TAKING STOCK: THE PLACE OF NARRATIVES IN PHILOSOPHICAL EDUCATION

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Abstract:
Recently fiction has been given a central role in the engagement in philosophical thinking, especially within an educational setting. We find many configurations of this intersection of the narrative and the philosophical and the variances among them need noting if we are to critically examine how each form works. But there remains a troubling question: can fiction really offer up philosophical ideas without failing as literature and missing the mark as philosophy? While allegories and analogies have a long and fruitful history of elucidating complex philosophical ideas, philosophers have taken pains to differentiate themselves from the crafter of tales. Philosophers have tended to prefer clear and sustained thinking through rational arguments over imaginative suggestion. Fiction is not philosophy. This paper will explore the different forms that narrative-as-philosophy can take and offer an assessment of the relative merits of these stories as invitations to philosophical thinking.

Key Words: Philosophical Narrative, Philosophical Education, Teacher Preparation, Fiction

Apreciando con duidado: el lugar de las narrativas en una educación filosófica

Resumen:
Recientemente a la ficción se le ha dado un papel central para envolverse con el pensamiento filosófico, especialmente dentro de un entorno educativo. Encontramos muchas configuraciones de estas intersecciones de lo narrativo, lo filosófico y precisamos hacer notar las variantes entre ellas, si examinamos críticamente la forma en la que cada una de ellas opera. Aquí cabe una pregunta inquietante: ¿puede realmente la ficción ofrecer ideas filosóficas en tanto literatura, sin ser ella misma filosofía? Mientras que las alegorías y las analogías tienen una larga y fructífera historia en elucidar complejas ideas filosóficas, los filósofos se han tomado el trabajo de diferenciarse de los creadores de historias. Los filósofos han preferido los pensamientos sustentados en argumentos racionales por encima de las sugerencias imaginativas. Ficción no es filosofía. Este trabajo explorará las distintas formas que la narrativa como filosofía puede tomar y ofrecer una evaluación de los méritos relativos de estas historias como invitación al pensamiento filosófico.

Palabras Llave: Narrativa filosófica, Educación filosófica, Formación de profesores, Ficción.

Apreciando com cuidado: o lugar das narrativas numa educação filosófica

Resumo:
Recentemente deu-se à ficção um papel central para o envolvimento com o pensamento filosófico, especialmente dentro de um contexto educativo. Encontramos muitas configurações destas intersecções do narrativo, do filosófico, e precisamos notar as variações entre elas, se

examinarmos criticamente a forma em que cada uma delas opera. Aqui cabe uma pergunta inquietante: pode realmente a ficção oferecer ideias filosóficas enquanto literatura, sem ser ela mesma filosófica? Enquanto as alegorias e as analogias tem uma larga e frutífera história de elucidação de complexas ideias filosóficas, os filósofos se deram o trabalho de se diferenciar dos criadores de histórias. Os filósofos preferiram os pensamentos sustentados em argumentos racionais em vez das sugestões imaginativas, Ficção não é filosofia. Este trabalho explorará as distintas formas que a narrativa como filosofia pode tomar e oferecer uma avaliação dos méritos relativos destas histórias como convite ao pensamento filosófico.

Palavras-chave: Narrativa filosófica, Educação filosófica, Formação de professores, Ficção.

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Introduction

In the *Republic* Plato cautions his readers through the persona of Socrates that most citizens of the ideal Republic will need to be manipulated for their own good. The leaders must shape citizens' behavior without revealing the truth because they assume the citizens are incapable of recognizing the genuine good and acting thereon. The vehicle of such manipulation will be the story. To this day, "story" carries with it a certain ambivalence: is it a delightful suspension of the everyday world which invites us to imaginatively entertain what might be or is it an intentional lie—"telling tales" through which the listener is controlled or managed in some sense? So, stories might be viewed as entertainment, lies, or perhaps simply easier ways to present 'truth" for those who may not be capable of understanding it directly. While allegories and analogies have a long and proud history of elucidating complex philosophical ideas,[1] philosophers have taken pains to differentiate themselves from the crafter of tales. And while many a novelist has introduced philosophical ideas and issues through the story, philosophers have tended to dismiss such as avoiding clear and sustained thinking through rational arguments. Fiction is not philosophy. But do these criticisms still hold water?

