Moral Education and Inspiration Through Theatre

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We hate pride, but in others; our own, we cherish! What hemlock shall purge you?[1]

The issue of moral education raises many questions for contemporary teachers. It is not clear whether education centering on ethics in public schools is even possible, let alone desirable. Whose morality should be the standard? What values should be stressed? How would education of this sort be approached? Should moral education be a matter of content or an exercise in moral reflection? Time-honored pedagogical methods often contain valuable insights for contemporary education. I believe that the tradition of theatre in Jesuit schools, which thrived in Europe between the 16th and 19th centuries, is one such method. Theatre in Jesuit schools created an aesthetic environment in which students could both ponder their relationship to the world, and evaluate the consequences of human action. Although the context for this enterprise was religious, I believe that this category can be broadened so as to make it applicable for public schools.

In this paper, I will argue that *storytelling can motivate students to explore ethical questions in a non-academic medium.* First, I will submit the tradition of theatre in Jesuit schools as a form of successful character education. The storyteller's ability to create a setting for ethical reflection will then be discussed. Finally, I will examine the debate among philosophers concerning the viability and advantages of moral education for children, and provide a philosophical rationale for my argument.

The Society of Jesus, commonly known as the Jesuit order, was founded by Saint Ignatius Loyola in 1534, with the dual purpose of promoting reform within the Roman Catholic Church, and preaching the Gospel in foreign lands. The establishment of colleges played a key role in the renewal of the Catholic Church in the wake of the Protestant Reformation, with nineteen schools being founded in the German-speaking provinces alone, over the course of a twenty-five year period (c. 1555-1580).[2] The goals for Jesuit education, as well as the means for achieving them, are outlined in the *Ratio Studiorum*, or "Plan of Studies," published in 1586. Jesuit education, in general, is intended to help students attain "perfect eloquence," i.e., the cultivation of one's intellectual, ethical, and spiritual potential.[3] Within this context, theatre had two main functions. It allowed students to improve their grammatical and rhetorical expertise, while instilling within them the moral values of the Church.[4] Drama was, and continues to be, an essential element in the training of students in Jesuit schools. Although most students went on to other professions, a number of significant figures within the history of literature and drama were involved in Jesuit theatrical productions during their youth. Broderick notes that "the more lasting influence of Jesuit drama lay in the effect it had on such great figures as Moliere, Corneille and Lope de Vega."[5] Even Voltaire stated in a letter that the theatrical performances staged at the Jesuit college in Paris were the finest aspect of his education there.[6]

For the purposes of this paper, I will not examine the role of theatre in developing students' rhetorical or artistic abilities. Jesuit drama's most important function was religious in nature, and found its justification in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. The *Exercises* are designed to bring about a transformation of the will, wherein the efforts of the exercitant are directed at achieving the "greater good." From an ethical perspective, this means exercising the proper attitude toward, and use of, all things.[7] "Composition of place" is a mental technique used for prayer, in which persons place themselves, for instance, at the scene of a Biblical event. The use of the senses insures that one will not engage in purely intellectual activity; indeed, it is hoped that the person will be absorbed by the affective quality of the scene. Feeling states, such as joy, sorrow, attraction, horror, consolation and desolation, all reflect a person's interior condition, and represent the movement toward or away from virtue. Thus, conversion of the will involves the reordering of these feelings for the service of good, as, for example, when a virtuous person associates noble activity with desirable emotions.

If the aim of meditation is to rouse an individual to seek the greater good, then it is not difficult to appreciate how theatre can inspire love of virtue within many people. Curry writes, "The Jesuits soon discovered they could increase their teaching effectiveness by acting out these contemplative exercises in plays."[8] In short, theatre made "meditation on virtue" accessible to vast numbers of people. The imaginary world of story was greatly enhanced by the Jesuit propensity toward spectacle. Lavish sets and costumes were combined with full orchestras, literate writing (both in Latin and the vernacular), good acting, and even ballet, to create an environment which had a rich, sensual appeal. Bangert notes that, in 17th century France, Jesuit theatre was so closely associated with the prevailing culture that it is hard to say which one played the dominant role.[9]

