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Commentary on Kagan

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I should confess at the outset that I am enthusiastically in agreement with the spirit and direction of Prof. Kagan’s project, so my comments are all in the manner of friendly amendments to it—nothing more than changes of emphasis, really—rather than negative critiques of it, and my questions ask for clarification and augmentation rather than revision or retraction. But I should also add that I am at once both grateful and resentful for the chance to comment—grateful because I was given the excuse I needed to read Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*, a book that had long been on my list of books to read; but resentful because I felt duty-bound to go back to Ayn Rand’s *Atlas Shrugged*, twenty-five years after I read it. Rand is an author of considerable skills: pick up her novels and you find yourself pulled into them before you can blink. But this time, as I read with a more critical attention, I became enraged: How can she *do that!* People don’t behave that way; The world isn’t like that. And making the leftists sniveling and whiney isn’t an argument! But that is the point. The novel *is* an argument, a bad one, no doubt, and one that will do bad things to your blood pressure as you read it, but it is an argument nonetheless.

Is it true, then, that stories are arguments, or arguments of a sort? Or would it be better to say that stories can be *used* as arguments by their authors or *read* as arguments by their audiences? The latter is safer, but I would argue for the more radical claim, the apparently dramatic overstatement that all stories are arguments, perhaps on a par with the infamous *il n’y a pas de hors-texte* 1. There is a difference, I hope. The Derridean claim is banal. Is everything a text? No, of course not. But if by "text" we mean something to be interpreted, then yes, everything can be subjected to interpretation. Everything is "textable." We can "read" anything, which is at bottom nothing more than a high-falutin’ expression of the truism that whatever we talk about is something we can talk about—and we can talk about anything. So, yes, stories are arguments in the sense that contexts can always be supplied in which stories can be *used* and read as arguments. Trading on an ambiguity, we can say that stories are *arguable*.

However, I think that stories are also arguments in a more interesting way. In his first case study—the allegory of the cave from Plato’s *Republic*—Kagan remarks that "The story… makes sense out of the low status of the philosopher in certain societies… [and also] inspires a certain kind of seeker to relinquish that status…” 2. That’s right, but it needs to be parsed. There are two things going on: sense is *made*, and then that sense is *used* when it becomes the premises, as it were, for an argument. The duality needs to be emphasized because it is this two-part harmony that is peculiar to understanding stories. Actually, it is misleading to say, "the story makes sense out of" the situation at hand. The story does no such thing. It is the author who does and the
readers who do. Philosophers run the risk of misunderstanding stories when they abstract them from the conditions of being told and being heard, in the same way that they risk misunderstanding philosophical arguments when they abstract them from their social, historical, and textual contexts—from their arguers and its audiences. It is a happy, but I suspect not all that common, occasion when reconstructing a philosophical argument as a putative proof in first-order predicate logic, with identity, serves as a significant aid to philosophical understanding.

Kagan focuses attention on assessing the validity of the argument that is constructed—on its persuasive strength—in order to map out the kinds of responses that are available when, as in the case of Rand’s stories, we find the conclusions objectionable. I would like to back up for a moment and consider the first part of that two-part harmony, the making-sense of the story. This is the essential moment for persuasive stories because this is the where the argument begins. Interpretation is the first argumentative move. It is often here, the interpretive moment, that determines whether the game is won or lost—as well as what game is even being played.

The claim that reading a text or hearing a story is an argumentative move—and the crucial first move—needs to be glossed. What I mean by this is that there is already an argumentative engagement with the author. The process of making sense of a story is a constant but generally unvoiced dialogue, a succession of Do you mean this? and What about that? These will range from the fairly innocuous and concrete—Who is narrating? or Was Frieda or Pecola the older one?—through the moderately reconstructive—Is the fire behind and above the prisoners in the cave or below and in front of them but hidden?—then to the highly abstract—Is the blinding sun supposed to be a Transcendent God, an inaccessible Truth? Once we are captured by the story, the questions and reactions change. We entreat the author, advise the characters, pray for the future: Please don't make Chako-san discover her? or Come on, Bilbo, surely you know better than to taunt a dragon! The ability to elicit just the right questions, the questions the author wants us, is the mark of an artful author. When we ask—How come it's her spineless brother who's running the railroads and not Dagny Taggart?—rather than the questions that need to be asked—Are people like this? Does society work this way? Could it work that way?—we have already bit the Randian bait. We have already been hooked by the premises of her argument.