Novels and Philosophy

In recent years fiction has been given a central role in the engagement in philosophical thinking within an educational setting. We find many configurations of this intersection of the narrative and the philosophical and the variances among them are worth noting if we are to critically examine how they work:

1. Novels with embedded philosophical themes—novels written primarily as fiction but which consciously include philosophical conundrums within. These philosophically rich narratives have been traditionally written for an adult

[1] The novels of Iris Murdoch, Albert Camus, Ayn Rand offer but a few examples from many.

audience. They function as parenthetical reflections on the perennial questions of human existence.

2. Novels that include direct references to the philosophical tradition by overtly reviewing the history of philosophy[2] or that include a quasi-academic review of philosophical problems.[3]
3. The canonical texts by Matthew Lipman, Ann Margaret Sharp and their associates (the philosophical novels of the Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children) and other academic works inspired by these novels.[4] These latter tend to be more relaxed in tone than the Lipman novels but are intentionally crafted to get the readers talking about philosophical questions and ideas as present within the story lines. In these novels philosophy drives the story. These tend to target children and young people.
4. Another approach takes children's and young adults' existing stories and mines these stories for philosophical meaning.[5]
5. Finally we discover the introduction of New Media story telling: from the clever videos of Berrie Heesen in the 1990s through to the recent IPad applications of Amy Leask we find a narrative door into philosophical discussion.

How do these various forms of narrative function to provoke and promote philosophical inquiry? What are the advantages and disadvantages of using these different forms for encouraging philosophical dialogue?

[2] See, especially, Jostein Gaarder, *Sophie's World* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007)

[3] See, especially, Lucy Eyre, *If Minds Had Toes* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2007)

[4] For example, see, Phillip Cam, ed., *Thinking Stories I: The Children's Philosophy Series* (Alexandria, NSW: Hale & Iremonger, 1998).

[5] Gareth Matthews was one of the first proponents of this method of using fiction. More recently Thomas Wartenberg has revisited Matthews' choices and has added other readily available stories with clear suggestions for ways in which these stories can generate philosophical ideas. See, Thomas Wartenberg, *Big Ideas for Little Kids: Teaching Philosophy through Children's Literature*, 2nd Edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). Peter Worley takes the classical story of the Odyssey and uses the myths therein in a retelling of the story, complete with philosophical themes and ideas for students to ponder. See, Peter Worley, *The If Odyssey: A Philosophical Journey through Greek Myth and Storytelling for 8-16 Year Olds* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012). For many years I had my graduate students at Stony Brook University create 'teacher's manuals" for examples of literature that they were already using in their classrooms.

The Power of the Story

Kieran Egan argues in *The Educated Mind* that a child's first access to deeply abstract concepts comes through the story.[6] Egan highlights fairy tales as a child's first encounter with the large binary ideas of good/evil, beauty/ugliness, beginnings/ends, youth/age, humans/nature. Far from being "concrete thinkers" young children immediately grasp the import of Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White and the many other fairy tales presented to them.[7] Although all these stories were originally written for adults, we have partitioned them off in the 'children's literature' section of the library or left them to the resources of the Disney Corporation.[8] Revealingly, this devalues them as appropriate only for "children" but Egan argues persuasively that these children are thinking far deeper and more clearly than we have given them credit. These stories invite reflection on the binary experiences detailed above and as such can serve as excellent prompts for philosophical dialogue. Revealingly, this devalues them as appropriate only for "children" but Egan argues persuasively that these children are thinking far deeper and more clearly than we have given them credit. These stories invite reflection on the binary experiences detailed above and as such can serve as excellent prompts for philosophical dialogue. The advantage of the narrative is that it fixes meaning. Egan argues in the essay, "The Other Half of the Child", that an event by itself means nothing until it has been situated within a context.[9] For example, the proposition, "He shot Tom", could range from justifiable defense to cold-blooded murder.[10] It is the story that fixes meaning here. Finally, narrative humanizes ideas and thereby offers us a point of identification with the characters and their dilemmas. The issues they face become important for us in the context of that narrative. No longer are

[6] Kieran Egan, *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape Our Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

[7] "Concrete thinkers" is the favored phrase of educators who use cognitive stage theory to categorize very young children as incapable of abstraction and instead, as using material objects as their primary focus in thinking in examples.

