought out? The following discussion on how to conceive stories will attempt to exemplify and clarify what this means as a thinking activity in my personal relationship with narrative. Aristotle, of course, also invites this ethical understanding in his claim that *historia* concerns the actual and *poiesis* the possible, although he is interested mostly in the structure of *mythos* (see Lindén, 2018 –211; 208; van den Akker, 2018, 60–61). But in order to bring out what an ethical understanding involves when it comes to responding to narratives, I will in the following turn to Weil's, Lévinas's and Murdoch's critique of aesthetics, especially as a question about what it means to respond to narratives that are about real people.

In *Gravity and Grace* (1952), Weil characteristically writes:

Imaginary evil is romantic and varied; real evil is gloomy, monotonous, barren, boring. Imaginary good is boring; real good is always new, marvellous, intoxicating. Therefore 'imaginative literature' is either boring or immoral (or a mixture of both). It only escapes from this alternative if in some way it passes over to the side of reality through the power of art—and only genius can do that. (Weil, 1952, 120)

Weil's Platonic thought is transparent in the sense that the question of art concerns first and foremost art's retention of contact with the Good. Why—as with Socrates's and Glaucon's reproach of tragedy—does literature *manifestly* not bring us in contact with the Good by disclosing the limitations of imitation? Some literature does that, but not the greater deal of it. For on the one hand if we were brought to the reality of misery and evil through literary imagination, we would be devastated by its monstrosity. This is of course not something good, but a contact with the Good would make us see and act upon that monstrosity. Having such a contact with the Good, we could not find curiosity or fascination in face of the reality of evil as shown in literature (see also Gaita, 2002, 42). On the other hand, if we were brought to the reality of the Good through literature, it would be intoxicating. We would not be bored by its presence. Since we are often not *truly* responsive to good and evil as shown through literature, something tends to disrupt us ethically and emotionally. If literature in itself brings us to places in thought and in life, 'imaginative literature', Weil says, often does not bring us to this reality—we want to comfortably stay in an imaginative land of boredom and immorality. 'Imagination and fiction make up more than three quarters of our real life. Rare indeed are the true contacts with good and evil' (Weil, 1952, 105). Imagination and fiction belong, for sure, to our 'real life', but comfortably leading a life in a land of imagination is to not realize what demands the reality of good and evil puts on our responses. Is this the failure of the literature or is it rather an ethical shortcoming in me?

For the Platonic thinkers the answer to this question is an existential concern. What then am I doing if I blame literature as such for seducing me? Does not responsibility fall upon me, my responsibility to try to see things clearly, my responsibility for seeing things in the light of the Good? The question, however, is not who causes the ethical failure—i.e. who is to blame—but rather my trying to see when I am no longer in contact with the Good. For this contact, which for Weil is a divine contact, is the 'bread' of our souls (Weil, 1952, 109).

Great art in the Platonic sense would be one that shows, through the power of artistry, its own limitations, and thus brings us to reality as revealed in the light of the Good. The limitations and strengths of art would disclose themselves through the honesty of the artist, which is a sign that the art is performed in the right way. Of course, as with any craft, another person can try to lead me astray by creating seductive images. Literature may even be written in such a way as to encourage seduction, and in such a case it may be rightfully in need of reproach. In this spirit, Weil says: 'A science', or any craft, 'which does not bring us nearer to God is worthless. But if it brings us to him in

the wrong way, that is to say if it brings us to an imaginary God, it is worse . . .' (Weil, 1952, 105). The purpose of an ethical understanding is to seek this meaning, to seek an understanding of the directions and places into which we are brought.

