

## Taking Narrative Seriously: Exploring the Educational Status of Story and Myth

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The Faust of poetry has a hold over men's minds which only the great myths of the world possess, and yet no-one believes in his reality.<sup>1</sup>

### VARIETIES OF NARRATIVE

Under the influence of recent trends in social and moral theory, forms of educationally significant knowledge have been widely characterized as *narratives*. Such narrative talk seems also to be driven by rather different considerations. First, it reflects widespread contemporary resistance to reductionist, empiricist and naive realist conceptions of the relationship of knowledge to the world: thus far, it is a timely and welcome reminder that human discourse can be meaningful in ways not reducible to the empirical data of natural or other science. It also reflects, however, the deep significance for personal and social self-understanding — not least for moral agency and identity — of *stories* of moral or other human agency: humans perhaps more readily conceive themselves as actors in the dramas of life, than as passively manipulated processes of blind material forces.

That said, the term narrative is often given wide application, and — in circumstances of philosophical skepticism regarding the epistemic priority of any one narrative over another — human agency may appear to be indifferently inspired or guided by a variety of scientific, religious, aesthetic or other stories: in this light, evolutionary theory might be just as much a story by which people can morally or otherwise live, as the *Bhagavad-Gita* or *Don Quixote*. It is also arguable, on the one hand, that extreme non-realist (for example postmodern) tendencies to regard scientific, religious, and literary narratives as on much the same epistemic level is far too indiscriminate: for one thing, if *everything* is story, then we might as well say that *nothing* is — since any and all significant contrast between what is and what is not story is thereby obliterated.

On the other hand, insofar as much mainstream pragmatist and/or other non-realism seems concerned only to question naive realist notions of a world entirely independent of our conceptions of it, it need not be committed to any such radical blurring of significant epistemic differences between scientific, religious and aesthetic narratives. So, as a pragmatist Christian one need not be committed to deciding between *Genesis* and Darwinian theory as *the* best account of how we came to be here. Indeed, as a reflective Christian who believes that *Genesis* has something important and interesting to say, I might still hold that Darwinism is theoretically compelling in a way *Genesis* is not. Such a view is also not notably affected by pragmatist emphasis on the provisionality of theory, and/or the point that scientific hypotheses may be in principle unsusceptible of any final confirmation. The key point is that to accept the theory of natural selection is to accept it on the basis of some kind of rational or empirical *evidence*. For a realist this is likely to be a matter of holding that the theory describes events that actually occurred; but even non-realists

will hold that any rational faith in evolutionary science depends on *some* kind of evidence. Hence, the grounds (if any) upon which I hold *Genesis* or *Don Quixote* to be profoundly insightful or true are at least different. I am unlikely to endorse the former — still less the latter — on the basis of empirical or other evidence: the profound wisdom or truth of *Don Quixote* is not a matter of its literal truth.

Moreover, even if some may have turned to such scientific or evidence-based theories as natural selection for the construction of their sense of moral or personal identity, it seems to have been narratives of a less evidential religious and/or literary kind that latter day social theories have largely conceived as identity constitutive. To whatever extent I might derive moral inspiration from some theory that depicts the universe as a meaningless motion of atoms or electrons, I am more likely to seek it in the myth of Prometheus or in the legendary exploits of some great hero or prophet. This already raises problems for any idea of education as focused upon the promotion of reason and truth — but I think it is probably important to pre-empt a potential mislocation of the difficulty.

As well as avoiding poststructuralist or postmodern blurring of any and all epistemic differences between narratives, I believe we need to steer clear of related communitarian inclinations to reduce non-evidential narratives to culturally self-authenticating moral fictions. For although some contemporary social theory seems to have conceived religious and other cultural fables, myths, and legends largely as instruments of social solidarity or cohesion — as the means by which this or that social group defines itself in contradistinction to others — this seems generally untypical of the actual cultural function of such narratives. For example, the early medieval English legend of *Gawaine and the Green Knight* — far from reinforcing the feudal or chivalric moral codes of its day — clearly sought to submit such values to serious critical scrutiny. In response to the applause of Arthur's court which greets him on return from his quest, Gawaine — aware of the moral lapses which have marred his exploits — insists (in David Harsent's fine libretto of Harrison Birtwistle's powerful operatic setting) that he is "not that hero." But this seems fairly typical of great cultural narratives. In short, far from functioning as self-vindicating reassurances of moral superiority over others, the parables and teachings of Christ, Buddha, or Krishna have more often served as mirrors through which the faithful might recognize their serious moral shortcomings. The real problem is that of how, as non-evidence based stories, they can do this.