[8] Eva Brann offers a cogent critique of how we define "children's literature". See, Eva Brann, "Through Phantasia to Philosophy: Review with Reminiscences," in Matthew Lipman, ed., *Thinking Children and Education* (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1993), 287-300.

[9] Kieran Egan, "The Other Half of the Child," in Lipman, ed., *Thinking Children and Education*, 301-306.

[10] Is he defending innocent people from the madman Tom or is Tom the innocent victim who has done nothing wrong and our protagonist is the villain? One needs the entire story to really determine what has happened here.

they "abstract" in the sense of being remote or disinteresting. We care about the persons, thereby activating an urgency regarding the issues.

The concept of "narrative" is manifesting a lively presence in academic discourse across disciplines. From philosophers to social scientists to literary scholars, the argument runs that all events are meaningful only in the context of a story: the story of a life, a political movement, a nation, the human experience. Even in the realms of the physical science we find narrative functioning to make concepts accessible and meaningful. The story form reminds us of the perspectival nature of experience and as such opens up possibilities of alternative discourse based on "who is telling the story." This can be particularly fruitful for philosophical discourse and literary studies. It also neatly problematizes the claims of one true viewpoint, the "eye of God," if you will. If all truths manifest themselves through different characters, we can no longer privilege one narrative over others as the truth, the universal claim of the real.[11] Voices often neglected or 'drowned out' can now be recognized and given a hearing.

For all these reasons we are witnessing a lively openness to introducing the narrative form in many different disciplines as a way of getting at truths and thereby acknowledging nuanced experiences that too often went undetected when the dominant voice held the stage. Nowhere has this been more evident that in programs which introduce philosophical inquiry to children. Stories provide a familiar form of access into reflection. They help fix meaning and invite readers/listeners to explore different voices or perspectives and they serve to reinforce the nature of the philosophical dialogue as open to continual review and reconsideration. Open questions are never closed nor does a good story run out of power to engage us.

Questions and Challenges

However, the introduction of stories into philosophical conversation has not proceeded in any unilateral direction and many models exist as to how best to achieve the intended goal of philosophical dialogue through the vehicle of the story. Two broad

[11] Consider the film, *Roshomon*, directed by Akira Kurosawa.

areas for discussion arise: the method of narrative discussion and the types of narratives. First we shall focus on methodological concerns.

Some points of critique address broader questions of how best to introduce philosophy to children or whether the word "introduce" itself is not laden with implications of control and power. Four issues seem to dominate in the literature on using stories and novels in a philosophy classroom. Firstly, there is the question of learning goals. What is hoped to be achieved by having the philosophical discussion? Should the teacher have a clear lesson plan in mind that uses the story to teach a particular philosophical topic, question, idea or a specified collection of these?[12] But does this run the risk of being didactic and controlling in ways that falsify the philosophical experience as a genuine discovery and crafting of ideas important to the participants? The lesson plan format, while admittedly structured and clear, can lead to such absurdities as claiming that "by the end of the lesson we will be able to define mind and body, and be able to determine the fate of the human soul."[13] Or should the goal be an open and free exploration of ideas that emerge as the children and teacher engage with the story? This kind of exploration may be difficult if not impossible to articulate in a curriculum format and therefore the dialogue might be easily dissipated and tend to wander off in wildly disconnected directions. Will the children get the point of the conversation or will it appear to be more of a waste of time, even a frustrating experience with a seeming lack of direction and closure?

