

A Poetic Moral Education

Introduction

We argue that, in the domain of ethics, a literary education is superior to, or at least on a par with, an argumentative one. Because academic life privileges the latter, we must first establish that literature does in fact have at least equal standing as a vehicle for ethical instruction. Having done that, we investigate what distinguishes literary education from traditional argumentative (rational) education.

Throughout this paper we use “literature” in a broad sense: the art of storytelling. We therefore use the terms mythos, fable, and literature interchangeably. We contrast this with ‘argument’, here taken to mean rational reasoning or logos. By “ethical education” we mean the craft that produces or develops an individual’s moral capacity; we aim to clarify what development here consists of. We also acknowledge, that an ethical education can be vicious as well as virtuous.

We engage primarily with two philosophical figures, Aristotle, and Vico. Our argument for a literary education takes form by placing Aristotelian ideas within the Vichian metaphysic.

Through discussing the overlap in their thought, I present a novel approach to understanding moral education. ~~Following this, I liken our account of literary education with that of Platonic mimesis, then invoke Plato to restrict the domain of such education.~~

Because our focus is the *vehicle* for transmitting ethical knowledge, we place special emphasis on language. The distinction between rational and literary education can be understood through how language is used. Our central claim relies on a shift in linguistic tropes that corresponds to stages in the cognitive process of learning. I propose that cognition proceeds successively through metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and finally irony. The first three tropes belong to

literature, fable, and myth; the last – irony - generates rational thought. From this, we ask whether ethical education is specifically achievable through an education that relies on fable.

Myth vs. Logos

Our first task is to justify the inquiry by establishing the credibility of myth as at least comparable to rational argument. Plato's Protagoras is relevant here. When addressing whether virtue can be taught, Protagoras asks whether he should, for "younger men a myth" (muthos) or "argue out the question" (logos). To this "several of the company answered that he should choose for himself," and Protagoras chooses the myth, saying that it will be more interesting. What matters to us is that the question itself 'what form should be used to convey an idea?' is posed, and that Protagoras opts for myth. Implicit in this episode is the equivalence of the two forms (if not the superiority of the mythical) as vehicles of philosophical thought.

Turning to the merits of poetic argument, we attend to maxims. Aristotle remarks, "one great advantage of maxims is due to want of intelligence in his hearers, who love to hear him succeed in expressing as a universal truth the opinions which they hold themselves about particular cases" (Aristotle, Rhetoric 2.21, 1395b2): men of limited ideas transform particulars into maxims. Vico explains that "the human mind, which is indefinite, being constricted by the vigor of the senses, cannot otherwise express its almost divine nature than by thus enlarging particulars in the imagination" (Vico, New Science 816). From this we infer that the mind's divine capacity finds expression in maxims, and that such enlargement of particulars is possible only in poetic language (in literature) as Vico's imaginative universals (Vico, New Science 34–35) make evident. Aristotle makes a similar claim in the Poetics, where he states that poetry is more philosophical than history because history concerns particulars while poetry concerns universals, which are the proper domain of philosophical inquiry (Aristotle, Poetics, 1451b5).

The natural question that follows is: why does poetry enlarge particulars while rational argument does not? I submit that the answer lies in the tropes: rational argument, I contend, emerges only as a product of irony.

Tropes

Tropes are figures of speech that move a word from its ordinary meaning to an unusual or figurative one; they arise either from necessity or ornament. Necessity originates because there are far more things in nature than there are words for them. Inversion may occur in four principal ways: whole to part and vice versa; cause to effect and vice versa; from similars; or from opposites. These inversions correspond to the four main tropes: synecdoche, metonymy, metaphor, and irony (Vico, *Rhetoric* 39). Among these, we associate irony with logical reasoning and the other three with literature.

Synecdoche and metonymy descend from metaphor. Vico explains that “in all languages the greater part of the expressions relating to inanimate things are formed by metaphor from the human body and its parts and from the human senses and passions... all of which is a consequence of our axiom that man in his ignorance makes himself the measure of all things” (Vico, *New Science* 405).

Vico describes three kinds of metonymy: of agent for act (because names for agents were commoner than names for acts); of subject for form and accident (because of the inability to abstract forms and qualities from subjects); and of cause for effect he says that it produced in each case a little fable (Vico, *New Science* 406). Synecdoche develops as particulars are elevated into universals.

Irony, Vico notes, “could not have begun until the period of reflection, because it is fashioned of falsehood by dint of a reflection that wears the mask of truth.” From this he derives “a great principle of human institutions”, that the first fables must originally have been true narrations, confirming his definition of fable as *vera narratio*, true speech. Irony is therefore a product of reflective capacity; abstraction is impossible when cognition functions through the imaginative universal. The imaginative universal is to poetic thought what concepts are to rational thought.

Poetic Universals

Before we proceed it is essential that we briefly discuss heroic characters and imaginative genera. Within the Vichian history of nations, the first men were incapable of thinking in terms of abstract concepts, instead their thought relied wholly on metaphor.