Jesuit theatre performed a critical function with respect to morality; it regularly challenged greed, vanity, pride, ambition, or other vices, which seemed to characterize prevailing societal attitudes.[10] This was particularly true in countries like Germany, in which ecclesiastical loyalties were divided along partisan lines. Basic moral virtues (love, loyalty, generosity, honor, chastity, fidelity prudence, etc.),[11] upon which most people could agree, were celebrated in public spectacles which drew Protestants and Catholics alike. It was believed that, by dramatizing the tensions between good and evil, people would want to lead lives of integrity.[12] In order to do this effectively, however, it would be necessary to express how attractive evil can be. Jesuit drama here reflected the recognition in the *Spiritual Exercises* that often, "the evil spirit assumes the appearance of an angel of light…drawing the soul into his hidden snares and evil designs."[13] Accordingly, it was important that the allure of vice, as well as its destructive consequences, should receive powerful expression. Commenting on the edification of Jesuit drama, a 17th century physician states that a sermon involves hearing alone, but "when the eyes are also impressed, it makes an all-powerful impression."[14]

Finally, the drama was meant to be a "call to action." Individuals were to be so moved by the perversity of evil and the desirability of good, that they would adopt as their own the virtues presented to them in dramatic form. It was hoped that at least

some of the students in Jesuit schools would be motivated to give themselves entirely to lives of service within the Society of Jesus.

So far, I have tried to offer an example from history, which indicates how moral education could be approached. Instead of taking the form of an academic subject, ethical reflection becomes an exercise of the will, wherein feelings speak more eloquently than reason. Theatre, I contend, is a form of storytelling, and as such, it appeals to an affective component of the will. In the following section, I will argue that, through the creation of an "as if" world (sometimes using religious imagery), stories invite ethical reflection instead of dictating moral values. Next, I will propose that the immediacy of a story helps one both to empathize with people who suffer, and to struggle with the reality of evil. Finally, I will suggest that stories provoke a change in a person's conduct so that it reflects his or her newly discovered moral convictions.

Stories traditionally play a significant role in the moral guidance of children, and are often told within a religious context. In *The Education of a Christian Prince*, Erasmus advises the teacher to "enter at once upon his duties, so as to implant the seeds of good moral conduct" in his students. This is done through "stories, pleasing fables, and clever parables,"[15] among which the life of Christ is preeminent. Those who followed the counsel of Erasmus include Charles Dickens, whose *Life of Our Lord* was written for the moral instruction of his children, and Shusako Endo, whose *Life of Christ* was intended specifically for a Japanese audience. In Judaism, *haggadah* is a form of storytelling which contains a religious or ethical message. Stories with a similar function can be found in the Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic traditions as well.

Immediately, the question arises whether religious stories are appropriate within the context of a public school. One must consider the meaning of the word "religious." In *A Common Faith*, John Dewey distinguishes carefully between the terms "religion" and "the religious." In his system, "imaginative" language (e.g., *God*) is acceptable; only a narrow mentality equates imagination with fantasy. "In a definite sense the only meaning that can be assigned the term 'imagination' is that things unrealized in fact come home to us and have the power to stir us."[16]

Dewey wants to establish common ground between those who seek the truth through adherence to a system of beliefs (i.e., traditional religion) and those who pursue it by means of scientific investigation. Dewey sees the present conflict between science and religion as ultimately a disagreement as to *how* one arrives at knowledge. Some people are committed to an open method of inquiry which examines observable reality (science); others believe in an "irreducible minimum of belief so fixed as not to be modified" (doctrine).[17] Dewey is clear about which alternative commands his own *intellectual* assent. "There is but one sure road of access to truth — patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record, and controlled reflection." Nevertheless, he does recognize the value of religious language. According to Dewey, the word *God* no longer refers to a single, objective Being; instead, it is an imaginative word which unifies a number of ideals and ends; language of this sort can have a positive effect on moral conduct, for it has the power to inspire a person. Once it is liberated from doctrinal content,

a religious attitude empowers individuals to promote the good that is possible in the face of real evil. *Religion* divides people along sectarian lines, but a truly *religious* attitude strengthens the connection between persons who work for a better world. "God," in this highly qualified sense, "is this active relation between ideal and actual."

