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Educating Virtuous Feeling and Emotion: the role of poetry, literature and other arts

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Abstract

The project described below proposes to extend the recently concluded ‘Knightly Virtues’ programme of school intervention in a radically new and innovative direction for Phase 2 of the Jubilee Centre research and development. In short, appreciating that the development of Aristotelian moral virtue requires the cultivation of feeling and emotion, and that Aristotle himself (as well as, as outlined below, other important later writers) regarded poetry as having great potential for the education of virtuous emotion, the co-authors of this project aim to develop – much along the lines of the ‘Knightly Virtues’ project – a school poetry curriculum designed to assist this end. (The poems will be carefully selected for their appropriateness for either upper primary or lower secondary pupils – and some suggestions are made below). It is hoped that as well as assisting pupils in schools to enhanced affective as well as cognitive appreciation of aspects of character and virtue, this project will also yield theoretical benefits in terms of greater conceptual understanding of the place of feeling and emotion in the development of virtuous character and that this will result in a further useful (co-authored) book for educators and teachers along the lines of the recent volume *Educating Character through Stories* by David Carr and Tom Harrison.

The narrative form of moral understanding

The recent highly successful Jubilee Centre ‘Knightly Virtues’ project (documented in *Educating Character through Stories* by David Carr and Tom Harrison) took its cue from a time honoured virtue ethical tradition of conceptualizing moral character

and agency that has long maintained that the general form of such agency is that of *narrative*. On this view, although biological, evolutionary or other natural science may indeed have contributions to make to understanding the natural circumstances that condition human association (the fact, for example, that such association is grounded in natural survival-conducive attachments), moral understanding is grounded primarily in person's grasp of him- or herself as a responsible – that is, essentially reasons-responsive – agent. In short, what primarily distinguishes human agents from other animate creatures who may be held to take action to achieve ends or goals is that they may consciously make plans or adopt means to the achievement of their distinctly human purposes in the light of some appreciation of the merit or value of such goals. In this regard, human conduct is by no means fixed or habituated, in so far as rational appreciation of alternative courses of action to achieve their purposes enables – indeed, often necessitates – rational choice between such alternatives. Moreover, such choice and the practical rational deliberation that it requires is not merely confined to the determination of purely local and instrumental means and ends, but extends – as philosophers have noted from antiquity – to reflection on the larger ends and purposes of human life: precisely to what may be fairly considered ethical questions about how one might live well or flourish in a wider moral sense.

It seems clear enough, yherefore, that the general form of such practical deliberation is precisely *narrativial*. To reflect seriously about what one might or should do in any circumstance requiring choice between alternative courses of action is precisely to think – or *imagine* – what the possible practical outcomes or consequences of this or that action might be. In turn, to appreciate what this or that action might or might not contribute to the larger aims of my flourishing or living well as a human agent as such is to think – again with the aid of some imagination – about the wider ends and goals I have or may want to have as a person aspiring to a purposeful (rather than merely aimless) life. The contemporary moral and social philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre puts all this fairly well in a nutshell by saying that to think of ourselves as

agents in general or moral agents in particular is essentially to think of ourselves – and, of course, of other rational human agents – as *characters* in stories that we tell about ourselves and others. From this perspective, moreover, it should hardly be found surprising that human agents – again in sharp contrast with other animate (and precisely ‘dumb’) creatures – are story-telling animals and that human cultures are significantly defined by the wealth of oral and literary narrative traditions that have developed in all human cultures (without exception) from virtually the dawn of human language. In the light of this, MacIntyre argues that such narratives may or should be considered to be the most significant resource for the understanding by humans of themselves as moral agents or, in short, for moral education. At all events, it was in this spirit that the Jubilee Knightly Virtues projects based its programme of a number of narratives drawn from past great literature – including Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and the tale of Gareth and Lynette from (mainly) Malory and Tennyson – for moral educational exploration in schools.

