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Manhattan dynamite and no pancakes:

Tradition and normality in the work of Tove Jansson

Abstract:
It is not uncommon to read the Moomin tales through existentialist lenses. Although there might be natural reasons for focusing on and privileging the nine classical Moomin books, it would, however, be a mistake to overlook Jansson’s comic strips. This is so, not only because of the quality of Jansson’s drawings and because of the way she innovatively worked with and developed that graphic medium, but certainly also because of the stories they contain. When read alongside the books, the comic strips add important aspects and nuances to Jansson’s portrayal of human existence. By allowing her the freedom to radically change the setting and scenery of the stories, Jansson was able to explore quite different topics than was possible in the novels, and in particular offer a somewhat different account of the role of customs, normality, and tradition.

Keywords: Moomin, tradition, normality, phenomenology, epoché

1. How to start philosophizing
In an underappreciated article from 1978, William Lenkowski engages with a classical methodological challenge that confronts phenomenological philosophizing. All our everyday preoccupations, all our practical concerns and pre-philosophical theoretical endeavours, all our
differences and disagreements, they all occur within a certain shared and unquestioned framework. They all take the world for granted. This reliance on and pre-understanding of the world is so fundamental, so obvious and natural, that we normally do not reflect upon it, and hardly ever appreciate it as a presupposition worthy of closer consideration. If philosophy is to deserve its credentials as a form of radical questioning, however, it cannot simply leave this presupposition unexamined. Indeed, for phenomenologists such as Husserl and Heidegger, the main task of philosophy is not to obtain new empirical knowledge about the world, but rather to investigate and understand that which is presupposed and taken for granted by any such empirical investigations. As Heidegger once remarked, “to philosophize means to be entirely and constantly troubled by and immediately sensitive to the complete enigma of things that common sense considers self-evident and unquestionable” (Heidegger 1976, 18). But how do we do that? How do we effectuate a rupture with the naivety that characterizes our everyday existence? Or more precisely, what could possibly motivate us to do so, given that the philosophical attitude, in Husserl’s words, constitutes a distinctly unnatural direction of thought (Husserl 1901, 14), i.e., one that in no way is part of or continuous with the natural attitude we normally occupy? As Lenkowski reminds us, already Plato and Aristotle argued that “philosophy begins in wonder”, (see Metaphysics 982b12, Theaetetus 155d) but what is to motivate us to start wondering about that which is left unquestioned in everyday life (Lenkowski 1978, 303)? Husserl’s typical reply doesn’t appear particularly illuminating, since he, in an almost Fichtean vein, describes philosophical reflection as an expression of our basic freedom (Husserl 1913, 62-65). Lenkowski now suggests that we might learn from the classical thinkers. As Aristotle pointed out in his Metaphysics, wonder goes hand in hand with perplexity (982b17-18), but perplexity is not something one actively initiates, but something one “falls into” (Lenkowski 1978, 314). Perhaps the question concerning how to get
started is ill-posed. Perhaps it is not a question of what we ought to do, but rather a question of what must happen to us. Perhaps the decision to initiate the rupture is not preceded by something I do, but by something that befalls me (Lenkowski 1978, 309)? Might there not be situations where one loses one’s footing and ground, where the world we normally feel at home in suddenly becomes uncanny, and where the familiar becomes strange and incomprehensible? (Lenkowski 1978, 309). If such situations were to occur, the philosophical attitude could best be described as the attempt to retain and sustain the sense of wonder. It would be a question of refusing to allow the familiarity of the world to return, it would be “the active refusal to let the world cease to be a problem” (Lenkowski 1978, 315).