All of these ways of engaging with the text are argumentative, but not all of them are adversarial. They do not have to entail an adversarial relationship with the author—although when we tell our students to read critically that may be what they are hearing. That is only one way to read, and it is but one way to argue. The process of finding, or creating, a sensible meaning for a difficult text is more like completing a formal proof or working out the solution to a logic puzzle. Those involve arguments of a different sort. When the project is finding an acceptable interpretation of a polysemous text (admittedly a pleonasm), then the engagement takes on yet other argumentative characteristics.
Kagan identifies three ways of arguing against persuasive stories: taking exception to it as a story, rebutting it with a story, and critically analyzing it as an argument. At first sight, it might appear that these all buy into the adversarial model for arguments, but Kagan deftly avoids that pitfall: the critical analysis he has in mind for the third category is meant to be applied to both *Atlas Shrugged* and *The Bluest Eye*, the story-arguments he accepts as well as the ones he does not. The question he asks is, "should the story be persuasive?" and there is certainly supposed to be room for informal logical analysis to answer in the affirmative.

Still, Kagan does put the question in terms of persuading and convincing rather than, say, successful teaching or artistic showing, as if there were always some resistance to overcome. If we are to get past the adversarial model for argumentation, we need to get past, or around, that, too. So I am not persuaded when Kagan says that the second sort of response—responding to the story with story—is "more constructive, more forceful, more profitable (if effective), but more difficult." Responding to *Atlas Shrugged* with Frank Capra’s movie *It’s A Wonderful Life* is not, I think, likely to be more constructive. It is to depart even further from reasoned dialogue in favor of a propaganda battle. For all its virtues—it’s a film with an uncanny knack of pushing all my emotional buttons, that never fails to reduce me to tears—it’s pretty hard not to conclude that the idyllic world of Capra’s Pleasantville collapses under critical scrutiny more quickly, more surely, and more completely than Rand’s New York. Critical engagement must be seen as the preferable option.

Since one way to criticize a story is as an argument, part of being a good story teller is being a good arguer. (And, I’ve argued elsewhere, vice-versa.) It is a legitimate objection to Rand’s novels that they do not pass critical muster. But in order to understand the act of reading a story as an argumentative engagement, there must be reference to both halves of the two-part harmony involved: making sense and making an argument. This requires both philosophical criticism and literary criticism. The question of whether the story should work needs to be paired with the questions of why it does work. Aesthetic, psychological, sociological, historical, economic, and even scientific factors can all be brought to bear. The attempt to fight fire with fire—responding to a story with another one—requires more literary ability than most of us can muster. The suggestion that that is how we should respond seems to rests on an endearingly naive faith that reason will always have the better story-tellers.

A truly effective response to a persuasive story must pay attention to the mechanics of interpretation as well as the argument. It is not enough to point out the logical flaws in the story as argument. Will someone who has read Rand’s novels and bought into her conclusions renounce those beliefs once the flaws in her stories-as-arguments have been identified? I think not. What is needed is not just counter-argument but something closer to debriefing, or what Harman calls "positive undermining." 3 As with any argument, we need to identify and assess the premises, consider the evidence—both what is included
as well as any counter-evidence that may have been excluded, and evaluate the strength of the inferences. In the case of literary arguments, we also need to examine how and why they have succeeded in having had the effect on our thinking that they have had.

My point is that the argumentative engagement starts much earlier, from the moment we pick up the book, enter the theater, or sit down by the hearth to listen, so that responding to the argument requires addressing all of its stages. Being an audience is engaging in argument. This is not to say that all audiences are active disputants--the passivity of televiewers is a cliché as old as the medium itself. But it is to say that that sort of passivity is critically (if not criminally) negligent. The obligations and responsibilities that are incumbent on us as would-be rational arguers are equally incumbent on as would-be critical readers. Perhaps they are even more incumbent because of the subtle effectiveness of persuasive stories. We are on our guard when we argue combatively; we are not when we read leisurely. We need not, in the end, exile the poets from our Republic.. but then we must recognize that when we read them, we argue with them, and when we argue with them, we must do so completely.

Endnotes


2P. 5; emphasis added.

3Gilbert Harman, "Positive Versus Negative Undermining in Belief Revision," Nous,