If one accepts the argument put forward by Dewey, then any story that provokes moral reflection within children and strengthens the bonds between persons is, for that very reason, *religious*. The question becomes more difficult when the story's import cannot be separated from the sectarian context (or *religion*) in which it appears. Jarrett contends that children have no problem suspending disbelief when it comes to mythical creatures or magic, in order to grasp the meaning behind a fairy tale. On the other hand, it is sometimes difficult for them to appreciate the moral or even aesthetic value of a story, if it is seen as "religious" (i.e., sectarian) literature. The teacher's job is to help children set aside questions of faith, and appreciate a story on its own terms.[18] Whether sacred or secular, good stories can awaken the affective element of human cognition. They "teach by attraction rather than compulsion. They capture the imagination and touch the heart."[19]

Why is it that, without embracing a particular religious system, or "believing in God" for that matter, one may still find inspiration in stories recounting, for example, Mara's temptation of the Buddha, or Satan's temptation of Jesus? There is an uncanny resemblance between many of the world's great religious myths. Whether or not they rise from the primordial structures of the mind (Jung's "archetypes"[20]) is still open to question. I, for one, think that mythology introduces persons to a mysterious domain that is deeper than the world of ordinary experience. It stands to reason that, in such a realm, superficial differences between cultures become less significant. Campbell argues that a withdrawal from the sphere of everyday affairs is not only typical of myth, it is *essential* to it. The hero accomplishes his *first* task by entering the "causal zones of the psyche where the difficulties really reside, and there to eradicate them in his own case, and break through to the direct experience and assimilation of the 'archetypal images.'"[21] Myths express the struggle for human transcendence, inciting the listener to resolve life's enigmas in an "as if" world that, paradoxically, is accessible to all.

This is not to suggest that stories must have a "happy ending," or that characters fall into clear categories of "good" and "evil." Robert Coles believes that stories rouse the conscience as well as the imagination, and sensitize otherwise "happy" (i.e., contented) individuals to the great suffering endured by much of the human family. In a word, stories are designed to make one feel uncomfortable.[22] He quotes a passage from Chekhov, who believes that "behind the door of every contented, happy man there ought to be someone standing with a little hammer and continually reminding him with a knock that there are unhappy people. But there is no man with a hammer."[23]

Stories likewise reveal the moral ambiguity of the human heart, which is evident in various aspects of a character's personality. Odysseus, for instance, exhibits admirable virtues and cruelty; the latter must be recognized as such so as to differentiate heroism from immorality.[24]

Great literature uses this sense of ambiguity to enlighten the reader, by tracing the moral development of a character with whom the reader forms an emotional bond. A classic example of this is Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. It is one thing to condemn the unreflective bigotry of the white characters who accept slavery as a given. "Far more complex is the tension within Huck himself, torn between his ingrained assumption that Blacks are, in being inferior, natural slaves, and his delight and comfort in Jim's company and his gradual awakening."[25] The author helps the reader struggle with the injustice of slavery, not by placing the protagonist in a position of moral superiority, but precisely by showing his predisposition to the conventional wisdom of his age. For instance, when Huck (thought to be Tom Sawyer) meets Aunt Sally, he invents a story about an accident that caused him to be late. When asked if anyone was hurt, he answers, "No'm. Killed a nigger." She replies, "Well, it's lucky; because some people do get hurt."[26] Obviously, Huck is not immune to the bigotry which denies the humanity of its victims. Nevertheless, he is motivated throughout the story by his friendship with Jim, whom he wants to see reunited with his family. It eventually dawns on Huck that Jim "cared just as much for his people as white folks do for their'n. It don't seem natural, but I reckon it's so."[27] The recognition of Jim's humanity does not allow Huck's prejudices to go unquestioned; we behold a genuine moral transformation taking place.

