

**“Another problem with people who fail to examine themselves is that they often prove all too easily influenced. When a talented demagogue addressed the Athenians with moving rhetoric but bad arguments, they were all too ready to be swayed, without ever examining the argument”**

**M.C. Nussbaum**

Although Nussbaum’s words tackle the crucial feature of the socio-political discourse – the issue of assessing one’s argumentation – I believe the problem is of manifold natures, including the linguistic and ethical ones. The aim of this dissertation is to provide a certain elucidation to Nussbaum’s claim, and clarify the essence of this sort of propositions. Therefore, the first part would be dedicated to the elaboration of the quote. The second – to providing certain semantic tools for assessing such claims (as such tools I consider Ludwig Wittgenstein’s account on propositions from *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*) and actually applying them to the problem. The final part is a general reflection evaluating aforementioned elements which, hopefully, will take us closer, at least by a footstep, to the solution.

## **I. What’s behind Nussbaum’s words?**

At first glance, Nussbaum’s claim seems as a kind of rational warning. The thesis that “people who fail to examine themselves [...] often prove all too easily influenced” is followed by an example about an Athenian demagogue misleading the public, which plays the role of thesis’s justification. Instead of blindly following the charisma and speaker’s proficiency in fabulous storytelling, one should assess the correspondence of the words with the facts. What is generally implied then, is that, in very simple words, people should pay attention to the content of the speech rather than the form of it.

Nussbaum emphasises that the people, who “fail to examine themselves” are those who are far too easily influenced. There is an intrinsic connection between the lack of substantial informational background and being a victim of misguidance. An individual particle of self-evaluation is in this case crucial. Taking that into account, what is distinctive about Nussbaum’s commentary is the fact that, on the contrary to most other contemporary commentators of socio-political discourse, she lays responsibility for the public disinformation not on the intentions of the demagogues, but on the incompetence of concrete individuals to consciously participate in the political space and disability to demark profound statements from the shallow ones (or maybe more accurately concerning the later semantic analysis – the elucidating ones from the misleading ones). Although, it would be quite far-fetched to say that this transfer of responsibility from demagogues to individuals can potentially result in “general consciousness of masses”, certainly it is a much more plausible and liberal view than imposing restrictions on the speakers, which could result in violation of the freedom of speech.

Reflecting on Nussbaum’s words, what seems as a claim concerning contemporary events, for instance: disinformation wars in subsequent American presidential elections or often fatal consequences of seemingly emancipating Arab Spring, is, in fact, something opposite – a universal statement, followed by the ancient example. So far, the vision Nussbaum propounds is perspicuous and rational. However, a salient problem emerges, which is usually omitted, I believe, due to our detrimental habit to take things for granted. How can we assess propositions concerning, for instance,

ethics, politics, aesthetics and religion? Or more importantly – can we assess such propositions at all? Positive answer for that question would finish the dissertation, but the inborn scepticism tells me that this is not the case, and considering Wittgenstein's view on meaning presented in *Tractatus* will, besides guarantying the plurality of thought, which is philosophy's ultimate strength, provide us with an unobvious account, that I believe, is sometimes necessary to attain the truly insightful analysis.

## II. *Tractarian* semantics and its consequences for Nussbaum's account

Ludwig Wittgenstein, in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, developed what is often referred to as the "Picture Theory of Meaning". The proposition (let's call it  $p$ ), according to the Austrian philosopher, shows how the world would be if the proposition was true. Therefore, it divides all the possible worlds into two classes: if the real (actual) world is in the first class – the proposition is true, if it is in the second – it's false. The very important thing is, that the negation of  $p$  divides all the possible world in exactly the same way – the sense of the proposition is determined by this distinction and as follows – proposition  $p$  is senseful if and only if its negation is senseful as well.

Consider a proposition:

(1) James ate yoghurt for breakfast.

Now, proposition (1) is true if and only if the actual world is in the class where James ate yoghurt for the breakfast. The negation of (1) is true if and only the actual world is not in the class where James ate yoghurt for breakfast. The proposition is senseful, because it refers to a certain fact. What does that mean to Nussbaum's problem? If propositions of the demagogue are of those kind (for instance: "We did not steal any money from the public funds."), the only way of assessment is referring to the facts and this can be done only by means of evaluation. Nussbaum would certainly endorse that view, because simply speaking it's almost a formal description of her claim. The problem is, these verifiable sentences are not the only ones, with which the listener has to deal.