Yet again, on whose shoulders does this demand fall? What the work (or the artist) brings along is one thing, but what I will be capable of seeing is another. Weil's question, instead, concerns the very meaning of being *literate* (see Weil, 2015, 22–23). Even if the literature for some reason may be written in order to seduce me, my falling for this temptation must concern an ongoing ethical understanding of what this literary expression is about. When I feel fascinated by the murderer of the story, no matter whether or not it was written in order to seduce me, I must understand that I am in fact alienated from the reality of evil. And more importantly, I must realize that my thoughts at that occasion have lost contact with the Good. Only by this detour, in this case of understanding, my loss of contact—perhaps an understanding that is brought about by another person's words that shake me up—can I try to see again. But when I was on the wrong path, I nevertheless thought that I had an ethical compass, even if it turned out to be a wrong one—an image of the good that I turned to in order to survive. 'Idolatry', Weil says, our creating or dwelling in false images of most importantly the reality of the Good, 'is thus a vital necessity in the cave. Even with the best of us it is inevitable that it should set narrow limits for mind and heart' (Weil, 1952, 109). The activity of trying to avoid being subject to idolatry, one could say, concerns a strict scrutiny of the meaning of our thoughts and actions in the light of the Good. This is how literature, like many of the things we do in life, will be evaluated.

The concern in the Platonic critique is not an outright rejection of artistic work, but rather a deeper ethical understanding that reproaches the possibly irresponsible thoughts in which artistic expressions easily invite us to dwell. Lévinas emphasizes another existential aspect of this irresponsibility when he argues, in one of his early essays, that 'art, essentially disengaged, constitutes, in a world of initiative and responsibility, a dimension of evasion' (Lévinas, 1987, 12). Why evasion? This critique of aesthetics in his early work, which is strengthened in his iconoclastic attitude much later, for example in *Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence* (Lévinas, 1991, 89), is both an evaluation of the artistic endeavour and an existential scrutiny of our own responsibility towards a life and reality beyond what art shows. In the same essay, Lévinas continues:

Here we rejoin the most common and ordinary experience of aesthetic enjoyment. It is one of the reasons that bring out the value of art. Art brings into the world the obscurity of fate, but it especially brings the irresponsibility that charms as a lightness and grace. It frees. To make or to appreciate a novel and a picture is to no longer have to conceive, is to renounce the effort of science, philosophy, and action. Do not speak, do not reflect, admire in silence and in peace—such are the counsels of wisdom satisfied before the beautiful. Magic, recognized everywhere as the devil's part, enjoys an incomprehensible tolerance in poetry. Revenge is gotten on wickedness by producing its caricature, which is to take from it its reality without annihilating it; evil powers are conjured by filling the world with idols which have mouths but do not speak. It is as though ridicule killed, as though everything really can end in songs. We find an appeasement when, beyond the invitations to comprehend and act, we throw ourselves into the rhythm of a reality which solicits only its admission into a book or a painting. Myth takes the place of mystery. The world to be built is replaced by the essential completion of its shadow. This is not the disinterestedness of contemplation but of irresponsibility. The poet exiles himself from the city. From this point of view, the value of the beautiful is relative. There is something wicked and egoist and cowardly in artistic enjoyment. There are times when one can be ashamed of it, as of feasting during a plague. (Lévinas, 1987, 12)

The critique implies that the detachment invited in the aesthetic endeavour—both through the act of creating, and through beholding art—often justifies our not responding to evil. Or rather, the very idea of art justifies our not being summoned up to respond to anyone real at all. Lévinas argues that art, in its very idea, prepares and creates a place for disinterestedness. But this is not the ethical disinterestedness that lets the other person be someone else than I am but is instead a disinterestedness that mutilates my responsiveness. By creating images of evil in art, while simultaneously allowing myself to be disinterested, I allow evil to continue to dwell there. The artwork is filled with images of wickedness, but it is as if nothing were done or spoken. If it truly were

done or spoken by someone, I could not comfortably resist taking action. In art we can behold in silence, at a distance. I find appeasement, purgation, feelings of *katharsis*, in the way the completeness of story plays out. As a voyeur I am allowed to behold a spectacle at a distance, which gradually mutilates my sense of responsibility. There is no real other persons to respond to, only caricatures. This aesthetics encourages me to let misery and evil survive in the artistic endeavour.