We have established that stories create an "as if" world, within which the reader might engage in ethical reflection — not as an objective observer, but as an emotionally engaged subject. Nevertheless, there is another important element to story: its power to rouse human beings to action. Obviously, no one who listens to a story is *forced* to do one thing or another. Still, a compelling narrative keeps before him or her the *urgency* of moral behavior. With respect to the duties of the hero, Campbell states that "his *second* solemn task and deed is to return to us, transfigured, and teach the lesson he has learned of life renewed."[28] The protagonist sets an example to be emulated, assuring the listener that, while the struggle ahead may be arduous, it is nonetheless worthwhile and necessary.

Occasionally, a situation demands immediate moral response, even though a person cannot articulate the reasons for his or her course of action, but this cannot be an excuse for inactivity. How, then, is one to act when there is a conflict between the reasons of the mind and the promptings of the heart? Again we look to Huck Finn, who initially feels "clean" after he has written a letter which could return Jim to a life of slavery, but reconsiders. "[Jim] said I was the best friend he ever had….I studied a minute, and then says to myself: 'All right, then, I'll *go* to hell' — and tore it up."[29] In the end, "orthopraxis" triumphs over "orthodoxy." Huck may not possess the abstract categories necessary to explain his actions, but he knows he is doing the right thing. Stories like *Huckleberry Finn* challenge the reader to do what is right, even as he or she strives to find a language for it.

The moral challenge placed before us by aesthetic experience is essential to education for freedom, about which Maxine Greene writes, "Encounters with the arts alone will not realize it; but the arts will help open the situations that require interpretation, the spheres of freedom to which educators might some day attend."[30]

Character education is intended to foster a person's growth on all levels, and show concrete action as the outward expression of interior values. I am convinced that authentic moral education recognizes the complementarity of distinctive modes of discourse. Storytelling has the purpose of moving the heart and strengthening the will. Philosophy establishes and enunciates the theoretical bases of the moral life. In the final part of my essay, I will explore some of the objections to character education that have been proposed, and explain why I believe that education of this sort is both possible to achieve as well as desirable.

A number of contemporary figures in psychology, education, and philosophy advocate the abandonment of character education within the public school. It is their contention that this type of education is virtually impossible to achieve. Chazan cites a number of empirical studies (e.g., Hartshorne, Coleman) which conclude that education does not have an influence on morality. An even gloomier analysis (Katz) suggests that schools are built for the express purpose of controlling students and reinforcing evil structures within society (e.g., racism, classicism, etc.). Advocates of the former critique insist that a skill-based education should be advanced, and that ethical training should be eliminated. Proponents of the latter call for the abolition of schools altogether.[31]

Skepticism regarding moral education, says Thomas Lickona, is due to a number of recent historical developments. The aforementioned study by Hartshorne and May found that a child's behavior, from the perspective of ethics, is not consistent in all contexts; instead, the two psychologists referred to moral behavior among children as "situation specific." If moral consistency is what is connoted by the term "character," one must then conclude that, by definition, education does little to improve it. Even though the same data would subsequently be given a quite different analysis, the study reinforced the belief that character education is a vain undertaking. Elsewhere, the popular technique of "values clarification" in the 1970s championed the practice of having students articulate — not question — their values. The notion that students should be trained to espouse a particular set of values and reject others was dismissed out of hand. Finally, one must add to these factors the disturbing increase in self-destructive and anti-social behavior among young people during the past two decades. In light of these considerations, the general suspicion toward any system which professes to engender ethical values within children is understandable.[32]

Lickona makes several points regarding the distrust of moral education. First, he contends that the presumption of a value-free education is naive. Education is not possible in any subject, however "objective," without basic regulations governing behavior; these ensure the order necessary for classroom instruction.[33] Furthermore, behavior in school is itself educative, quite apart from the academic content of a subject, because it establishes patterns of respect for others within children. Admittedly, it may be too much to expect that public education will address the controversial issues being debated within our pluralistic society. Nevertheless, it is legitimate to demand that schools promote values which are central to moral dialogue: honesty, fairness, and justice. Values like these are basic to schools, which may not abdicate their responsibility for the ethical growth of students.