Poetry and the education of virtuous emotion

However, Alasdair MacIntyre is by no means the first philosopher to have emphasized the moral educational uses of literature. Indeed, although MacIntyre generally draws – albeit, in the present view, somewhat anomalously – on the virtue ethics of Aristotle, his views on the moral value of literature are clearly in a fairly direct line of descent from Aristotle’s views of the moral value of poetry in his *Poetics*. For it is in this book that Aristotle argues, in stark contrast to the views of his master Plato, for the philosophical and moral value of poetry insofar as: ‘poetry ... is a more philosophical and higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular’. To be sure, the poetry referred to in Aristotle’s *Poetics* is the great Greek epic or narrative poetry, tragedy and comedy of the likes of Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes which is perhaps rather literarily broader than what we might today refer to as poetry – or, at least, which cuts across narrower contemporary distinctions between fiction, drama and poetry. Still, in

either the ancient or the modern sense, the reference to poetry – rather than literature more broadly – is of no small significance. For it is evident from the *Poetics* that Aristotle regarded the highly colourful, metaphorical and figurative language and imagery of poetry as having a very distinctive role to play in the formation of *moral sensibility*. For Aristotle, the language of poetry is *rhetorical* rather than descriptive or literal, aiming precisely to arouse or engage the emotions. While his master Plato regarded the rhetorical language and images of art as dangerously at odds with the clear deliberations of affectively disengaged reason, Aristotle regards it as of potentially great value and significance for the development of effective practical (moral) reflection and deliberation. The reason for this lies in the difference between moral psychologies of Aristotle and Plato. For whereas Plato seems to regard genuine moral agency as a matter of the rule or suppression of feeling or passion by disinterested or dispassionate reason, Aristotle recognises that there may be no genuine virtues of courage, compassion or justice in the absence of properly cultivated or ordered feeling or passion.

From this viewpoint, the works of the great poets are of moral value insofar as they are capable of moving us towards profound morally relevant feeling and emotion: the works of tragedians such as Sophocles and Euripides are able to move us towards due sympathy and pity for the plight of such characters as Oedipus, Antigone, Medea, Hecuba and Andromache; but the works of great comic dramatists and satirists may be of no less moral significance insofar as they show the vanity and absurdity of much familiar human *hubris* and posturing and help us to despise or laugh at it. The tragedians and comedians therefore assist us towards the ordering, refinement or purification (*katharsis*) of our feelings and emotions in aid of sound moral deliberation and judgement. Again, however, it is very important to be clear that the poet thus arouses and engages our feelings not via the descriptive narrative of historians or newspaper reporters but by the employment of carefully crafted emotive or rhetorical language. This is something that the poet deliberately sets out to do. Thus, nearer our own times, what distinguishes (say) a poem by Wilfred Owen about

trench warfare in WWI from a newspaper report of such events, is that by the artful use of vivid imagery and the language of feeling, Owen sets out to re-create for us the experience of what it must have been like to be there. He evokes the true horror and tragedy of modern warfare and arouses our pity for those caught up in it as well as our righteous anger (a significant Aristotelian virtue) towards those and the conditions that caused them to be there. So, for Aristotle, it is not only the narrative content of poetry that assists us to deeper understanding of the moral significance of life – and, indeed, of the dire consequences for human life when people fail to appreciate what it is good or bad for us to do – but the very poetic language that the poet uses to engage our affective involvement with such narratives. For without such affective engagement in moral deliberation and judgement, they can be no genuine moral character or virtue.