The metaphor that Vico speaks of is as Vico explains something that we can only with great difficulty comprehend and cannot at all understand as the first men did since we moderns operate through reflective thought, whereas the metaphor is a product of imaginative thought.

We understand the metaphor only in terms of analogy, whereas in poetic thought metaphor created imaginative genera - In imaginative thought, the metaphor served the function of creating imaginative genera, fantastical universals, the equivalent of what in reflective thought is a concept. Heroic thought operates on imaginative genera, which actualize as poetic characters.

Verene’s example of Hercules, to be understood as identical with courage, illustrates imaginative genera: to the mind that operates on particulars, Hercules is at best an analogy for courage; to the imaginative mind, Hercules is courage. In this mode of thought imaginative genera occupy the conceptual place that concepts do in rational thought.

Unlike concepts though, imaginative genera have the distinctive feature of having the capacity to be represented. For instance, the heroic character of Hercules once grasped is seen in every instance of courage, and to demonstrate courage one need only paint a picture of Hercules. This feature of imaginative genera is beyond the capacity of reflective thought, for in vulgar language we can at best point at an instantiation of a concept such as courage, but never to courage itself.

It is this feature that I believe holds the answer to moral education. Since as we demonstrate shortly, morality exists only as a universal, and though rational thought may be able to identify or point to it, it is incapable of representing it. Instead, what is required is imaginative universals to be created which can then be pointed at.

Topos and Education

Tracing how tropes develop clarifies the difference between rational metaphysics and imaginative metaphysics. The former teaches that “man becomes all things by understanding them,” while the latter teaches that “man becomes all things by not understanding them,” for “when man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them” (Vico, *New Science*, 405). This distinction explains why we associate irony with rational reasoning and the remaining tropes with imaginative reasoning: rational metaphysics requires reflection; imaginative activity does not.

From these principles Vico argues, in *On the Study Methods of Our Time*, that education must begin with the *ars topica* - the art of finding the middle term - which can only be gained through fable. Only after this education has taken place can one properly engage in *logos*. *Topos*, he says, is responsible for “the invention of arguments which is by nature prior to the judgment of their

validity” (Vico, *Study Methods* p. 15). Verene explains this by observing that “logic does not create the meanings of its terms; it uses them.” Before a mind can make logical inferences it must first create the point where two concepts touch; creating such a point requires imagination, through metaphor (Verene, *Science of Imagination*, p. 41).

Ethical Education?

When we construct ethical frameworks, we often struggle to characterize them with particulars. Ethical description frequently invokes some abstract universal - akin to Vico’s imaginative genera - whether Plato’s Forms, Aristotle’s kalon, or the Confucian moral exemplar, which resembles what Vico calls a poetic character.

Other conceptions of the moral exist, Kantian deontology, utilitarian consequentialism for instance, but their effectiveness as instruments of moral education is difficult to defend. To someone who already understands ethics, these systems may help articulate moral intuitions; but as vehicles for education, they offer limited value.

A student encountering such frameworks can either accept or reject their soundness; that affirmation depends on pre-existing assumptions. This dependence is evident in how philosophy courses often proceed: via thought experiments. The aim of these thought experiments is to reveal strengths or weaknesses in particular theories and to show their compatibility with students’ intuitions. If the goal of ethical education is to help students make “better” decisions, then such exercises alone do not suffice.

How, then, does one receive an ethical education? A full answer exceeds the scope of this paper; such education plausibly emerges from varied sources, including social interactions. For our purposes, we ask whether literature qualifies as a means of ethical education. Answering that

requires describing how literature could achieve moral formation. We proceed in two steps: first, we establish that ethical education is constituted by *topoi*; second, we argue that literature enables the formation of those *topoi*.

Topoi (commonplaces) establish the groundwork for rational reasoning. The education of *topos* is gained through literature because literature deals in universals. Rational arguments employing *logos* operate on particulars; this is why Aristotle calls the poet “a truer philosopher than a historian” (Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1451b5). Although the philosopher works with universals, to apprehend universals one must first grasp the middle term. As Vico explains in *De Nostri*, the middle term on which the syllogism operates can be gained only through a mythical education.

Ethical education therefore operates through grasping universals. We have already argued why modern ethical frameworks, if presented as purely rational systems of principles or procedures, do not suffice for moral formation. The remaining question is how one grasps Plato’s Forms, recognizes Aristotle’s *kalon*, or identifies an exemplar. Many explanations end by appealing to innate faculty or intuition; this is insufficient because it gives no criterion to distinguish good from bad. Intuitions can be misleading, the existence of evil attests to this.

Literature addresses this gap by providing the source and shape of those intuitions. Mythical education, I argue, forms the meeting point for ethical reasoning. For this reason we identify ethical education with the tropes prior to irony. Moral faculties are acquired by identifying with imaginative genera. Aristotle describes a *topos* as “a heading under which many enthymemes fall” (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1403a18 -19); these derive from *endoxa* (commonly held beliefs), a notion akin to Vico’s reasoning from myth, where *topos* is rooted in the *sensus communis* (common sense). Moral education in the general population is commonly acquired through consuming literature with moral content. It is therefore unsurprising that primary-school

curricula include many such stories - whether Winnie-the-Pooh teaching the value of friendship or Ms. Frizzle teaching curiosity and joy in discovery.