The idea that the impetus to break with the confines of thoughtless normality might be due to something that happens to and overwhelms us, rather than to a free decision of ours, is an idea that can also be found in the work of authors such as Jaspers and Heidegger. In Philosophie II: Existenzerhellung, Jaspers discusses how the encounter with certain limit situations, situations often accompanied by feelings of dread, guilt or acute anxiety, might unsettle us and shake and disrupt a life lead in accordance with well-established conventions. By forcing us to abandon the security of the familiar, such situations might allow for a novel look at the world (and ourselves) (Jaspers 1956, 204). In Sein und Zeit, Heidegger characterizes our everyday life as a life led according to conventional norms and standards. Everything is already understood and interpreted by others, and by uncritically taking over the prevailing judgments, valuations, and world- and self-apprehension, by leaving all of this unquestioned, we feel safe and at home. Anxiety, however, makes everyday familiarity collapse. Anxiety makes it impossible to simply continue one’s business as usual, i.e., makes it impossible to continue to rely on the way one conventionally interprets the world and oneself (Heidegger 1927, 187). When overwhelmed by anxiety even the
most familiar of places becomes unfamiliar. As Overgaard rightly points out in a brief comparison of Heidegger and Lenkowski, the methodological function of anxiety should be obvious. Given that we as philosophers need to question what we normally take for granted, anxiety is a godsend. By making the obvious and familiar problematic and questionable, anxiety can be seen as an event or happening in natural life that can propel us into philosophy (Overgaard 2004, 29).¹

2. Philosophy and the Moomins

What does all of this have to do with the Moomins? Their philosophical origin is well known. As Tove Jansson was later to report, one summer in the early 1930s, she lost a discussion about Immanuel Kant with her brother Per Olov. In frustration, she sketched “the ugliest creature imaginable” as a caricature of Kant on the toilet wall of their summerhouse and thus (an early version of) the Moomintroll was born (Jansson 2007a, 66). The link to philosophy, however, goes beyond the origins. In her authorized biography, Westin reports how Jansson in the 1940s delved into philosophy and became fascinated by Nietzsche and Bergson (Westin 2007, 185, 188). In addition, it is not difficult to detect themes in the classical Moomin books that strongly evoke ideas found in phenomenology and existentialism.

Consider, for instance, Jansson’s portrayal of the stifling character of rules and conventions. The Hemulens are notorious sticklers for regulations and order, and many of them are obsessed with and preoccupied with managing and (re)ordering their various collections of plants, stamps, butterflies, etc. Another striking type of figure whose joyless life gravitates around the maintenance of empty rituals and formal customs is the Fillyjonk. In many of the stories, Fillyjonks are portrayed as creatures for whom duty and tradition are essential for a respectable

¹ For a discussion of other emotive paths to the philosophical attitude, see Heinämaa 2002.
life. In *Tales from Moominvalley*, for instance, we encounter a Fillyjonk who has rented a house she deeply dislikes, simply because she was told that her grandmother used to live in it. And when she eventually realizes that she was misinformed, it is too late. She has already written to her relatives about her new home and finds it inappropriate to now change her plans (Jansson 1962, 40-41). In *Moominsummer Madness*, Moomintroll and the Snork Maiden visit another Fillyjonk who every year prepares a Midsummer Eve meal and waits in vain for her uncle and his wife who never show up. She keeps sending them invitations every year even though she dislikes her family, simply because it is “one’s duty to ask one’s relatives to dinner on holidays” (Jansson 1954, 86).

Even the Moomin family is sometimes presented in a comparable manner. In *Moominland Midwinter*, we learn how they follow traditions and customs even when they no longer understand their meaning, simply because that is the way it has always been done. When winter approaches, they each fill their stomach with pine needles, cover the chandeliers with white gauze, and go to sleep “because such was the custom of their forefathers, and Moomins stick to tradition” (Jansson 1957, 12).

In *Moominland Midwinter*, however, we also encounter another recurring theme. By breaking with tradition, by disrupting customs, a new world can be discovered. This happens to the Moomintroll when he suddenly wakes up in the middle of the winter and discovers the strange and wonderful world of winter, inhabited by all kinds of odd and delightful creatures. But there are many other examples as well, and often the change is occasioned by the “great powers of nature” (Jansson 1962, 58), i.e., by natural forces beyond our powers. In *Comet in Moominland*, the astronomical event disrupts all customs and turns the world upside down. The sea disappears, and makes everything look different (Jansson 1946, 123). In *Moominsummer Madness*, the flooding of the valley also changes the world of the inhabitants. The mountain ridges become rocky
islands, and even the familiar and cosy kitchen of the Moomins looks different; when seen through the hole in the ceiling, it appears like an enchanted light-green aquarium (Jansson 1954, 22). Some of the most dramatic examples involve fillyjonks. In *Tales from Moominvalley*, the Fillyjonk who has been leading her joyless life in the house she hates, has her existence shattered by the arrival of a tornado. When natural disaster strikes, it is felt as a liberating force, precisely because it shatters the constrictions of senseless routines. By removing all her tray-cloths, and tea-cosies and knick-knacks, by turning everything upside down, a new beginning is made possible. That this natural revolution also leads to a personal transformation is clear. As Jansson writes, “the old kind of fillyjonk was lost, and she wasn’t sure that she wanted her back” (Jansson 1962, 56)

