The Moral of the Story:
Content, Process, and Reflection in
Moral Education through Narratives

by
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By

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To my parents, Bill and Pauline.

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    The problem this project attempts to solve is to
develop a workable moral education in light of the clash
between religious forms of moral education and U.S. Supreme
Court decisions concerning them. The concept of story and
storytelling has been suggested as a unifying focus for
disparate prescriptions for moral education.
    Several recent approaches to moral storytelling have
been proposed. The approaches of William Bennett, Nel
Noddings, and Herbert Kohl are among those which have
attempted to combine moral education and storytelling within
the last decade. Bennett is identified with other theorists
whose primary concern is the moral content of a story.
Noddings is identified as a process theorist, whose primary
concern is the process of moral storytelling, not the
content. Kohl is identified as a reflection theorist, whose
approach challenges tradition in the hope of creating a more
moral society. Each one of these three approaches attempts
to provide a comprehensive program of moral education, but
they fall short of that goal. The purpose of this project,
then, is to construct a storytelling moral education program
that improves upon earlier approaches.
    Using the three levels of moral thinking posited by
R.M. Hare, a three-level approach to moral storytelling is
proposed. The intuitive, critical, and meta-ethical levels
of moral thinking that Hare refers to are used to frame a
new, three-level, approach to moral storytelling. The
three-level approach combines content, process, and
reflection into a unified prescription for moral education.
Thus, a more comprehensive plan for moral education through
storytelling is developed, one that respects traditional
forms of moral education while remaining within the
parameters set by the U.S. Supreme Court.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

> Deprive children of stories and you leave them
> unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in
> their words. - Alasdair MacIntyre[1]

Introduction

For a long time now I have been interested in ethics
and how one comes to be a moral person. Most recently, I
have been wondering about the debates that have been raging
concerning school prayer legislation and other issues that
seem to indicate that in order to have an effective moral
education it needs to be of a religious nature. Such
suggestions have historical roots in this country, but they
seem to be out of touch with the secular nature of today's
society.

Since the first days of the American colonies, there
have been programs to create moral adults from rambunctious
children. Most of these programs have been based on
religious teachings, and for a long time religion was
thought to be inseparably bound-up with a moral education.
However, society has gradually evolved from a pre-modern
country, heavily dominated by religious thought, to a
postmodern nation that tries to keep civic and religious
concerns separate. This evolution is particularly evident
in U.S. Supreme Court decisions made in the early 1960s. It
was then that the Court substantially eliminated religion in
the public schools. Specifically, in 1962 the Court ruled
in Engel v. Vitale that it was unconstitutional for public
school systems to conduct prayer services on school property
during regular school hours. The following year, in
Schempp, the Court declared Bible reading in the public
schools unconstitutional. And in 1971, the landmark case of
Lemon v. Kurtzman led to a criteria known as the "Lemon
test" to keep civic and religious concerns apart.[2]

The impact these cases have had on public education is
that they have virtually eliminated some elements that
formerly helped to teach important moral lessons. The story
of moral education since the 1960s has been one that shows a
number of attempts to replace the morality of institutional
religion with a more contemporary version of moral
education. Those non-religious programs have met with
dubious success.[3] However, this does not mean that a

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[1] Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory
(Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 201.

[2] For more information on these cases see Louis Fischer,
David Schimmel, and Cynthia Kelly, Teachers and the Law, 4th
ed. (New York: Longman, 1995).

[3] See: Edward A. Wynne and Mary Hess, "Long-term Trends in
Youth Conduct and the Revival of Traditional Value
Patterns," Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis 8
(Fall 1986): 294-308.

secular moral education should be abandoned. In fact, given the decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court, we are behooved to seek new ways to construct a working program of secular moral education.

Problem Statement

The problem this project will address is the need to bring an effective program of moral education to the public classroom in the face of a church and state separation. Throughout recent decades there have been a number of attempts to design a plan for a secular moral education, but these plans have failed for one reason or another. However, parents, teachers, and community leaders are still looking for a way to teach morals in the face of the court's decisions.[4] Examples of ethical problems that need to be addressed in our schools today include the reduction of violence and drug abuse. One of the ways traditionally used to ameliorate similar problems in schools and society has been moral/religious education in the form of storytelling. Understanding the ideas behind several storytelling moral education programs may shed light on how to alleviate the moral problems that students face today.