As with Weil, this variant of Plato's iconoclasm is not to be understood as settling the character of art as such but rather as an attempt to speak of temptations in our relationship with art. What does art that portrays evil deeds entail with regard to my ability to respond to another? What does enjoyment when creating or beholding such artworks mean? What would be lacking in such voyeurism is Lévinas's primary ethical concept of the face, later spelled out as *proximity*, that is, my being entangled in another whose face summons me to 'a world of initiative and responsibility' (Lévinas, 1987, 12). If the artistic endeavour invites or even justifies my beholding wickedness at a distance, or enjoying it, I have lost contact with the other and therein my responsibility. By mutilating my ability to act and respond, I have purposefully *evaded* my ability to act upon my relationship with another. I choose aesthetic detachment, justified by an idea of disinterestedness, without trying to see how that attitude changes me. As with Weil, this is a call for existential awakening, for a reflection on what I am saying and doing if I take aesthetic distance. If I speak of understanding evil deeds when beholding or enjoying an artwork, am I truly understanding them? Should not evil be counteracted by all means and not merely be contemplated? How can we let ourselves be there, breathe among those shadows, laugh and cry in their company? Should we not, as Socrates said, relentlessly try to make sure 'that our guardians [of the state/soul] may not be bred among symbols of evil, as it were in a pasturage of poisonous herbs'? (Plato, 1937, 401b)

Weil and Lévinas are in many ways very different, but they both stress, in their own distinct ways—through ideas such as inner purity (Weil), and infinite responsibility (Lévinas)—an ethical ideal that is ruthless. Speaking from their own existence, the ideal of leading a life turned towards the Good (for Weil) or responsibility for the other (for Lévinas) must be strict, just because they themselves, and the people they live with, are not always pure of heart. We are steadily tempted to find comfort and ease in replacing this orientation with an idol that is less demanding, with an ideal that is supposedly more realistic, as it were, one that occasionally allows evil to appear without reproach, an ideal that restricts one's responsibility to the particularity of appearance or context. The activity of philosophy, following Plato, must be an ethical understanding of this orientation, which in every instance will be entangled in the becoming of oneself (compare with Strandberg, 2015).

What has this tough critique of aesthetic temptations to do with the ethics and aesthetics of historiography? There are two interrelated insights to this critique, of which the latter is especially important to how historiography should be conceived. On the one hand, if in my aesthetic mind I am accustomed to dwell in a land of shadows when reading literature, for the sake of amusement or curiosity, I allow a place for misery and evil to exist. I will then think that the evils of literature are imaginary and will thus not truly respond to them as immoral, because they are supposedly confined to the literary medium. Thus I—the reader, the beholder—remain unresponsive to what is created and to what is allowed to linger on within the literary work, which is possibly a *manifest* or *actual* reality of suffering, misery or evil that the literary work about evil deeds is inspired by, yet is a caricature of. In literature I do not truly see the reality that evil bears on. On the other hand, however, if I think that the literary medium in principle is a land of imagination and shadows, I can as a consequence easily fail to respond to a manifest and actual reality of misery in yet another sense. What I am unresponsive to is not necessarily a reality of misery that merely *inspires* the literary work, it can also be another real person's suffering as *told* through a story. I can think that her suffering or misery is fictitious just because it is told as a story. Thus, understanding that some narratives like historiography—despite their narrative, textual, or literary characteristics—concern the actuality of suffering and misery in a different way than literary fiction is not an aesthetic but a deeply *ethical* distinction that determines how I will conceive the story. When I think that all stories or textual manifestations in principle are literary imaginations, I do, as it were, no longer see nor care about

seeing the ethical differences between stories. The aesthetic temptation to no longer see differences between stories is absolutely central to both Weil and Lévinas, and is elaborated further by the third thinker who follows Plato's aesthetic vision, Murdoch.

'Auschwitz is not a tragedy'

In our culture we are accustomed to speak of the tragic. But what is expressed in such language use? 'Tragedy', as such, Murdoch argues, 'belongs only to art, where it occupies a very small area' (Murdoch, 2003, 92). There are, Murdoch says, some works like the Homeric *Iliad* that rise 'to a tragic level', and have this aura of great art of misery over themselves, although they almost always involve a mixture of comic and tragic elements (Murdoch, 2003, 93). But the *Iliad* is not a tragedy; 'it is too long and multiform to be a tragedy' Murdoch (2003, 93). Great tragedies are rather few, and bad tragedies are not tragedies (Murdoch, 2003, 92–93). It is, she says, 'as if we needed for psychological reasons to inflate the idea' of tragedy, in that way giving tragedies an exaggerated sense of greatness, taking them to express the depth of our anxious lives and to deal responsibly with the miseries of the world (Murdoch, 2003, 92).