#### THE QUEST FOR MYTHIC MEANING AND TRUTH

This point certainly reinforces common intuitions about the teaching of great literature: we are surely motivated to teach Milton or Shakespeare to young people, not to make them feel proud to be British, or superior to colonials, but because of the potential of such great authors for the cultivation of civilized moral and other sensibility. The deep human insights of these writers, we may hold, have power to transform people — of any place or time — for the better. And though the matter is nowadays controversial, the same may be said of the teaching, where it occurs, of Christian, Moslem, or Hindu scriptures. Generally, it may be doubted whether such scriptures have primarily been taught to affirm the superiority of particular faiths

over others: rather they are taught in the spirit of assisting people — not just some but all people — to moral or other improvement.

Some religious believers would of course take serious exception to regarding the Bible or Koran as narratives or stories in the sense of Milton or Shakespeare's works, and we have already cautioned against indiscriminate blurring of important distinctions between kinds of narrative. In terms of our general distinction between evidential and other narratives, the sacred texts of Christianity and Islam are clearly rooted in substantial historical claims for which true believers will hold there is significant evidence. But there is just as clearly much in Christian literature that is, to say the least, of doubtful historical validity, and of rather clearer poetic or mythopoetic intent. Indeed, leaving aside biblical stories of Lot's wife, Noah's ark, Jonah and the whale and parables, it seems fair to include the poetry of Dante and Milton and the medieval Arthurian and Grail narratives, in the corpus of great Christian literature. Surely few of those who derive Christian inspiration from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* or the *Narnia* stories of C.S. Lewis would take such fables to state literal truths.

Indeed, one might ask what any such literal grounding would really add to the significance of such narratives. One may feel that those academic and other searches for the real King Arthur (in some ancient Celtic chief) or the real Hiawatha (in some ancient Onondaga chief) are at best a distraction and have rather missed the point. Insofar as any connections to the Arthur and Hiawatha of myth and literature of the hero of Badon hill or the legendary Iroquois politician are likely to be at best tenuous, it would appear to be the shadowy historical figures who are myths in the vulgar sense of "untruths" or "fictions," and the literary creations of Malory, Tennyson, and Longfellow who are the real articles.

A major stumbling block in any discussion of these issues, of course, is the term "myth" itself. While we cannot here explore the extensive modern literature on this topic, it should be noted that although many early pioneers of the study of myth used the term precisely in the vulgar sense of "untruth," later mythologists have employed it in a significantly different sense.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, although older theorists often conceived myth as a kind of primitive or bad science that modern science has superseded, many modern mythologists have explicitly held — not least under the influence of Carl Jung — that myths are sources of non-literal psychological or "archetypal" truth which do not stand in any epistemic or explanatory competition with empirical science.<sup>3</sup> On this view, myths have a symbolic or metaphorical significance that does not at all depend upon truth-to-facts or predictive power.

In this light, some remarks on religious meaning of the late Elizabeth Anscombe — a generally conservative Catholic analytical philosopher — are illuminating. Briefly, in a short paper on transubstantiation, Anscombe held (without departing from the Roman position) that the religious significance of the doctrine turns more upon the issue of what it *symbolizes*, than upon any (physical or metaphysical) account of how the real presence actually occurs.<sup>4</sup> Thus, although theologians might attempt to explain transubstantiation in terms of some distinction between substance and accident, and though the faithful may truly believe that certain miraculous

interventions in the order of nature actually occur, it may be doubted whether religious significance or truth is to be found in such events or metaphysical explanations as such. Rather, the religious import of transubstantiation or of Christ's resurrection (rather than of, say, the subject of some genetic experiment) cannot be separated from a larger grasp of the divine teachings and salvific mission of Jesus as (for Christians) God incarnate.

Although Anscombe speaks more of symbolism than myth, one may clearly regard myth — along with allegory, fable, parable and so on — as a species of symbol. Still, the insight is profound and illuminating: it does not require the faithful to deny the real presence — to hold that transubstantiation is a myth in the vulgar sense of something that does not occur — but it reinforces the modern mythologists' sense of myth as a species of symbolic rather than literal significance or truth. That said, myths can clearly be bearers of significance or truth even when they do not refer to any actual occurrence: in short, they can be simultaneously myths in the vulgar and revised senses. Religious parables are clearly myths in both senses: Christians find profound truth in the parables of the good Samaritan or the prodigal son, but they do not usually take them to be literal reports.