A comparable account can be found in *Moominvalley in November*. The Fillyjonk we encounter there has shut herself up inside her impenetrable house, where she feels secure in the company of all her precious belongings. Feeling threatened by nature (and chrysalis and creepy-crawly things), she spends her days cleaning carpets, washing windows, etc. At one point in the story, she ends up on the roof with carpet slippers, but the roof is wet, and she starts to slide and almost glides over the roof top. This close encounter with death, initially leaves her with vertigo and dizziness and nausea. But then she starts to look differently at things; she notices the beautiful red of the lampshade, the unusual shape of the hook in the ceiling. She also starts to wonder about things she used to take for granted. Be it fundamental forces of nature, such as gravity, or her own cognitive capacities. How strange that things that hangs from a hook hangs downwards and not in any other direction; how strange that one has eyes to see with, and is that actually possible? Whereas she earlier felt protected by her belongings, she now realizes that she has far too many coffee cups and serving dishes and stacks of plates. Eventually she decides to leave her home, to venture into the world and seek out other people (Jansson 1970, 25).
What we find in these different examples is a description of how a life ensnared in stifling conventions, empty customs and unintelligible traditions, can be disrupted and liberated by upsetting external events. When confronted with the overwhelming, uncontrollable and unsettling power of nature, our ingrained habits, our habitual complacency, can be shaken and make us wonder anew. The encounter with limit situations can effectuate a kind of gestalt switch, can make us gain a richer perspective on the world, and make us reconsider the life we are living. Suddenly coming to realize the meaninglessness of the conventions that have structured our lives can be deeply disquieting, but also emancipating. An episode in *Midsummer Madness* exemplifies this theme. The Fillyjonk who is rescued by Moomintroll and the Snork Maiden feels an immense relief when she is able to put the customs aside. Venturing out into the summer night, she comes across a heap of signs and notices. The signs that all exclaim that something or other is not allowed stems from a park run by a Hemulen, who has tried to domesticate nature by cutting, and shearing and trimming everything into neat geometrical shapes. The reason why all the signs are now to be found in a heap is because Snufkin has previously passed through the park and pulled down each and every single notice, since he as the freedom loving creature that he is, abhors prohibitions, restrictions, and commandments. When the Fillyjonk comes across the heap, she is elated by the prospect that “everything’s allowed” and even suggests that they should build a bonfire of all the notices and dance around it until they have burned to ashes (Jansson 1954, 89).

What should one conclude from all of this? That tradition and normality are restricting shackles that limit our outlook? That the rejection of conventions, while initially anxiety-provoking, is ultimately exhilarating and liberating? It is not uncommon to read the Moomin tales through existentialist lenses. In Jukka Laajarinne’s book *Muumit ja olemisen arvoitus*, we find an example of such a reading, where authors like Kierkegaard, Camus, Heidegger and Sartre are
employed to unlock and decipher Jansson’s tales (Laajarinne 2009). In Karjalainen’s recent book *Tove Jansson: Work and Love* we also see Sartre highlighted as an influence on Jansson. According to Karjalainen it was especially Sartre’s concept of freedom that came to be of importance to Jansson (Karjalainen 2013, 112).

3. The comic strips

Jansson’s different novels and collection of short stories about the Moomins were published over several decades, with the earliest *The Moomins and The Great Flood* appearing in 1945, and the last *Moominvalley in November* being published in 1970. Though these books have deservedly received most of the attention, we shouldn’t forget, however, that Jansson also explored the life of the Moomins in a series of highly successful comic strips.