Methodology

The methodology of the present study will be philosophical. That is, it will be an analysis of various ideas about and programs of moral education through storytelling. By analyzing the various elements of these moral education practices, I hope to create a structure by which an effective program of secular moral education can be constructed. To do this, the project will employ the philosophical method of critique using both the historical and current literature concerning moral education and storytelling.

Purpose of the Study

The study is tied to what religious education has historically brought to moral education in America. As far back as the Puritan settlements, moral education for the young was considered necessary. The fire and brimstone sermons of preachers in colonial New England, however, were not the only way that morality was taught. For instance, Cotton Mather, a famous Puritan clergyman, used stories to teach children important moral lessons. He described how he did this, in an entry in his diary in February 1706: "I begin betimes to entertain [children] with delightful Stories, especially scriptural ones. And still conclude with some Lesson of Piety; bidding them to learn that Lesson from the Story."[5] Indeed, often when moral teaching was

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[4] William J. Bennett, Our Children and Our Country: Improving America's Schools and Affirming the Common Culture (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 70-1.

[5]Cotton Mather, The Diary of Cotton Mather, 1681-1708, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford, in Massachusetts Historical

needed, the stories of the Testaments were drawn upon.
These stories were the essence of a religion's moral
lessons. In fact, moral lessons were so dependent on
religious stories that it is difficult to separate the moral
and religious education of that time period.

Much has changed since the time of the Puritans, but
one lesson that remains is that stories have a great power
to shape children's lives. Since the 1960s there have been
a number of attempts to recompose the role of stories in
moral education, but the authors of those attempts have
misunderstood the various levels on which stories affect
moral thinking. Thus, much of what has been written about
moral education is incomplete and, therefore, requires more
analysis. This project is an attempt to clarify the various
levels on which stories affect morality and thus rectify the
problems that non-religious moral education has had in the
past. By creating a new structure to redesign a secular
moral education based on stories and storytelling, the
purpose of this project is to produce a better prescription
for moral education in the public schools.

Source Literature and the Three Levels of Moral Thinking

The sources this project will draw from include a
variety of thinkers such as R.M. Hare, Lawrence Kohlberg,
Nel Noddings, Herbert Kohl, William Bennett, and others.
These scholars will be used to help formulate a theory of
moral education and narrative. The work of Hare in the area
of moral thinking has helped formulate a theory that a
storytelling moral education needs to consider three things:
the content of the story, a process of story analysis, and a
reflection upon the stories of oneself and society.[6] The
content of the story affects behavior on an unreflective
day-to-day basis, what Hare calls the intuitive level. This
is where the content of narratives are internalized and are
acted upon without reflection. Bennett's work will be of
great help here in seeing just how stories can form the
content of moral action.

The second level comes into play when time permits us
to think at length about our actions in the face of
competing moral goods. Hare refers to this level as the
critical level; it is where an analysis is made of various
resolutions that are played out in stories. The literature
concerning this level is vast, but the study will focus on
the work of Kohlberg and Noddings in order to flesh out the
importance of a process approach as part of the storytelling
moral education program.

The third level is Hare's meta-ethical level, the level
at which one reflects upon the reasoning of one's moral

Society Collections, ser. 7, vol. 7 (Boston: The Society,
1911), 534. Cited in: B. Edward McClellan, Schools and the
Shaping of Character: Moral Education in America, 1607-
Present (Bloomington, IN: ERIC, 1992), 7. Emphasis in
McClellan.

[6] R. M. Hare, Moral Thinking: Its Levels, Method and Point
(New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 25.

actions. The work of Kohl will be of great use in understanding the necessity of bringing different stories into the moral education classroom in order to produce a reflection upon stories. Such reflection will look at the stories of both society and one's own life in order to stimulate imagination and critical thinking. These three levels are not hierarchical in nature, but instead resonate the different ways in which stories can affect one's moral actions.