This connection helps explain why ethics and literature are often described in divine terms: both deal with universals that cannot be reduced to particulars and that precede rational reasoning. In *Ion*, Plato describes the rhapsode as divinely inspired because he knows things but cannot explain them except when possessed by poetry. Vico likewise distinguishes the lawgiver of the age of gods, the poet of the age of heroes, and the vulgar man of the age of men. The lawgiver is divine and knows he is so (Moses, for instance); the poet is divine but does not know it, being only a vehicle for the divine; the vulgar man receives only a corrupted form of the divine. The widespread attribution of divinity to morality need not be explained away; its popularity signals why the poet can be the most effective transmitter of moral code.

The Right Literature

Finally, we must confront the possibility that an ethical education can be evil. Even if we accept what has been said so far, the question remains: how does one choose the 'right' literature?

Because we have established that the moral code is not derived from reasoning and does not appeal to particulars, there is no 'rational' way to demonstrate which education is good.

The right education is therefore constituted by the right fables, as common sense dictates. This appears at first glance to be problematic based on the common sense understanding of 'common sense', that we are robbed of any objective grounding but are left to rely on mere opinions.

Fortunately, this is not the move we make here, not only do we not lose grounding, but instead by invoking common sense we establish a firmer foundation than any rational argument may provide. The common sense we speak of here is not that which is common by communication,

but rather: “common sense is judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, or the entire human race” (Vico, New Science 142).

Since human choice is by its nature most uncertain, it is given certainty only by means of appeal to the common sense (Vico, New Science 138-141). The certainty of common sense is testified to by the principle that “Uniform ideas originating among entire peoples unknown to each other must have a common ground of truth” (Vico, New Science 144), what we are pointed to with common sense here is an innate disposition, a disposition towards what is good.

It is important to note that in this view of the common sense there does not arise a problem of what is popular or what is seen by the many to be right, the appeal is instead to the individual. It is as Vico says, ‘judgement without reflection’ and if what we have said so far is true, then this is the only judgement relevant to ethical development.

Evil...

Returning now, we have established so far that since moral education occurs through identification with imaginative genera, poetic characters, we need ‘good’ characters. There remains the question of “how good?”, whether it would suffice to have a good character among many villains, whether the character can be good in some ways but not in others, or if we ask for a perfect character?

The straightforward answer appears to be to only admit the most perfect characters, after all if there is no grounds on which to distinguish the good from the bad, then any bad may be emulated and so none should be admitted in the education. What kind of literature would this be though? It is hard to imagine a story being interesting without the presence of conflict, and even harder to think that a story with only good characters can involve conflict. There are then two problems we

are faced with, concerning the content and the method. With the content of the education we must decide whether knowledge of anything but what is best should be taught and with the method, whether it is possible to teach knowledge of the best. To answer these, we look at Plato and Aristotle's discussion of mimesis, for the method is functionally identical to what we have discussed through the course of this paper.

It is interesting that on the one hand, when talking about education that takes place through imaginative identification, we have on the one hand Plato who admits in Books II & III of the Republic only of the most perfect characters. While on the other hand, not only does Aristotle in the Poetics admit of such education but asserts that it is better than that the characters be perfect that they be flawed instead.

In Book III we are met with an argument about imitations becoming established as habits, this is presented as justification for the previous argument that only what is appropriate should be imitated (Plato, Republic III, 395c), yet curiously, immediately following Socrates mentions madness and evil and remarks "They must know, of course, about mad and evil men and women, but they must not do or imitate anything they do." (Plato, Republic III, 396a). It seems then obvious that the guardians, who are at this point in the republic analogous to the people with just souls have knowledge of what is not appropriate for them to do. Note also that Plato pushes for rewriting the myths to remove all shortcomings from the Gods, to have perfect characters¹. Similarly, Aristotle in the Poetics introduces imitation as a way to learn, describing that we enjoy it because we learn from it, and distinguishing a child from an animal since the former is far more imitative (Aristotle, Poetics 1448b), But when speaking of what tragedy must be like, he

¹ I was not able to find this, but I am curious as to whether there can be other characters in the rewritten stories who are 'bad'.

says that the character should neither be one that is pre-eminently virtuous or just nor one who possesses villainy of his own, but is instead somewhere in between the two (Aristotle Poetics, 1453a)

The purpose in highlighting this is to lay the criteria for our decision on what to admit into the education we have described earlier, and for this purpose it would benefit us to see the above accounts not as contradicting each other but rather as speaking of different modes. For instance, that in the sections we have cited, Plato's concern is myth while Aristotle's is tragedy. The conclusion for our purposes then is that the answer to what sort of characters to admit depends on a number of factors, ranging from the age of the person being educated to what role they are to play in society.

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