This first concern over whether the dialogue should be directive or exploratory is closed related to the second issue, the question of dialogue control. *Who* ought to shape the dialogue growing out of an encounter with a story? Should the facilitator have a firm grip on the direction and nature of the discussion, thereby clearly establishing guidelines, assuring that they are followed, and that the dialogue proceeds in the "proper" direction? A teacher-centered dialogue insures that the main ideas raised by

[12] This is the dominant model of pre-college education across disciplines. Teachers must have detailed lesson plans with clear objectives and have articulated ways to assess the mastery of the material presented by the students (the assessment piece).

[13] Learning outcomes, the popular format for assessing learning at all levels, often stipulates precise goals to be achieved by the end of a lesson or session.

the story are entertained and examined. The teacher can structure the discussion so that the desired learning goal is achieved. The participants may speak with one another but the teacher/facilitator is monitoring the conversation and nipping in the bud irrelevant or off-topic remarks, returning everyone to the agenda at hand. This avoids a seeming chaotic chat with no clear direction and results, but it also enforces an all-too-familiar structure of power: the teacher/facilitator owns the conversation and sets all the rules. The message received is that the participant must simply give the teacher what he wants. The alternative is a child-centered discussion in which no one person controls the dialogue but rather the dialogue grows within the nexus of the community and weaves in and out of ideas that members of the community, together, chose to pursue. Now, we can easily imagine the downside of this in cases where children bounce from idea to idea with no systematic building of concepts or explorations of questions. While this kind of discussion might appear to have a lot of energy through active participation, we might question whether in fact there was any at all real philosophical dialogue and serious entertaining of ideas with analysis. The teacher/facilitator may feel out of control and quite uncomfortable with the resulting dialogue. Still, one might respond that a child-centered control allows children to discuss the issues that matter to them, not to the adult teacher/facilitator. Might that not be the desired goal of the philosophical dialogue?

This second issue leads to a third one, and that focuses on the background preparation for the teacher. Depending upon the teacher's preparation, she or he might react quite differently in each of the above scenarios. The crux of this issue is the question of philosophical and pedagogical training for the teacher. How important is it that the teacher be knowledgeable in the history of philosophy and the methods of philosophical dialogue? Some advocates for using stories in the classroom to prompt philosophical discussion take the position that such background knowledge is essential for a successful experience.[14] Without some knowledge of philosophical ideas, how can

[14] The Institute for the Advancement of Philosophy for Children offered degree programs which addressed broad knowledge in philosophy, especially philosophy of education, even as the IAPC also stressed the accessibility of their programs to all teachers, regardless of formal philosophical training.

the teacher be expected to recognize such ideas when they are introduced by the children? How will she be able to shape their discussion or simply acknowledge their salient points without ready access to these ideas? Paired with this position that "background knowledge is necessary" we might, however, insist that while necessary, such knowledge is not sufficient. A teacher must also have theoretical knowledge of and practice in philosophical *dialogue* if she is to successfully facilitate a conversation among young people. If the model of philosopher here is not direct instruction but facilitation of philosophical dialogue, then the "facilitator" will need to master skills of eliciting ideas, helping participants examine those ideas and recognize similarities and distinctions, offer reasons, analyze said reasons, and the many other associated skills of critical thinking in a dialogue context.[15] Learning how and when to ask questions, summarize, invite responses are all important aspects of pedagogy and are likewise necessary for a successful dialogue. Familiarity with the story is not sufficient for assuring supportive philosophical pedagogy.

But others will respond that requiring teachers to have extensive background knowledge in philosophy is unduly a hardship and indeed unnecessary.[16] Some will argue that by virtue of being human, we are all philosophers and can intuitively grasp the philosophical import of ideas. Others take the position that the children have a natural philosophical sense and the teacher can simply step back and let them philosophize. Regardless of this point, this position claims is that teachers have neither the time nor the need to know the history of philosophy before they can explore the philosophical implication within the narrative. That indeed is the power of the narrative: the philosophy emerges on its own.

