Some thoughts on fairy tales and ethical enquiry

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Moral instruction vs. ethical enquiry

In his book *All Things Considered* – published a century ago – G.K. Chesterton suggests that fairy tales are essentially moral fables:

> The fairy tales are at root ... moral in the sense of being didactic, moral in the sense of being moralising... If you happen to read fairy tales, you will observe that one idea runs from one end of them to the other— the idea that peace and happiness can only exist on some condition. This idea, which is the core of ethics, is the core of the nursery-tales. The whole happiness of fairyland hangs upon a thread, upon one thread. Cinderella may have a dress woven on supernatural looms and blazing with unearthly brilliance; but she must be back when the clock strikes twelve... A girl is given a box on condition she does not open it; she opens it, and all the evils of this world rush out at her. A man and woman are put in a garden on condition that they do not eat one fruit: they eat it, and lose their joy in all the fruits of the earth... It is surely obvious that all ethics ought to be taught to this fairy-tale tune; that, if one does the thing forbidden, one imperils all the things provided.

Of course, conducting an ethical enquiry into a fairy tale is a far cry from treating the tale (as Chesterton does) as a moral lesson to be obeyed.

There are good reasons for students to look askance at fairy tales as vehicles for moral instruction. For one thing, fairy tales tend to highlight culturally-relative human qualities that may not seem morally compelling to all readers. For instance, Western fairy tales typically highlight wit, courage, resilience and power; Japanese fairy tales emphasise respect and obedience to parents and authority figures, and the importance of keeping one's word; and Native American tales about the trickster Coyote valorise cleverness and creativity.

Other values seem to be common across the globe. Traditional stories from many countries stress the values of honesty, common sense and respect for nature – but even these widely-held values deserve to be scrutinised and questioned. Each value could fruitfully become the focus of its own ethical enquiry in which students negotiate the meanings of the value and challenge its applicability in various contexts.

Moral character and destiny

Many fairy tales feature stock characters who undergo little or no character development. Typically, the bad or foolish characters are punished, and the good or wise characters are rewarded.

In an ethical enquiry, we might ask: Are these binary destinies *realistic*? Are they *fair*? Are they *civilised*? Are they *utopian*?

Heroes and villains

Certain tropes consistently recur in fairy tales – even across cultures as diverse as the Yombe in Africa and the Navajo in the USA (as Grey Daniels points out in his thesis, *Fitting the Mold*). And some of these tropes have ethical implications. For instance, in many fairy tales, a previously-ordinary person takes on the mantle of heroism by making a decision, solving a problem, finding a needed magical item, rescuing the captured, etc. In an ethical enquiry, we might wonder: Does this action alone make the person into a hero? What is a hero, after all?

Often, the hero in the tale is recognised by a mark or brand, or by something given to him or her. We might wonder: Is heroism a permanent quality (as being 'branded' might signify)? Is public recognition actually relevant to the hero's status? Does recognition contribute to the hero's virtue, or might it – on the contrary – *undermine* the hero's virtue?

Can a hero be unpopular? Can a hero be flawed? How could we tell the difference between an unpopular, flawed hero and an ordinary person who has attempted a grand gesture?

Just desserts?

Turning to another trope, many fairy tales feature a villain who is punished, banished or vanquished. Often, the hero and the villain are involved in a direct altercation or combat ending with the villain's humiliation or death. In an ethical enquiry, we might wonder: Is it morally acceptable for the villain to be killed?

Students might argue that indeed death is a fitting punishment for the villain's crimes; or that the hero has a right to kill the villain in an exercise of self-defence; or that the eradication of the villain's evil presence is justified because it makes the world safer for others. In response, other students might challenge these positions by arguing that punishments should be non-violent; that self-defence should be constrained; or that imprisonment (rather than death) of the villain would protect others just as well.

Some might wonder: "What would our world be like if everyone behaved violently whenever they felt threatened?" In response, those students who believe it's acceptable for villains to be killed would need to argue that there is something special about the case of the villain's misdemeanours that justifies a violent response, whereas other kinds of threat or oppression do not. This gets philosophically interesting, because the students need to articulate their criteria for the acceptability of violence under particular circumstances – and every criterion then becomes a contestable claim.

By taking seriously and investigating the initial claim that the death of the villain is a fitting punishment, students are obliged to think hard about their reasons for holding such a view, and whether those reasons are strong enough to withstand counter-arguments. The process of philosophical enquiry shows some answers to be better reasoned, more coherent or more informed than others. Through questioning, students are able to see for themselves which opinions bear up under scrutiny and criticism.

In the end, a student might change her mind, or she might not. But if she is required to think carefully about the beliefs and values that underlie her claims, there's a greater chance that she'll begin to think more independently, more reasonably and more ethically than if a facilitator simply said: "How could you say such a thing? Killing is obviously wrong!"