But what other than literal truth or meaning might they have? The short answer to this question is that they have non-literal analogical or metaphorical meaning or truth. To be sure, the coherence of received distinctions between the literal and the non-literal has itself been called into question in the expanding theoretical literature of metaphor, but there is nevertheless a reasonable case for saying that much religious narrative exhibits something like the analogical or metaphorical character of human creative and imaginative arts.<sup>5</sup> Like great works of art, parables appear to work upon human experience by pointing beyond themselves to some deeper spiritual or psychological reality which cannot be otherwise directly approached or accessed.

The trouble with any attempt to explain how parables and artworks achieve this, of course, is that it is itself hard put to avoid metaphor. That said, we might try to contrast non-theoretical art with theoretical science by saying that whereas the latter aims to assist our grasp of experiential particulars through the abstract generalities of (causal or statistical) law, the former seeks to show us the universal through the (experiential or experienced) particular: to see, as the great English visionary poet William Blake so neatly (and of course metaphorically) puts it, "a world in a grain of sand" or "heaven in a wild flower."<sup>6</sup> At all events, appreciation of the extent to which human moral identity and value are a function of such religious and artistic conditioning into particular ways of seeing the world is probably the key insight of modern communitarian social theory: on this view, it appears to be from religious and other cultural stories, rather than from scientific theory, that we derive a sense of who we are and of how we should act for the best. On the other hand, all this may well revive worries about whether inherited cultural narratives are after all little more than products of social construction or individual fancy.

#### NON-LITERAL TRUTH AND EDUCATION

Problems about educational proposals to teach religious insight and imaginative literature in schools are of course familiar: they include those of how particular

religious narratives might be taught with even-handed liberal respect for diversity of belief, and those of the potential colonialism or exclusivity of any apparent preference for some works of art and literature over others. Our present concern, however, is with the more fundamental problem of how, on an account of education as initiation into objective knowledge and truth rather than subjective prejudice, sophistry or delusion, any educationally significant notion of non-literal meaning or truth might be identified. Once again, there are familiar dialectical moves with respect to this and related concerns.

One strategy might seek to deny, in the light of some more or less radical constructivism, that education is concerned with any search for non-subjective truth or objectivity. However, short of certain implausible, and probably philosophically self-destructive, forms of poststructuralism and postmodernism, this move is hardly attractive or persuasive. It also runs against the grain of the common intuition that there does seem much of universal moral and other importance to be gained from Shakespeare's plays which those of other quite different cultures (including Japanese film directors) are not precluded from sharing. This point has also some force against familiar empiricist or verificationist attempts to deny sense or truth to any and all non-evidential discourse: Thomas Mann's *Dr Faustus* may contain few matters of fact or relations of ideas, but I may have much to learn about gaining the world and losing one's soul in the course of reading it.

At another extreme from taking great religions or artworks to have *nothing* meaningful to say about anything, is the view that — despite any and all apparent differences between particular faiths and stories — they are all expressive of one and the *same* significant human truth. This position is also prone to different, more and less plausible, interpretations. Theoretically speaking, realists or absolute idealists might hold that the apparently diverse scientific or moral perspectives of different epistemic communities are really all groping towards some single truth, which — given human intellectual and perceptual limitations — is glimpsed only through a glass darkly. With regard to the more normative features of much narrative, however, one might try to construe apparent diversity in terms of a certain moral commonality: on this view, to whatever extent different faiths have been in historical conflict, they are all nevertheless rooted in a recognition of certain universal human values and virtues of honesty, self-control, integrity, justice, and tolerance.

Still, claims concerning the potential or actual moral or other universality of religious and other narrative are misleading and liable to problematic educational deployment. First, any realist or quasi-realist interpretation of non-scientific meaning or truth is liable to be question-beggingly reductive: the truth of religious and literary narratives would not seem, we have argued, to be the literal or descriptive truth realists ascribe to empirical theories. In this regard, any claim that faiths and fables have meaning and truth more by dint of expressing *moral* universals at least appreciates that moral norms require rather different rational grounding from empirical theories. The search for such universals has also been influential in latter day political theory and public policy-making: it underpins liberal attempts to secure social solidarity in conditions of value pluralism, and it has grounded consensual

approaches to moral and values education. Values educators have actually sought (sociologically) to discover a common core of cross-cultural values and virtues, and teachers have been encouraged to emphasize such cross-cultural moral commonality in their teaching of world religions.<sup>7</sup>