Exploring Three Approaches

The study will entail looking at a number of ways that stories have been used in moral education.

The Content Approach

First, there is the most obvious use of narratives, stories that are told in the hope that they will shape people's behavior by modeling that behavior for them. This is the traditional use of narrative that was utilized by the character education movement. This movement, more recently championed by former U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett, builds on the idea that an education in basic values is what is necessary for a good moral education.[7] Historically, this movement was not well organized, but was a diffuse attempt at preserving traditional values and to insure a place for moral education in the public schools.[8] Put simply, the hope of these content theorists is that a student will learn right conduct through stories and the model provided by the teacher. That is, the moral content of the stories will accompany a person through one's life and help one to do the right thing. Stories are told in order to focus on the "moral of the story" in the hope of internalizing the content of traditional values in students.

The Process Approach

Second, there are the so called process theories. These deal with methods such as values-clarification and Kohlbergian theory. They are called "process theories" because they focus on the process of coming to a moral decision. Unlike the content theories, content is not as important in process theories. The narratives used in these theories tend to deal with the values present in the individual today, rather than those of a moral tradition and a community's history. For example, in values-clarification, the most individualistic of the process

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[7] William J. Bennett, "Moral Literacy and the Formation of Character," <u>NASSP Bulletin</u> (December 1988): 29-34.

[8] B. Edward McClellan, <u>Schools and the Shaping of Character: Moral Education in America, 1607-Present</u> (Bloomington, IN: ERIC, 1992), 55.

theories, the aim was to help students clarify their own points of view, their own values.[9]

Kohlberg's early approach to moral education employed stories in two ways. First, there was the story told in order to set up a moral dilemma. Students were expected to resolve the dilemmas and defend their positions. This defense could be, in part, in the form of a personal story (thus, the second way stories were used). Students were expected to put themselves into the shoes of another person and come up with a reasoned moral action. The teacher gauged the progress of a student by the moral reasoning that was exhibited in the telling of his story. That is, judgment was made not on the solution (the content of the response), but by the process that went into the conclusion. The aim was to move the student up a series of moral development stages. Later versions of Kohlberg's theory of moral development also had a process orientation because they too employed stories and discussions to come to moral decisions.[10]

The process approach gradually evolved into a set of approaches that increasingly focused on the stories of students. One of the most important developments in this vein was the caring approach. It emanated from a reaction to the justice orientation that Kohlberg used in his theory. In fact, the caring approach was inspired by Carol Gilligan, one of Kohlberg's students.[11] She rejected the universal nature of justice that Kohlberg assumed in his work and began to form her own theory based on the stories that her subjects told. Gilligan's investigations unveiled stories that were based on interpersonal relationships. This different perspective revealed gender differences in moral development. Gilligan explains that

> the moral imperative that emerges repeatedly in interviews with women is an injunction to care, a responsibility to discern and alleviate the "real and recognizable trouble" of this world. For men, the moral imperative appears rather as an injunction to respect the rights of others [justice theory] and thus to protect from interference the rights to life and self-fulfillment.[12]

Gilligan's research has sparked a whole new industry in moral education. Since her work in the 1970s, gender differences have become an important consideration for moral

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[9] Howard Kirchenbaum, <u>Advanced Value Clarification</u> (La Jolla, CA: University Associates, 1977), 20.

[10] F. Clark Power, Ann Higgins, and Lawrence Kohlberg, <u>Lawrence Kohlberg's Approach to Moral Education</u> (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 60.

[11] Carol Gilligan, <u>In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development</u> (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), xxx.

[12] Gilligan, <u>In a Different Voice</u>, 100.

storytelling. Gilligan's position is nicely summed up by
Bill Puka.