The first comic strips were published in 1947-1948 in the magazine *Ny Tid*. But a few years later, Jansson took up the project again and commenced a series made directly for the British market, and first published in the London based newspaper *The Evening News*, where it ran from 1954-1975.

Let me in the following examine in some detail one of these comic strips, namely the strip *Moomin Begins a New Life* from 1956.2 As we shall see, Jansson didn’t merely supplant the ideas she had developed in her novels and stories into the comic strips, but rather used the new medium to develop new themes. By having the freedom to radically change the setting and scenery of the stories, she was able to explore quite different topics than was possible in the novels. As I will

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2 In the end, 73 episodes of the comic strips were published in *The Evening News*. Tove Jansson made the first 13 episodes herself, she then asked her brother Lars Jansson to help her out, and from episode 22 onwards he took over and made the rest himself. The strip that I will focus on in the following was made by Tove Jansson on her own.
argue in what follows, the 1956 strip provides for a somewhat more nuanced appreciation of the role of customs, normality, and tradition, than the one often found in more existentialist readings of the nine classical Moomin books. *Moomin Begins a New Life* (Jansson 2007b) tells the story of how life in the Moominvalley is disrupted by the arrival of a freedom preaching prophet. His main message is that one should be happy, enjoy oneself, and do whatever one likes. When Moominmamma politely inquires whether they are not already living a fairly happy life, the prophet protests and insists that they are all tied down and constrained by traditions and ingrained customs. Different members of the Moomin family take the message to heart and proceed to relieve themselves of responsibilities, interpersonal commitments and inhibitions of various kinds. The Snork Maiden leaves Moomintroll, and Moominpappa decides to live for himself in a tree “quite openly and unashamedly”.

As the influence of the prophet grows and comes to pervade the entire valley, prisons are abolished, and so are the very notion of crime. As a result, Stinky is set free, and he immediately takes on the task of showing Moominpappa how to extricate himself of all the middle class
nonsense that for too long has constrained him. Free love and unlimited alcohol is the way forward. Indeed, one of the first things that Stinky teaches Moominpappa is how to produce a moonshine called “Manhattan Dynamite”.

Not surprisingly, Little My is also enjoying herself, and when Moomintroll complains about how the Snork Maiden has gone off on a romantic adventure with a new paramour, Little My simply encourages him to become adventurous himself. A suggestion Moomintroll decides to follow by becoming a highwayman and thereby “the freest of the lot”.

Moominmamma who has continued to uphold the importance of family traditions and who has even prepared a birthday party for Moomintroll, that nobody attends, eventually gets enough of it, and decides to pursue some freedom of her own. Her decision troubles not only Moomintroll, who is gradually fed up by his free life, but also Moominpappa, who has been too proud to admit that he isn’t really enjoying the life in the tree as much as he was expecting, and who had also considered returning home. But as Moominmamma then explains to him, she is now leading a free life with no ties, and so would he please just go away and leave her alone.
It is clearly not that easy to restore what has once been upset. The situation is not made any easier by the fact that Stinky is doing what he can to keep matters in flux and therefore invites another prophet to the Moominvalley; one who preaches a very different message than the first. When the second puritan prophet arrives to the valley, he is horrified by the inhabitants’ sinful lives. He blasts them for having followed a false prophet, whose wicked ways have led them to lead a life without conceptions of conscience, guilt, sin, and punishments. What they instead must do is to repent and follow the call of duty. They should start a new life of sacrifice and self-denial. Everything that is good and enjoyable is evil and must be banished. Moominpappa paints their house black, pancakes are forbidden, and burned oat gruel is the new dish of choice. Not surprisingly, the first prophet is not prepared to give up without a fight, and the scuffle between the two is only interrupted by the arrival of Moominmamma, who urges
for a return to common sense. As she points out, even though both of the prophets are preaching nice things, in the end it is all a bit too unpractical for ordinary people. As Mommintroll remarks in one of the final frames, “Isn’t it lovely to be living normally again?” Things are back to what they used to be. Normality has been restored.