[15] Catherine McCall exemplifies this position in her argument that a facilitator must have a firm and deep knowledge of both philosophy and the process of critical thinking in dialogue. See, Catherine McCall, Transforming Thinking: Philosophical Inquiry in the Primary and Secondary Classroom (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009). David Kennedy has also written extensively on providing support to facilitators to promote better thinking. As an example, see his essay, "Developing Philosophical Facilitation: a Toolbox of Philosophical 'Moves'," in Sara Goering, Nicholas J. Shudak, and Thomas E. Wartenberg, eds., *Philosophy in Schools: An Introduction for Philosophers and Teachers* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 110-118.

[16] I would put Thomas Wartenberg in this in his stressing that no one needs to know any philosophy to do philosophy with children. See, Wartenberg, *Big Ideas for Little Kids*.

The fourth point of debate concerns the relevance of support material. For the novels by Matthew Lipman, one has extensive teacher manuals which include many reflections on potential philosophical ideas, accompanied by question sets, games, and exercises that facilitators can use to assist young people in thinking through the topic at hand. Other stories are accompanied by less extensive guides but still have articulated supplemental materials consisting of questions and highlights of the main philosophical ideas contained in or suggested by the story.[17] Some practitioners praise these guides/manuals as enormously helpful for facilitators, especially those unfamiliar with philosophical ideas or not entirely comfortable with running a discussion. The materials are hailed as essential for achieving a genuinely philosophical discussion. However, there are those who find such support materials to be forced, cumbersome or outright stifling. These materials are sometimes criticized by those advocating for philosophical *dialogue-as-open-exploration* as leading teachers to be too restrictive, didactic and directive through the imposition of these questions or activities on the students. From a practical standpoint, they may be rejected as too expensive or complicated to use.

What we have learned is that the adoption of stories for philosophical dialogue still leaves many other questions open and the nature of the discussion and the process varies dramatically based on which position a practitioner takes to each of these four issues: the question of outcome, locus of control, the value of background knowledge, and finally the adoption or rejection of accompanying materials to be used with the stories.

A Narrative in What Form? The Relative Merits of Using Literature, Philosophical Novels, and Beyond

I would like to briefly outline the relative merits of three different forms of narrative that we find in the philosophy classroom: existing literature/stories, the specifically crafted "philosophical novel," and narratives via new media (from video to

[17] Wartenberg articulates relevant philosophical themes to explore in each of the stories he chooses for his text. Philip Cam includes discussion questions with his own stories.

the App.) Each form of narrative offers positive contributions but also generates some accompany drawbacks or concerns.

When it comes to using "trade literature",[18] there are some clear positive characteristics.[19] Such literature is readily available and often familiar to both students and teachers/parents. These works tend to be well written and often include illustrations at the lower grades that can offer multiple levels of access into the ideas.[20] Such literature is readily available and often familiar to both students and teachers/parents. These works tend to be well written and often include illustrations at the lower grades that can offer multiple levels of access into the ideas.[21] The drawbacks of using existing literature lie in implementation: using literature requires mastery of facilitation if the goal is a sustained recognition of and exploration of philosophical themes. Will the facilitator and students be adept enough at discerning the philosophical potential in the story line? Or will the discussion go in the direction of character analysis and literary study—a far more familiar terrain for most teachers and students? --Or a simply sharing of personal opinions? Additionally, can the use of literature as a philosophical prompt "kill" a story, much as over-analysis[22] is claimed to do? Does this counteract/falsify the author's intentions? (Note we have an interesting aesthetic question here.) Finally do illustrations help or hinder the development of empathetic identification with the characters so that I find myself thinking along with

[18] "Trade literature" refers to stories written and published as stories in their own right, not as part of an educational curriculum.

[19] Claudia Mills has written a thoughtful support of using children's literature. See, Claudia Mills, "Philosophical Children's Literature for Upper Elementary and Middle School" in S. Goering, N. Shudak, and T. Wartenberg, *Philosophy in Schools*, 141-51. Rory E. Kraft, Jr. offers similar examples of rich philosophical themes in young children's picture books in, Rory E. Kraft, "Philosophy in the Great Green Room: Early Children's Literature as Philosophy for Children," *ibid*, 119-31.