Other critics maintain that even if moral education is attainable, it is nevertheless ill-advised. Bereiter raises an epistemological objection, questioning the foundations of ethical knowledge. He claims that moral values are not subject to scientific scrutiny, and therefore do not enjoy the same degree of certainty as other types of knowledge. Such ideas are rooted in logical positivism, which separates "facts" from "values." Facts are thought to have a greater claim to "objective truth" because they are scientifically demonstrable; by contrast, moral discernment belongs within the domain of personal feeling because it is "emotive" in nature. According to Bereiter, it is immoral to impose a subjective ethical system upon students. Other opponents exalt ethical values, but stress the idea that moral growth is best realized within an individualized context. They regard "moral education as a tool of the state or the group to impose its own values and to perpetuate itself."[34]

The style of education suggested above implies that students learn in isolation from one another, and divorce what happens at school from their situation in life. In fact, these things cannot be done. According to Dewey, the school is a social institution whose business it is "to deepen and extend [the child's] sense of the values bound up in his home life."[35] This is an eloquent apologia for the school's responsibility to expand the moral horizons of children, a task which is accomplished through human interaction. Admittedly, it presumes that a child's family is basically sound, and this may not always be the case. In the event that it is not, schools must provide "remedial" services to children. Both scenarios support the idea that schools do, in fact, have an influence on children's values. Whether that influence promotes or thwarts human growth, however, is open to debate.

The philosophical rationale for my thesis that moral education is both feasible and desirable is drawn from the writings of Kohlberg, Habermas, Dewey, and Buber. The first two insist that the capacity for moral reasoning develops gradually within human beings. The latter believe that the way children are taught has greater significance for moral education than the content of curriculum.

Kohlberg holds that previous models of "character education" were misguided because they promoted what he calls a "bag of virtues." One paradigm approaches moral education by offering examples of moral rectitude drawn from the lives of famous Americans. Behavior, even more than the process of moral reasoning itself, was to be imitated. But what of the person with an equal love of justice, who chooses a different course of action? A discussion of *why* the subject acts as he does might be more pertinent than an account of the deed itself.

Ethical lists have no loftier goal, according to Kohlberg, than the mere preservation of order in the classroom, and so an unreflective obedience is usually presented as the highest virtue. This attitude has little to do with authentic moral education. Teachers waste their time enforcing rules — particular activities always admitting of exception. Instead, the focus should be on helping students embrace moral principles — abidingly valid reasons for acting. This is accomplished by presenting difficult situations to students, in which their current moral sensibilities are no longer sufficient. Moral tenets which were previously compatible now come into conflict, in which case some refinement of an inadequate ethical system is

deemed necessary. By encouraging students to expand their ethical principles, a teacher facilitates their advancement to higher stages of moral development.

Habermas argues that the kind of moral progression Kohlberg illustrates is necessary for *practical discourse*, a philosophical dialogue concerned with ethical matters. This is a demanding intellectual exchange between several participants focusing on the universality of moral principles. In practical discourse, "A just solution to a moral dilemma is a solution acceptable to all parties, considering each as free and equal, and assuming none of them know which role they would occupy in the situation."[36] Not everyone, however, possesses the competence required for this consistent, rigorous type of moral argumentation. Kohlberg's theory of moral stages describes the psychological grounds for Habermas's philosophical convictions. According to the latter, there is a "relation between reliable moral intuitions and the psychological explanation of how this intuitive knowledge is acquired." Obviously, this notion of practical conversation is not to be accepted uncritically. Nel Noddings illustrates a number of criticisms, which express a common concern that the degree of sophistication required for such discourse is so great that few could engage in it, and it would hardly reflect the conversation of ordinary people. Other forms of expression, (e.g., story) may be better suited to moral discussion.[37] Still, the argument for practical discourse presumes that belief in various levels of ethical refinement is defensible, and that cultivating values within individuals is necessary.