For Wittgenstein, there are two other kinds of proposition: the senseless ones and the nonsense ones. What is the difference and how does it correspond to our problem? Senseless proposition are tautologies and contradictions. Wittgenstein, writing that "tautologies tell us nothing about the world" meant that, just as contradiction, they are incapable of dividing all possible world into two classes, in which they have different truth values.

Consider a proposition (it is an example provided by M. Potter):

(2) Either it's raining or it's not.

In all possible world this proposition is true. Moreover, the distinctive feature which divides senseless proposition such as (2) with the nonsense ones is the fact that proposition one is a disjunction of many senseful propositions:

Either it's raining or it's sunny.

Either it's raining or it's sunny or it's foggy.

Either it's raining or it's sunny or it's foggy or it's snowing.

...

Now a proposition (3) such as "The name 'a' refers to a", which tells us nothing about the world (due to the Wittgensteinian distinction between a sign and a symbol, which for the brevity I decided to skip)

cannot be a compound of senseful propositions. That's why the author of *Tractatus* distinguishes between senseless (2) and nonsense (3) propositions. In terms of political speeches, senseless propositions seem to be a rarity, but if they appear they should be immediately ignored as telling nothing at all about the world. This is another point Nussbaum would certainly endorse – indifference towards this kind of propositions equates dwindling importance of pure rhetoric and increasing demand on factual statements. It's a brilliant example, which presents how intuitive and accurate observations of a socio-political commentator are backed up by conceptual clarification of purely logical analysis of language.

The most difficult, or even unsolvable problem is the one concerning nonsense propositions such as (3). While this particular example is purely semantic and can be hardly applied to any kind of political speech, one can, without a moment of hesitation, invent an ethical one.

Consider:

(4) Outsourcing African countries is wrong.

"Why couldn't be that a contingent truth?" one may ask. That's a completely understandable question. Imagine that (4) divides all the possible worlds into two classes: in one class – outsourcing African countries is wrong, in the other (to use the words of Wittgenstein) – it is not the case that outsourcing African countries is wrong. Someone assessing that ethical claim would have to say that: "The class of possible worlds where "(4) is the case" is better than the class of worlds where "(4) is not the case"". What's important is that the true ethical content of the proposition is now not in (4), but in the aforementioned sentence assessing the classes of possible worlds and that proposition is not a contingent truth. Therefore, in factual terms, ethical propositions, such as (4) are nonsense and do not tell us anything about the world. That is the reason Wittgenstein formed *Tractatus's* famous 7<sup>th</sup> thesis.

It's a part where Nussbaum's and Wittgenstein's accounts seem to stop being so interwoven. Does that mean that ethical, religious, aesthetic propositions are unimportant? Logical positivists from the Vienna Circle or resolute readers of *Tractatus* would be willing to endorse that view, but Wittgenstein himself treated it as a misinterpretation. And as these ethical claims are, as we know, omnipresent in the socio-political discourse how are we supposed to deal with them, if not linguistically? As profound German author J.W. Goethe wrote: "In the beginning there was the Deed". Ethical, aesthetic or religious propositions are of extreme importance (as Wittgenstein wrote in a letter to P. Englemann – "the main aim of this book is the ethical one"), but their meaning should be acquainted by the action – of prayer or contemplation – as they are in a certain sense intrinsic. This interpretation is conducted in the spirit of Soren Kierkegaard, who seemed to be one of few thinkers who identified true ethical commitment extra-linguistically. "To pray is an action" – he wrote in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*.

### III. Conclusion

Besides the fact that non-linguistic nature of ethical does not, in any way prevent anyone from factual assessment (if the proposition is senseful) or absolute refrainment (if the proposition is senseless) of demagogue's speech, I think that the discrepancy between Nussbaum's and Wittgenstein's accounts of ethical is illusory or, at worst, in the context of the quote, unimportant. The reason is that Nussbaum's aim is primarily to raise awareness about those verifiable (senseful) and tautological

(rhetoric) statements. In these cases, our logical analysis of meaning demarked them successfully. The ethical claims, which are of course present in the political discourse, should simply not be assessed by the means of argumentation, but shouldn't be moulded by rhetoric devices either. "Examining yourself" in terms of ethics should be taken literally and can be interpreted as such in the quote. The action can be the only form of assessment. I hope that Wittgensteinian interpretation of Nussbaum's quote elucidated a very simple, yet profound message of the author concerning the language, our social and political discourse: To be meaningful is to refer to the facts. When one do not speak about the facts, one should not be listened to.