In real life, however, when exaggerated by tragic expressions smuggled in from aesthetic discourse, it is imperative to understand in what direction they lead us. 'Newspapers talk about "tragic situation" or "tragedies at sea"' (Murdoch, 2003, 93). But there is possibly something problematic in these expressions. If I describe real persons' miseries in such terms, something false risks being involved, 'possibly a forgivable reaching for consolation' (Murdoch, 2003, 93). The falseness lingers in the very idea of the comic and the tragic. 'Real life is not tragic' (Murdoch, 2003, 93). Why say that the accident is a tragedy? 'Art', Murdoch argues, 'offers some consolation, some sense, some form whereas the most dreadful ills of human life allow of none. Auschwitz is not a tragedy' (Murdoch, 2003, 93). There is a deeper existential sense to this distinction, which goes back to Aristotle's account, to the ethics of responding to actuality and to possibility.

Again, what is a 'tragedy'—what does this concept involve? Tragedy for Aristotle is the highest form of imaginary artistic discourse (*poiesis*) exactly because the story—the imitation of suffering and misery by the means of a plot (*mythos*)—is carefully constructed in order to unleash the consoling 'tragic effect' that purges the spectator's emotions by arousing pity and fear, the *katharsis* that 'satisfies the moral sense' (Aristotle, 1902, 1453a1–2). This satisfaction of the 'moral sense' is caused by the aesthetic greatness of the imitation, which means that the tragic effect is directly related to how well the story is constructed. The imitation, Aristotle says, is disjoined and disrupted if an element of the story is dislocated, which also means that the consoling effect will be weakened if the plot is disjoined. Purgation of the emotions of pity and fear are the appropriate responses to this spectacle; but they are also a sign that the tragedy is successful, because if the imitation is successful, it will unleash pity and fear in the spectators. To use the concept of 'tragedy', then, is to describe the event with an aesthetic concept. This description will denote a typical kind of story of suffering or misery connected to the appropriate ethical response to the kind of imitative story a tragedy is supposed to be.

What then is implicated if I respond to Auschwitz (or other genocides or horrors) in terms of its supposedly being a 'tragedy'? What am I saying if I say that these stories have a tragic plot (see such inclinations in White, 1985, 2000a, 2016; compare with; Partner, 2012)? This is best shown through an example that forces me to see that I have a personal relationship to what is told, where 'tragedy' will be my personal response to the persons of the story. It is only by seeing my own relation to what is told that the recklessness of my saying 'tragedy' will be evident (see Murdoch, 1997). Murdoch writes:

Let us take a real life-example. I read in some account of the matter that on one of the last days in Hitler's bunker at the end of the war, when Dr and Mrs. Goebbels were hustling their children up to bed, about to poison them with cyanide, one of the children, jesting with one of the guards, whom she was fond of, said to him, '*Misch, Misch, du bist ein Fisch*'. This episode has a piercing touchingness composed partly of tragic irony. It touches us

too as evidence of the innocent vitality of the human spirit under terrible conditions. (Stories from the concentration camps.) And we picture children in that place. There is also the fact that someone remembered it. But this is not tragedy, it is a fragment of something far more awful, not just because it is 'real', but because it is different; it has no formal context, is not modified or solaced by any limited surround. The story could be told in different ways, but this touch of art does not make it tragic. (Murdoch, 2003, 95)

If I were to respond to what is told about the girl in terms of 'tragedy', it would suggest that I aestheticize this story of misery in at least four respects.³ Not everything is determined by the wording, but a concept will guide my thoughts. A concept is something through which I think.