> Women spontaneously prefer caring. While they can
> think and act through the ethics of justice and
> individual rights preferred by males, they find them
> somewhat alien, flawed, and limited--except when
> balanced with caring. This "feminine preference"
> apparently has been missed by researchers in moral
> development because they judge moral competence and
> development by male standards. This causes them to
> underrate caring, female competencies.[13]

In short, males tend to be "justice centered," while females
tend to be "relationship centered." Thus, Gilligan argued
for a more gender friendly interpretation of moral
development by removing the importance of the justice
orientation. The upshot of Gilligan's work for the purpose
of the study is that if different genders are "centered"
differently, then they will likely have different stories to
tell. This difference in turn leads to stories being told
and interpreted in different "voices," i.e., with different
points of view, implying that moral education needs to be
tackled in a new way.
    Gender differences add yet another complexity to moral
education. It will not be necessary to dwell on these
differences, however, in order to come up with a workable
solution to the problem at hand. Nel Noddings has been
greatly influenced by the work of Gilligan, but has taken
her work in a different direction. Noddings has applied the
idea of caring to moral education and larger curricula
issues and has done some important work to join moral
education and narrative in education without necessarily
dwelling on gender differences.[14] So Noddings' work will be
of key importance in investigating the role of narrative and
process in a secular moral education.

<u>The Reflection Approach</u>

    Another way that narrative and moral education are
brought together is seen in the way stories give individuals
reasons to follow a moral code, a reflection approach. Any
program of moral education is incomplete if following a
moral code has no meaning for students. So the study will
investigate the way stories "give meaning to" morality.
This meaning component is another important aspect of moral
education that was lost in the Supreme Court decisions
relating to public education and religion in the 1960s.
Historically, religion gave reasons to be moral, but a
secular society cannot appeal to an afterlife or some other

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[13] Bill Puka, ed. <u>Moral Development: A Compendium, Volume 6:
Caring Voices and Women's Moral Frames: Gilligan's View</u> (New
York: Garland Publishing, 1994), xiii.

[14] Nel Noddings, <u>The Challenge to Care in Schools: An
Alternative Approach to Education</u> (New York: Teachers
College Press, 1992).

supernatural reward/punishment structure. Legal sanctions can be persuasive, but still may not furnish a person with a reason to be moral. If there is no personal reason to be moral, no meaning in a moral way of acting, then effective moral education is not possible. Therefore, a meaning component is a necessary element for any program of moral education. Indeed, no discussion of narrative and moral education can be satisfactory without a mention of meaning, the reason why one should be moral.

One way to bring meaning to moral education is through a discussion of stories that involve a vision of the future. Such stories can be autobiographical and deal with the set of stories in one's life. Or stories of vision can come out of an analysis of societal stories, often referred to as myths. Contrary to popular usage, myths do not imply falsehood anymore than any other story does. They do however help people in framing themselves and their actions with respect to a particular ideal or vision. Myth can be thought of as a system of stories that inform the perceptions, memories, and aspirations of a people and helps map out their purpose of life.[15] A storytelling moral education must involve a student in reflecting on how individual narratives jibe with, or contradict, societal myths. Myths, after all, are stories that provide a community with ways of structuring experience. They inform a person about one's identity and the culture in which one participates.[16] A myth comes into play when a social or moral rule demands justification.[17] Thus, a discussion of myth is essential for giving a person a community identity and a reason to be moral.

The Three-Level Approach

This project will show that these different views of narratives and moral education can be brought together to form a coherent prescription for moral education. In short, what is being proposed is that a secular narrative orientation to moral education has three levels. There is the level that affects our behavior on an unreflective day-to-day basis, an intuitive level. There is a second level, the critical level, that is used when time permits one to think at length about one's actions in the face of competing goods. The third level is a meta-ethical level, the level at which one analyzes the purpose of one's moral actions. These three levels reflect the different ways in which narratives can affect one's moral actions. When the content, process, and reflection approaches are combined in a coherent fashion, they will affect the different levels of

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[15] Sam Keen, The Passionate Life: Stages of Loving (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 20-1.

[16] Ian G. Barbour, Myths, Models, and Paradigms: A Comparative Study in Science and Religion (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 5.

[17] B. Malinowski, Magic, Science, and Religion (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1948), 36.

moral thinking and thus, form an effective program of moral
education through storytelling.