Moral dilemmas

> *Fairy tales map out possible ways of attaining happiness; they expose and resolve deep-rooted moral conflicts.*
>
> – Jack Zipes, 'Why Fairy Tales are Immortal'.

Typically, scenarios that are presented to school students as moral dilemmas are not in fact morally problematic: there is a 'morally right' course of action, and an alternative 'morally wrong' course of action that appeals to self-interest or some other non-moral value. However, genuine moral dilemmas involve a conflict between two (or more) moral values. A challenge for us as facilitators of ethical enquiry is to identify genuine moral dilemmas – dilemmas that are hard to resolve and genuinely controversial. These turn out to be useful prompts for students to work out what they would do when cherished values conflict.

Virtues

Virtues are moral values that are embodied in people's actions and that help to constitute their character. Peter Worley provides a handy list of virtues in his book *Once Upon an If: The storythinking handbook* (page 13):

> What kind of qualities am I talking about when I talk about virtues? Lists of virtues vary but philosopher Andre Comte-Sponville (2002) has attempted to reduce them to the following central virtues:
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> - fidelity
> - prudence
> - temperance
> - courage
> - justice
> - generosity
> - compassion
> - mercy
> - gratitude
> - humility
> - simplicity
> - tolerance
> - purity
> - gentleness
> - good faith
> - humour
> - love.

The classical view is that moderation is virtuous, while either a deficiency or an excess of any virtuous quality becomes a vice. For instance, courage is virtue, whereas a deficiency of courage makes for cowardice, and an excess of courage makes for rashness.

Conceptual enquiry in ethics

It's often useful to examine a value-laden concept very closely, and investigate the 'grey areas' at the boundary of the concept. Consider *stealing*, for instance. If we're exploring the behaviour of a character who steals (e.g. Jack from *Jack and the Beanstalk*), we might encourage students to consider a range of scenarios and behaviours which may or may not be regarding as stealing, and which may or may not be regarded as acceptable.

To illustrate this idea, here's an activity from Phil Cam's *Thinking Stories 1: Teacher Resource/Activity Book* which asks students to consider whether or not the following are examples of stealing:

- You borrow something and forget to return it.
- You use someone's things without asking.
- You take something which you know the owner doesn't need any more.
- You find something that someone lost, and you keep it.
- You take something belonging to someone else, thinking that it is your own.
- You pick fruit from a neighbour's tree that is hanging over the fence.

There is ambiguity in some of these examples, which may prompt students to reconsider the belief that stealing is universally wrong – or at least, to reconsider what they think counts as stealing.

Moral perspectives

In *Teaching Thinking: Philosophical enquiry in the classroom*, Robert Fisher presents the following questions that can help children to develop attitudes of moral awareness:

- Does this fit in with the sort of person I want to be?
- Do I want people to behave towards me like that?
- Does it help or harm other people?
- Could I have done better?
- Does this make the world a better place?
- Is this a constructive or destructive thing?
- What would others think of this?

Asking these questions can highlight differences among moral theories. For instance, a course of action that is consistent with virtue theory might be inconsistent with utilitarianism. Even if students are unfamiliar with these theories, asking the above questions will help the children think about the 'rightness' of a proposed course of action from a number of different moral perspectives. This will help them to draw their own thoughtful conclusions, independently of external moral guidelines.

A sample philosophical enquiry plan based on a fairy tale: The Princess and the Pea

Below is a philosophical enquiry session plan that I created for teachers whose students had attended the Victorian Opera's production of 'The Princess and Pea'.

Do you think the princess *wanted* to marry the prince?

Why / why not?

How do you know?

Did the princess have a *choice* about whether to get married?

Should princesses do as they are told?

Should *girls* do as they're told?

Under what circumstances (if any)?

The princess couldn't sleep because of the pea – and she ended up with bruises on her body because of the pea. Would it have been rude and ungrateful for the princess to complain about the bed?

What's more important: politeness or comfort?

[alternatively: politeness or safety?]

The princess was very sensitive. Is it good to be sensitive?

What exactly do we mean by 'sensitive'?

Concept game: Think about the following examples, and classify each of them as *'sensitive' … or 'not sensitive' … or 'I don't know'.*

- someone with skin that burns easily in the sun
- someone with a blocked nose
- someone who is good at empathising (experiencing what other people are feeling)
- someone with impaired vision
- someone whose feelings are easily hurt
- someone with excellent hearing
- someone who pays no attention to other people's emotions
- someone with a good sense of balance
- someone who often cries

Can you *learn* how to be sensitive?

Are there any advantages to *not* being sensitive?

Is it sometimes better to be tough than sensitive?

Why / why not?

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