Firstly, if I say 'tragedy', it points in the direction that I do not care about *differentiating* between real and imaginary misery, namely real and imaginary persons having lived through these experiences. I will not acknowledge how the reality of this girl pierces my being by this horror of her fate. I will not see how these real persons in the story address me differently from how fictive characters in a tragedy do. If I do not see this difference, I am in the world of imagination.

Secondly, if I say 'tragedy', I imagine that I have an *aesthetic* distance to the story, instead of the *temporal* distance to the girl in the bunker that I in fact have. I would then think that this story of the girl in the bunker is just read by me from afar, similarly to the aesthetic distance I experience when reading a novel that concerns misery. When I read a novel, I read it from outside, and the spectacle takes place between characters. I come from my life towards the narrative. When reading a novel, I may have a relation to what is told. But even if I identify with what is told, I remain outside in the sense that I see the order of the story—how it begins and ends—from an omnipresent vantage point. When I read a novel, this omnipresence is my *only* place of existence; I have no other *existential* place in relation to what is told. But by contrast to reading a novel, this is not the case in real life. In real life, I am already implicated in a lifeworld with the girl in the bunker. I read about her in hindsight, I have a vantage point that she could not have, but I never was outside a life shared with her. Responding in hindsight to what is told is not to embody the omnipresence of aesthetic distance to a story. What I see is rather my personal relationship to a past actuality of another person. The past actuality is lived through by the girl and told by someone who survived, but even if she is dead, I cannot escape this relationship with her in terms of my being her posterity or afterlife. This is the entanglement I think that I escape from if I say that a story about a real person's suffering and misery is tragic. That is, I think that I somehow am *aesthetically* detached from a life with her.

Thirdly, if I say 'tragedy', I suppose that this story is encapsulated in a tragic *form*, and that its suffering and misery in turn is directly connected to how this story is told or written. As with the art of tragedy, I think that it matters that the story begins and ends in the bunker, and that it is told in exactly this way. What I fail to realize is that a real-life story does not begin and end somewhere specific; 'it has no formal context, is not modified or solaced by any limited surround' (Murdoch, 2003, p. 95). In truth, the story has no form beyond being a fragmented story from life told by a survivor and retold by Murdoch. The context is a life that I share with these persons. 'The story could be told in different ways', and these formal variations cannot disrupt what is most piercing in this reality, namely the girl who addresses me through the story (Murdoch, 2003, 95). It is not the form that provides a context and suggests what kind of fate she has lived through. Instead, her having lived through this fate disrupts any importance formal aspects may be taken to have.

Fourthly, if I say 'tragedy', I think that the story is orchestrated in order to trigger the emotional response of pity and fear in me; and furthermore, that when these emotions are evoked, they can supposedly *relieve* me of the burden of misery. But in real life, misery is not lived through and told in order to evoke pity and fear so that my moral sense may be purged. The story concerns solely a question of how to respond to another who has lived through misery, responding in a way that is just to her. I am not invited to bewail what is told as if it were a dramatic spectacle: this story 'is a fragment of something far more awful' (Murdoch, 2003, 95). I must understand that I live in a world in which this has actually happened to this little girl. There is no consolation, I cannot be relieved from the reality I share with her who has suffered and is now dead.

If an ethical understanding of narrative discourse is my concern, all of these ideas, brought about when I say ‘tragedy’, are symptomatic of an aestheticizing temptation. In order to see if this story is to be understood on aesthetic criteria at all I must ask: where do I exist in relation to what is told, in relation to the teller and to the girl? Unlike fictional characters, I share a life with the girl. I live after her, I read of what has happened to her, and so on. Thus, I must be clear about what it means to respond to her (see Carr, 2016; Elgabsi, 2022; Meretoja, 2018; see also Pihlainen, 2002). What is the ethical distinction between responding to *historia* and to *poiesis*, between responding to an actual misery and to a possible misery, to a real person and to a character? As Aristotle also suggests, the medium—the form—has no relevance with regard to this *ethical distinction*. Herodotus could have written in verse and that would have made no difference to the ethical distinction as to how I should apprehend the reality of *historia* and *poiesis*. Actuality concerns me differently from how possibility does. It concerns my own relationship with an actual person to whom I can do injustice by my aesthetic response.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to bring clarity to the question what Plato’s critique of narrative and imitative art may imply. In contrast to the idea that what is at stake is a rejection of narrative aesthetics, I have argued that Socrates’s and Glaucon’s concern is how to ethically respond to the meaning that different narratives such as *historia* and *poiesis* can have in our lives, and thereby what different things they demand of us. I have tried to clarify the meaning of Plato’s critique through the ideas of Simone Weil, Emmanuel Lévinas and Iris Murdoch who respectively characterize a critique of aesthetics as a fundamental personal, ethical-existential concern as to how the real and the imaginary should be conceived by me as a reader.