[20] For example, I have used, *Boodil, My Dog*, a picture book, as a prompt for comparing the ideas in the text as contrasted with or challenged by the ideas suggested in the image. See, Pija Lindenbaum, *Boodil, My Dog* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1995).

[21] Students often complain that at some point, the analysis of a work of art (literature here but any example might do) can destroy a genuine enjoyment of and appreciation for the living work. The story becomes fodder for an academic chore and therefore, its "life is sucked out of it."

them?[23] Or do illustrations enliven a text and render it more accessible? We might also see images as adding an enriching or even counter-narrative in some cases.

Perhaps then, we had best stick to stories written specifically as philosophical tools to prompt discussion? Here we find positives: they are constructed with philosophical themes *intentionally* integrated into the narrative. This serves to offer far more support for neophyte teachers and students and if there are also accompanying materials with lesson plans, this too can provide a more direct access into a philosophical discussion. True, but often the complaint is that these stories are forced, boring, or lack authenticity. Their unfamiliarity to the users might function as another discouraging hurdle for the class. Of course, one might reply that we simply need to produce better quality of story and that could well be a direction in which to go but most philosophers are not necessarily gifted fiction writers so this might be quite challenging. Finally, a practical problem is that these would require additional cost to the schools or users—not always a welcome point in tight financial times.

Given the rapid development of technology, new forms of narrative have emerged over the past twenty years and the pace of change has clearly accelerated: from movies, videos, to YouTube films and now to interactive computer sites like blogs, wikis, and the newest platform, the tablet with its "Apps." These new forms of media are alluring and engaging. Preschoolers know their way around an Ipad in astonishing ways. These are often interactive and more game-like. From Berrie Heesen's delightful films from the 1990s to Amy Leask's most recent Ipad app on ethics or aesthetics, we find a wealth of other ways to present philosophical ideas to children and young people. The concerns we might have with these media are multiple: to what extent do these forms limit children by setting an agenda and controlling the direction of their thinking? Do they promote social isolation by being individual activities and to what

[23] Laurance Splitter has raised this concern with illustrated stories. If the characters are blond and blue eyed, and I am not, will I "find myself" in that story or will that alienate me from engaging fully in the ideas? See his and Ann Sharp's extensive discussion of the potential problems in Ann M. Sharp and Laurance J. Splitter, *Teaching for Better Thinking* (Melbourne: ACER, 1995), 106-09.

extent is that a strength or weakness?[24] We need to weigh the benefits of technology against some of its admitted drawbacks, perhaps even more so when we are considering children who spend an inordinate amount of time on a machine instead of engaging directly with others and the world. Finally the visual is powerful and might it not pre-empt identification with the characters.[25]

So, can stories offer rich access to problematic ideas as sources of individual reflection and communal discussion? If yes, what are the best methods for incorporating narratives into a philosophical discussion? The conclusion is that there is no best way but that each narrative form and method of use must be scrutinized carefully if our goal is ultimately to offer our young people and ourselves opportunities for forming communities of inquiry which transform our lives through seeking a shared goal of a deeper, broader and shared human experience through philosophical inquiry. The value of narrative has been redeemed from the critique of Plato but we must still be cautious so that we are not "telling tales" and fooling our children and perhaps ourselves.

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[24] For example, in playing with an IPad app I am losing out on the community aspect of a classroom, interacting directly, face to face with others? Or does this allow me to engage courageously and at my own pace with ideas? Even in an online community discussion, is the nature of the interaction the same as face to face? What is gained? What might be lost?

[25] I am mindful of the work of feminist Griselda Pollock who has written about the power of visual media to establish internal norms of "woman" to the point that women define themselves as "that to be looked at" by men who "do the looking." See, Griselda Pollock, "The Visual," in *A Concise Companion to Feminist theory*, Mary Eagleton, ed., (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 173-94.