We should also not be too readily dismissive of such quests for ethical universalism: it would be hard to make sense of any human morality that did not admit (say) honesty, self-control and justice as core values and virtues. The trouble is that any such universalism rather flies in the face of the equally familiar disagreement and disunity of so much moral life. Indeed, it seems a problem of consensually grounded universalism that moral agreement is secured only at a level of generality at which disagreement cannot arise. We all seem to believe in fraternity and tolerance, so let us teach the parable of the good Samaritan: but this parable teaches fraternity and tolerance to religious outsiders of a kind that members of some past and present faiths have held outsiders do not merit. We all seem to believe in justice: but what then of the parable of the workers in the vineyard — according to which those who are hired at the end of the day merit as much in terms of (divine) reward as those who have labored since daybreak?

Such contested values are found, moreover, not only in “antiquated” religious myths and parables, but in works officially prescribed on school literature courses, and in the popular contemporary reading of young people. For example, leaving aside any and all fatuous concerns about witchcraft in *Harry Potter*, it is difficult to doubt the widespread popularity among the young of both C.S Lewis’s *Narnia* stories and the more recent *Dark Materials* trilogy of the British author Philip Pullman. But these works also offer deeply opposed perspectives on human freedom and flourishing. Lewis’s tale is a fairly up-front reworking of the Christian story which endorses largely orthodox Christian conceptions of good and evil, freedom and authority, and sin and salvation. Pullman’s tale on the other hand, owing as it does to such earlier English writers as David Lindsay and William Blake, and reaching further back to pre-modern gnostic and Manichean sources, represents a profoundly anti-clerical rejection of such conceptions.

Although gnosticism is a complex perspective, it turns partly on a particular view of the role of knowledge in human emancipation. Broadly, whereas Christian orthodoxy holds that the fall of man in *Genesis* was a matter of human disobedience of divine law — only redeemable by divine grace and sacrifice — gnostics hold that the knowledge jealously withheld from men by Jehovah is the key to human salvation, and that in encouraging the parents of mankind to eat from the tree it was the serpent (or Satan) who offered salvation. On this view, unfettered knowledge is an unqualified spiritual good and the coercive laws of state and church embody the will of a tyrant God who seeks to hold his creation in bondage and servitude. Gnosticism and/or the issues it addresses are prominent in much classical literature from antiquity onwards: the Prometheus of Aeschylus and the Shelleys (including Frankenstein and his monster) is a gnostic figure, as are Milton’s Satan, the Faustus of Marlowe, Goethe, and Thomas Mann, and the various allegorical creations of Blake’s *Songs* and *Prophetic Books*.

Should such works be regarded as mere entertaining diversions, or should we regard them as having some normative significance? If they are merely entertainment, then we should not care what our children read — barring, some might say, works which overtly encourage youngsters in the patent irresponsibilities of sexual promiscuity, drug abuse or other self-destructive or anti-social behavior. However, much serious classical and modern literature (one has only to think of the romantic poets) has precisely explored, if not celebrated, the emancipatory potential of extreme experimental and self-expressive knowledge seeking. But assuming that such literature has significant educational value, and that education aims to develop young people in life enhancing rather than harmful ways, it may also seem appropriate to cultivate capacities for the rational evaluation of undeniably great but also potentially corruptive works. In that case, how should we conceive any such rational capacity with respect to non-literal narratives?

#### MYTH, REASON, AND FLOURISHING

Alasdair MacIntyre's communitarian virtue-ethics — one highly influential source of a narrational construal of cultural heritage — characterizes traditions as “arguments extended through time.”<sup>8</sup> However, the myths and stories of present concern — though narratives — are less (if at all) arguments, and more imaginative explorations of human possibility. Indeed, creative artists may insist that their main concern is only to enhance human appreciation of such possibilities, not to teach moral lessons: that, in the words of W.H. Auden, “art is not life and cannot be a midwife to society.”<sup>9</sup> Still, myths do share some of the features of normative argument. First, the actions of mythic and fictional agents take up *logical space* — thereby excluding, no less than the propositional signs of theoretical inference, other possibilities. In short, they are subject to laws of practical reason: one action precludes another, its consequences preclude further actions — until one imagined destiny has utterly displaced other possibilities.