4. Phenomenology of normality

One might read *Moomin Begins a New Life* as a corrective to any simpleminded existentialist (“Sartrean”) emphasis on boundless freedom and the limiting and constraining character of normality. Traditions, conventions, and norms are not simply to be considered as blinders that restrict our outlook and discernment. What is highlighted by and recognized in the story is the extent to which our life is a life structured by patterns of normality. We are at home in a world of customs and traditions, and rather than being a hindrance or obstacle to a socially meaningful life, normality is essential for the latter. Although such a focus on tradition and normality might be associated more with hermeneutics than with phenomenology, it was already recognized, as I will now briefly show, by phenomenological philosophers, psychiatrists, and sociologists.

When we navigate the world, we do not continuously start from scratch. The reason we eventually become as skilful as we do in manoeuvring the social world and in coping with everyday challenges is because we can take a lot for granted. The stock of assumptions, expectations, and

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3 I am not suggesting that this would be Sartre’s own view. For a nuanced discussion of Sartre’s concept of freedom, see Stewart 1998.
prescriptions which we rely on is partially based on previous experience and partially socially
derived. I have been among others for as long as I remember, and as Husserl observes in a
manuscript dating from the 1920s, “I am what I am as an heir […]; everything of my own is
founded, in part through the tradition of my ancestors, in part through the tradition of my
contemporaries” (Husserl 1973a, 223). Normality only gets its full sense in a social context.
Normality is also conventionality; it goes beyond the individual and has a “one does it this way”
attached to it (Husserl 1973b, 611).

Social reality is constituted by the interaction of the participating subjects. We are rarely
aware of the involved processes but tend to internalise the various routines and maxims that guide
our lives to such an extent that they recede from view. However, upheavals and disruptions,
particularly in the social sphere, might make us aware of what we have and what we rely on in
daily life.

In texts from the 1930ies Husserl investigates how the encounter with foreign ways of
living, with what he terms alien worlds, i.e., communities with their own norms and standards of
normality, can make us aware of our own homeworldly particularity. Encountering the divergent
perspectives of foreigners, can make us gain a different, be it critical or more appreciative,
perspective on our own customs, on that which we take for granted and usually leave unquestioned.
It might also motivate us to aim for a more comprehensive understanding, one that encompasses
and integrates multiple perspectives (see Husserl 1973b, 214-218).

A further example to mention comes from the domain of phenomenological psychiatry. It
has often been remarked that fundamental features of normal life can be sharply illuminated
through a study of their pathological distortions. By using pathology as a contrast, one might also
highlight the fact that normality is itself an achievement. In his classical work Der Verlust der
natürlichen Selbstverständlichkeit, Blankenburg argued that schizophrenia is characterized by a “pathology of common sense” or a “loss of natural evidence” (Blankenburg 1971). The common sense or natural evidence in question can be understood as amounting to an implicit grip of the “rules of the game”, a sense of proportion, a taste for what is adequate and appropriate, likely and relevant. Because of this loss, schizophrenic individuals might be captured and puzzled by matters that seem obvious to normal people. A young woman described the situation in the following way:

What is it that I really lack? Something so small, so comic, but so unique and important that you cannot live without it (…). I find that I no longer have footing in the world. I have lost a hold in regard to the simplest, everyday things. (…). What I lack really is the ‘natural evidence’ (…). It is not knowledge… It is something that every child is equipped with. It is these very simple things a human being has the need for, to carry on life, how to act, to be with other people, to know the rules of the game (Quoted in Blankenburg 1971, 42-43).

In the tradition of phenomenological sociology, one can find special methods introduced in order to explicate the practices that people engage in when establishing and maintaining social order. Garfinkel, for instance, developed the so-called breaching experiments. These experiments were designed to create situations that undermine our normal background assumptions thereby making us more aware of the many social norms that are tacitly presupposed in everyday life. Classical examples include negotiating the price of an item in a department store, ordering something not on the menu in a restaurant, or behaving as guests when visiting one’s parents.
Garfinkel also showed how people react when the norms governing conversational expectancy are violated:

On Friday night my husband and I were watching television.