Notes

1. Rosenberg (2018) is an excellent example of how an exaggerated variant of Plato’s critique of narrative and imitative art might play out in our time. Rosenberg does not refer to Plato, but the consequences would be that all stories, no matter how they are told and what they are about, in principle corrupt our souls in one way or another. For a critique of Rosenberg see Peels (2020).
2. The claims of this article about the ethical importance of conceiving differences between narratives are conceptual. They nevertheless resonate with recent trends in educational research about the connection between historical and ethical consciousness, and with the importance of this connection for both practical education and for shaping the curriculum (Ammert et al., 2022; Grever & Adriaansen, 2019; see also Jonas & Nakazawa, 2021).
3. A possible claim could be that the concepts of ‘story’, ‘telling’ or ‘narrative’ are inherently aesthetic, meaning that all our encounters with stories are aesthetic in one way or another (see Barthes, 1975; Mink, 1970; White, 2000b). In the philosophy of narrative, scholars have discussed different directions and implications of this claim (see Carr, 1986, 2014; Meretoja, 2014, 2018; Pihlainen, 2002, 2017; Ricoeur, 1990, 2004). The claim that stories are inherently aesthetic, however, does not make it less important to explicate the ways in which stories about real people’s suffering and misery ethically claim me differently from how fictive stories do. To see and act upon this difference when reading stories about the past is, to my mind, hardly best characterized as an aesthetic response. Instead, it is to recognize an ethical relationship with another person.

Acknowledgments

Substantial parts of this article have grown in conversation with Göran Torrkulla, or in dialogue with his teachings in Ancient and existential philosophy at Åbo Akademi University. Thank you also Hugo Strandberg, Kalle Pihlainen, Jonas Ahlskog, Camilla Kronqvist, Alexander Öhman, Bennett Gilbert and Ada Elgabsi for all the helpful comments on the issues of this article. I also want to thank the editors of *Journal of Curriculum Studies* as well as two anonymous reviewers. This work has been conducted with financial support from the Kone Foundation.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the The Kone Foundation; Victoriastiftelsen.