By contrast, Martin Buber ("The Education of Character") differentiates between education in the "hard" sciences (e.g., math or physics) and the advancement of those conditions necessary for moral growth. In the case of science, a teacher explains basic rules to students, providing them with the tools necessary for problem-solving. Students tend to be open to this kind of instruction because intellectual skills can be readily manipulated for the students' own purposes. This is not the case when it comes to morality. Students naturally resist a teacher's formal attempts to impose moral propaganda because, unlike "subjects," morality involves a person in his (or her) totality. The presentation of ethical themes as though they could somehow be isolated from the rest of life strikes the student as artificial. Buber is convinced that moral education takes place in the encounter between the student and a fully alive teacher, precisely when the instructor has no intention of teaching. The effective educator humbly admits to being only one among many factors — natural, social, and cultural — that make an impression (the meaning of "character") upon a student. The teacher, however, recognizes that he or she consciously presents reality to the student, not only of what is, but also of what should be. The responsibility of knowing that one influences the student on many levels means that the teacher must earn the latter's confidence. When a student realizes that the teacher looks upon his or her duties not simply as an occupation, but as the commitment to a person, an environment of acceptance is thereby established, which allows important human questions to be asked. These questions tend to arise from specific circumstances which demand that the teacher respond from his entire being. Thus, a completely new perspective is revealed to the student.[38]

Buber's thoughts about the relationship between teacher and student are similar to the idea of caring as expressed by Noddings: "[Caring] limits our obligation so

that it may be realistically met….[Choices depend] on the will to be good, to remain in caring relation to the other."[39] Buber, like Noddings, cautions against a preoccupation with absolute values. (Habermas's concern with moral philosophy's "universalist" claims would probably fit in this category.) Such values are rooted in a collectivist attitude which offends against the self. Instead, a good moral educator "inculcates in [the student] the desire to…become a person following the only way that leads to *this* goal *today*."[40]

Dewey's thoughts on moral education, as expressed in his *My Pedagogic Creed*, are quite similar to those of Buber. First, moral education presumes an interaction between teacher and student. In addition, values are transmitted more effectively by the atmosphere in a classroom than by verbal articulation. Buber parts company with Dewey, however, on the issue of character. He rejects the notion that it is merely the "interpenetration of habits." While "habits" and "maxims" are both helpful in the process of moral education, a person of great character acts "from the whole of his substance. That is, it is peculiar to react in accordance with the uniqueness of every situation which challenges him as an active person."[41] I agree with Buber, although I think that the way he interprets Dewey's notion of character is inaccurate. A deed, for Dewey, is "simply self in full activity."[42] Consequently, habit is not to be understood in the pejorative sense of blind repetition, but rather as a function of character, "attending to the bearing and value of acts." Unified action, then, reflects the whole person responding to "the demands of the situation."

In the preceding pages I have argued that education for character is reasonable and beneficial, and that theatrical presentation of moral themes — a form of storytelling — represents a viable option for inculcating values in students. The claim that schools should be "value-free" not only appears to be an evasion of professional responsibility, but also lies in sharp contradistinction to the goals of ordinary educational practice. Teachers cannot help but shape the character of children, and so they must act consciously and responsibly. Admittedly, there is justification for the reluctance to address explosive moral issues precisely because consensus is so difficult to reach. Nevertheless, schools must provide children with the experience and language they need to become competent in ethical conversation. By promoting justice, honesty, respect, and the sincere desire for truth, schools make an invaluable contribution to the welfare of children right now. They also foster the necessary conditions for resolving the vexing problems which afflict society. Moral education through the arts can be an effective instrument for encouraging values that are essential to ethical reflection, regardless of a person's religious affiliation. It differs from character education in which students merely imitate the virtues embodied by historical figures. Instead, students are given the chance to empathize with particular human beings (albeit imaginary ones), and to revise their own values on the basis of greater self knowledge. I believe that poetic and artistic experience exerts a powerful influence on the moral development of children, because it invites them to explore the world as it *could be*.

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25. Ibid., 168.

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28. Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 19.

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36. Jurgen Habermas, "Reconstruction and Interpretation in the Social Sciences," in *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 36, 37.

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40. Buber, "The Education of Character," 111.

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