My husband remarked that he was tired. I asked, “How are you tired? Physically, mentally, or just bored?”

(S) I don't know, I guess physically, mainly.

(E) You mean that your muscles ache or your bones?

(S) I guess so. Don't be so technical.

(After more watching)

(S) All these old movies have the same kind of old iron bedstead in them.

(E) What do you mean? Do you mean all old movies, or some of them, or just the ones you have seen?

(S) What's the matter with you? You know what I mean.

(E) I wish you would be more specific.

(S) You know what I mean! Drop dead! (Garfinkel 1967, 43)

One can find literary parallels to this in both Jansson’s own work and in an English classic that Jansson illustrated, namely Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*. Consider, first, how the following conversation between Alice, the March Hare and the Hatter highlights to what extent we in our conversational interaction take it for granted that others’ play along according to the same rules, and how disconcerting it is when they don’t:
The table was a large one, but the three were all crowded together at one corner of it. ‘No room! No room!’ they cried out when they saw Alice coming. ‘There’s plenty of room!’ said Alice indignantly, and she sat down in a large arm-chair at one end of the table. ‘Have some wine,’ the March Hare said in an encouraging tone. Alice looked all round the table, but there was nothing on it but tea. ‘I don’t see any wine,’ she remarked. ‘There isn’t any,’ said the March Hare. ‘Then it wasn’t very civil of you to offer it,’ said Alice angrily. ‘It wasn’t very civil of you to sit down without being invited,’ said the March Hare. ‘I didn’t know it was your table,’ said Alice; ‘it’s laid for a great many more than three.’ ‘Your hair wants cutting,’ said the Hatter. He had been looking at Alice for some time with great curiosity, and this was his first speech. ‘You should learn not to make personal remarks,’ Alice said with some severity: ‘it’s very rude.’ The Hatter opened his eyes very wide on hearing this; but all he said was, ‘Why is a raven like a writing-desk?’ (Carroll 1865, 44).

In Jansson’s own work, there is the episode in A tale of Horror from Tales from Moominvalley, where a young Whomper encounters Little My. The Whomper has a vivid imagination and is regularly scolded by his father for telling too many lies. He is not prepared for Little My, however, who is an even better story teller than himself, and who manages to scare him witless when she starts to elaborate on his own stories. The Whomper is accustomed to other people telling the truth, and the encounter with Little My profoundly shakes him and makes him realize the destructive power of lying:

The whomper felt so hurt that he was very near to tears. ‘Daddy,’ he said. ‘That girl… you’d never believe… I’m not going back there, not in a thousand years,’ the whomper
continued savagely. ‘She tricked me! She told such stories! She makes people sick with her lies!’ (Jansson 1962, 36-37).

In many ways, normality is the glue that keeps social reality together. Like the air we breath, we don’t usually attend to it, and only realize its significance when it goes missing or is otherwise disturbed or impaired. In phenomenological philosophy, we do not merely find analyses of the constitutive importance of normality, but also an emphasis on the extent to which the philosophical attitude involves a sustained rupture with a taken for granted normality. 4

5. Conclusion

Upheaval, separation, homecoming are among the recurrent themes in Jansson’s writings. Although there might be natural reasons for focusing on and privileging the nine classical Moomin books, which contain such an abundance of profound reflections on these topics, it would be a mistake to overlook the comic strips. This is so, not only because of the quality of Jansson’s drawings and because of the way she innovatively worked with and developed that graphic medium, but certainly also because of the stories they contain. Many of the stories take place in natural and social environments that differ from those described in the classical books. By allowing Jansson this freedom to expand and vary the context and setting, the strips also permit for an exploration of a new and diverse set of topics. In particular, they contain a far more extensive engagement with,

4 Does the philosophical perspective we gain on our normality and normativity change anything? Must it necessarily lead to a transformation of the norms according to which we live, or might it leave everything as it is, but now simply understood differently? This is a highly relevant question – and one that brings to mind the famed ten ox-herding pictures from Zen Buddhism –, but it is not one that I can address in the present text.
analysis of, and critical commentary on features of communal life. When read alongside the books, the comic strips consequently add further aspects and nuances to Jansson’s portrayal of human existence.

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