Moreover, if further authority and support – beyond Aristotle – is needed for the view that poetry may play a significant role in the cultivation of human moral and other sensibilities one might look no further than to the very compelling view of the romantic poets of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries for whom poetry could enable not just the expression of emotion but the creation of new – hitherto unfelt – feelings and emotions. In this regard one of the greatest romantic poets of this period – William Wordsworth – goes so far as to define poetry as the ‘spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings’ and as ‘emotion recollected in tranquillity’. For the romantic poets, one of the problems with the daily grind of instrumental and utilitarian concerns with what Wordsworth calls ‘getting and spending’ – especially in post-industrial societies that have also greatly alienated us from the close connection with nature that characterised pre-industrial modes of production – is that we can no longer perceive the world in a non-instrumental or non-utilitarian way: no longer, that is, appreciate the world around us – of nature and human association – for its intrinsic worth. In this light, we need precisely to be taught to see the world again, as past generations of human beings seemed able to see it, not merely as a means to our own practical and self-interested (and often philistine) ends, but for *its own sake*. For

Wordsworth and others this is precisely the key to understanding the *mythic* sensibilities of the ancients who actually animated nature through elaborate mythologies, personifying rivers, trees, forests, mountains and groves as gods goddesses, giants, satyrs and nymphs. On a romantic view, this is not just a mistaken or confused pre-scientific way of perceiving the world but precisely a different way of appreciating or valuing whereby – via the mythic sensibility – there is a direct and authentic relationship with things that is no less (if not more) affective than cognitive. It is this that the modern consciousness has lost and that poetry can help recover: precisely, it can help us to *re-enchant* the world. It should also hardly need saying that such recovery is as much *moral* as affective and/or cognitive.

The proposal: educating virtuous emotion through poetry

At all events, in the light of these Aristotelian and romantic arguments for the potential contribution of poetry to the cultivation of moral feeling, sensibility and character, the present team has proposed a school-based project – by way of some natural or logical extension of the recently successful ‘Knightly Virtues’ programme – focused on the exploration of a number of more and less well known poems (in part or whole) from past and present literature. It is envisaged that the target school population for this programme will be pupils in lower secondary range and the poems will be carefully selected with a view to their accessibility and attraction to this age group. In this regard, poems will be selected for their strong narrative content – pieces, that is, which have a readily appreciable story to tell – and, precisely, for their potential for the stimulation and cultivation of moral emotion or sensibility. Although, this project is at a very early stage of planning, the following poems have been identified – in collaboration with local teachers of English literature – as potentially suitable in this context and Aidan Thompson has already developed a curricular programme based on these poems.

(1) ‘The shooting of Dan McGrew’ by Robert Service

(2) 'Dulce et decorum est' by Wilfred Owen

(3) 'Ozymandius' by Percy Shelley

(4) 'Goblin market' (much abridged) by Christian Rossetti

(5) 'The clod and the pebble' by William Blake and 'Love and friendship' by Emily Bronte

(6) 'Mirror' by Sylvia Plath

(7) 'The Rime of the ancient mariner' by Samuel Coleridge

Research prospects and outcomes

(1) As already indicated, the main aim of this project is to follow the path already blazed by the 'Knightly Virtues' programme in schools and – with the assistance of a similar school-based development team – the plan would be to run this programme past pupils at either upper primary or perhaps (more appropriately) lower secondary pupils in a selected range of British schools. As in the case of the Knightly Virtue project, this will involve the development of a key 'workbook' (containing all the poems and including suggested exercises) that pupils may use and keep as a personal resource and take home, if wished, to share with parents. Some the questions that the pupils might be asked to explore are:

(i) What is this poem about?

(ii) What is the point or message of the poem?

- (iii) Who (where relevant) do you think are the good and bad characters in the poem?
- (iv) How does the poem make you feel?
- (v) How does the language of the poem make one feel in this way?

(2) Again, as in the case of the Knightly Virtues project, there will be ongoing monitoring and evaluation of the programme during its implementation and also some more formal research evaluation of the project on its conclusion. In the light of this, it is envisaged that another book might be produced – along the lines of the recent Carr-Harrison *Educating Character through Stories* volume – specifically focused on the use of poetry for the cultivation of moral feeling and sentiment – co-authored by Carr, Bohlin and Thompson. In advance of this, publication in reputable journals of papers on aspects of the moral uses of poetry is also a possibility.