References

- Ammert, N., Edling, S., Löfström, J., & Sharp, H. (2022). *Historical and moral consciousness in education: Learning ethics for democratic citizenship education*. Routledge.
- Aristotle. (1902). *Poetics*. Macmillan and Co.
- Barthes, R. (1975). An introduction to the structural analysis of narrative. *New Literary History*, 6(2), 237–272. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468419>
- Carr, D. (1986). Narrative and the real world: An argument for continuity. *History and Theory*, 25(2), 117–131. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2505301>
- Carr, D. (2014). *Experience and history: Phenomenological perspectives on the historical world*. Oxford University Press.
- Carr, D. (2016). Virtue and knowledge. *Philosophy*, 91(357), 375–390. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003181911600005X>
- Carr, D. (2019). Moral exemplification in narrative literature and art. *Journal of Moral Education*, 48(3), 358–368. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2018.1463201>
- Elgabsi, N. (2022). Literary mediation, responsibility, and ethical understanding of the afflicted other: A philosophy of testimonial narrative. *Internationales Jahrbuch für Hermeneutik*, 20, 143–169.
- Gaita, R. (2002). *A common humanity: Thinking about love and truth and justice*. Routledge.
- Grever, M., & Adriaansen, R.-J. (2019). Historical consciousness: The enigma of different paradigms. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 51(6), 814–830. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2019.1652937>
- Jonas, M., & Nakazawa, Y. (2021). *A platonic theory of moral education: Cultivating virtue in contemporary democratic classrooms*. Routledge.
- Kronqvist, C. (2019). A personal love of the good. *Philosophia*, 47(4), 977–994. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-018-0039-x>
- Larson, K. (2009). *Everything important is to do with passion: Iris Murdoch's concept of love and its platonic origin*. University of Uppsala Press.
- Lévinas, E. (1987). Reality and its shadow. In *Collected philosophical papers* (pp. 1–14). Martinus Nijhoff Publishers.
- Lévinas, E. (1991). *Otherwise than being, or beyond essence*. Springer.
- Lindén, J.-I. (2018). Story and history: Remarks on the poetics of Aristotle and some suggestions about a possible aristotelian philosophy of history. In E. Moutsopoulos & M. Protopapas-Marneli (Eds.), *Aristotle: Timeless and scientifically timely* (pp. 203–224). Academy of Athens.
- Meretoja, H. (2014). Narrative and human existence: Ontology, epistemology, and ethics. *New Literary History*, 45(1), 89–109. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2014.0001>
- Meretoja, H. (2018). *The ethics of storytelling: Narrative hermeneutics, history, and the possible*. Oxford University Press.
- Mink, L. O. (1970). History and fiction as modes of comprehension. *New Literary History*, 1(3), 541–558. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468271>
- Murdoch, I. (1997). Vision and choice in morality. In P. Conradi (Ed.), *Existentialists and mystics* (pp. 76–98). Penguin Books.
- Murdoch, I. (2003). *Metaphysics as a guide to morals*. Vintage.
- Partner, N. (2012). The fundamental things apply: Aristotle's narrative theory and the classical origins of postmodern history. In N. Partner & S. Foot (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of historical theory* (pp. 495–507). SAGE.
- Peels, R. (2020). How literature delivers knowledge and understanding, illustrated by Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* and Wharton's *Summer*. *The British Journal of Aesthetics*, 60(2), 199–222. <https://doi.org/10.1093/aesthj/ayz040>
- Pihlainen, K. (2002). The moral of the historical story: Textual differences in fact and fiction. *New Literary History*, 22(1), 50–64. <https://doi.org/10.1353/nlh.2002.0008>
- Pihlainen, K. (2017). *The work of history: Constructivism and a politics of the past*. Routledge.
- Plato. (1937). *The republic I: Books I–V*. Harvard University Press.
- Plato. (1942). *The republic II: Books VI–X*. Harvard University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1990). The circle of narrative and temporality. In *Time and narrative: Volume 1* (pp. 3–87). The University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1994). The self and narrative identity. In *Oneself as another* (pp. 140–168). The University of Chicago Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (2004). *Memory, history, forgetting*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Rosenberg, A. (2018). *How history gets things wrong: The neuroscience of our addiction to stories*. The MIT Press.
- Strandberg, H. (2015). *Self-knowledge and self-deception*. Palgrave Macmillan.

- van den Akker, C. (2018). *The exemplifying past: A philosophy of history*. Amsterdam University Press.
- Weil, S. (1952). *Gravity and grace*. G. P. Putnam's Sons.
- Weil, S. (2015). Essay on the concept of reading. In E. O. Springsted (Ed.), *Late philosophical writings* (pp. 21–27). University of Notre Dame Press.
- White, H. (1973). *Metahistory: The historical imagination in nineteenth-century Europe*. The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. (1985). The historical text as literary artifact. In *Tropics of discourse: Essays in cultural criticism* (pp. 81–100). The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. (2000a). Historical emplotment and the problem of truth in historical representation. In *Figural realism: Studies in the mimesis effect* (pp. 27–42). The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. (2000b). Literary theory and historical writing. In *Figural realism: Studies in the mimesis effect* (pp. 1–26). The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- White, H. (2016). Historical truth, estrangement, and disbelief. In C. Fogu, W. Kansteiner, & T. Presner (Eds.), *Probing the ethics of holocaust culture* (pp. 53–71). Harvard University Press.