But there are clearly other logical and normative grounds, as well as practical consistency, upon which fictional and other narratives are apt for evaluation. In this respect, it is noteworthy that Christianity was from the outset deeply antipathetic to gnosticism. Moreover, it is likely that certain fashionable (poststructuralist or other) tendencies to explain such hostility by reference to hegemonic clerical suppression of freedom of thought (the myth, perhaps, of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor) rather miss the point. At least two other reasons may have had priority — the first theoretical, the second more practical. The first is that gnosticism seems to rest on a philosophically suspect manichean or dualistic view of relations between soul and body and/or the divine and the human which is utterly at odds with incarnational theology. The second is precisely that gnostic dualists were held to promote related excesses — of either ascetic self-denial or sensual indulgence — which orthodox Christians regarded as deeply uncongenial to personal and social health and flourishing.

Thus, without denying that it may be a mistake to regard all literary narratives as having explicit moral, social remedial or therapeutic intent, it seems that many are apt for normative appraisal of a sort clearly recognized in (for example) Aristotle's

account of the uses of practical wisdom. But what is to some extent true of literary narratives may seem all the more so of religious myths and parables, which are more conspicuously implicated in moral regulation and prescription. Indeed, the case for normative appraisal of religious stories seems more compelling, since — where practical logic determines that not all courses of action are possible, where prescriptions must therefore conflict, and where not all are equally consistent with human wellbeing — it becomes a matter of mortal importance to be clear what is or is not conducive to spiritual or other flourishing or salvation.

In this light, there may be some cause for concern about the shallowness of current religious educational trends in Britain and elsewhere under pressure of liberal fears of intolerance. In an educational climate in which religious myths and stories are taught — often by teachers ill-equipped for the task — either as diverse aesthetic features of local culture, or as variants of the same moral banalities, it is hard to see how the young might come to appreciate the contemporary import and relevance of religious narratives. Indeed, it may be one lesson of recent events that spiritual, moral and political prescriptions often have identifiable sources in the metaphysical, theological and normative complexities of religious myths and parables. In this light, gnosticism might be viewed as part of a larger trend of non-incarnational theologies towards contempt for the body that can make it easier to embrace the casual destruction of self and others in the hope of some purely spiritual afterlife. That said, incarnational theologies may also exhibit significant prescriptive diversity: thus, whereas salvation for some may be a matter of karmic reincarnation on the basis of personal works, it is only possible for others by virtue of divine grace operating on our actions in this life.

At all events, even where the great religious narratives of humankind express myths which the faithful do not regard as literally true, they may be rightly taken to aspire to non-literal or metaphorical truth of a normatively significant order: to that extent, they are of at least as much educational potential and interest as the more overtly fictional narratives of Milton, Shakespeare, and Eliot. To claim this much, however, may also be to admit that they are apt for the kind of normative rational (logical, metaphysical, moral, and theological) appraisal that leaves them open to argument as more or less coherent, consistent or conducive to wellbeing. Recent social theory has certainly raised our awareness of the importance for human identity, agency and education of great religious and other narratives; perhaps it is now time to begin taking them seriously. But before they can be part of any meaningful education, they must also be properly understood.

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1. E.M. Butler, *The Myth of the Magus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1948), 268.

2. However, for an excellent overview in a useful recent collection, see Robert A. Segal "Myth as Primitive Philosophy," in *Thinking Through Myths: Philosophical Perspectives*, ed. Kevin Schillbrack (London: Routledge, 2002).

3. See, for a significant work on these lines, C.G. Jung and C. Kerényi, *The Science of Mythology: Essays on the Myth of the Divine Child and the Mysteries of Eleusis* (London: Routledge, 1985).

4. G.E.M. Anscombe, "Transubstantiation," in *Ethics, Religion, and Politics: Collected Philosophical Papers Volume III* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1981).



5. For a useful discussion of this particular issue and of the literature in general, see J. Mark Halstead "Metaphor, Cognition and Spiritual Reality," in *Spirituality, Philosophy, and Education*, ed. David Carr and John Haldane (London: Routledge/Falmer, 1993).
6. William Blake, "Auguries of Innocence," in *William Blake: A Selection of Poems and Letters*, ed. J. Bronowski (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1965).
7. For a notable official British attempt at such cross-cultural consensus seeking, see Schools Curriculum and Assessment Authority, *Spiritual and Moral Development* (London: SCAA, UK, Discussion Paper No. 3, 1995).
8. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Notre Dame Press, 1981).
9. W.H. Auden, "New Year Letter," in *W.H. Auden: Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), part 1, 201.