Preliminary Definitions

Given that this project primarily concerns stories and
their affect on moral behavior, two concepts should be
defined (at least tentatively). Therefore, this section
will define "moral behavior" and "story."

Moral Behavior

Lisa Kuhmerker defines moral behavior as "intentional
behavior that has social consequences."[18] Moral behavior
has social consequences and it is the judgment of these
consequences that often renders such behavior good or bad,
moral or immoral. Kuhmerker also correctly points out that
moral behavior has to do with "the individual's capacity to
feel, reason, and respond morally" with an awareness of what
is happening.[19] Moral behavior is complex and involves many
elements. This project will explore the role of stories in
shaping such behavior.

Story

"Story" comes from the Latin historia, meaning a
relation of events through oral or written means. The word
"narrative" comes from the Latin narráre which means to
relate or to "make known," so it is a very close cousin of
story. Indeed, according to the Oxford English Dictionary
story is defined as "a narrative," and narrative is defined
as a "tale, story, recital (of facts, etc.)." For the
purpose of this study, then, story and narrative may be used
interchangeably.
This conception of story is sweeping, but it must
remain so throughout the project. As William Ayers points
out,

> there is, of course, not a single story to tell, but a
> kaleidoscope of stories, changing, flowing, crashing
> against one another, each one playing, light and
> shadow, off the others in an infinity of pure and crazy
> patterns. There are moral myths and heroic accounts,
> subversive parables and standard homilies, women's
> stories as well as men's stories, black and white
> narratives, tales of humiliation and of triumph,
> tragedy and transcendence, the sad story of the slow
> and silent erosion of passion or concern. . . . The
> storytellers are various, and the stories themselves
> infinite.[20]

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[18] Lisa Kuhmerker, "Learning to Care--The Development of
Empathy," Journal of Moral Education 5 (1975): 25.

[19] Kuhmerker, "Learning to Care," 25.

[20] William Ayers, "In the Country of the Blind: Telling Our
Stories" in Teacher Lore: Learning From Our Own Experience,

Thus, storytelling in moral education is vast, and attempting to provide a strict definition for story is not the purpose of this project. Instead, story in many forms will be investigated, and a frame provided, in order to see moral education as a multifaceted storytelling concern.

The Role of Story

In a recent conversation about stories, a friend of mine remarked that she used to wear a particular dress as a story-teller and was glad she would never have to wear that dress again. She meant that she never intended to tell stories again, to which I replied, "you don't have to wear a clown suit to tell stories." I still stand by this reply because it gets to the heart of a misunderstanding about stories. Many people seem to think that telling stories is just for children. In other words, they think a narrative approach to informing people is too weak an educative form to be of any legitimate use.[21] Theodore Sarbin credits this mis-understanding of stories to the fact that "storytelling is commonly associated with fiction, fantasy, and pretending."[22] In the contemporary world, narratives are not seen as the stuff of science. Yet, the wisdom that stories impart can be found in many forms and in many parts of the globe. Roland Barthes points out that

> the narratives of the world are numberless. Narrative is first and foremost a prodigious variety of genres, themselves distributed amongst different substances--as though any material were fit to receive man's stories. Able to be carried by articulated language, spoken or written, fixed or moving images, gestures, and the ordered mixture of all these substances; narrative is present in myth, legend, fable, tale, novella, epic, history, tragedy, drama, comedy mime, painting . . . stained glass windows, cinema, comics, news items, conversation.[23]

Understanding the wide range of possibilities for narratives begins to expand the definition of "story."

A story also can be defined merely as a tale we tell to entertain, but this too is inadequate. Kieran Egan wrote in

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ed. William H. Schubert and William C. Ayers (New York: Longman, 1992), 155.

[21] Donald E. Polkinghorne, "Narrative Configuration in Qualitative Analysis," International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education 8 (January-March 1995): 7.

[22] Theodore R. Sarbin,"The Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology," in Narrative Psychology: The Storied Nature of Human Conduct, ed. Theodore R. Sarbin (New York: Praeger, 1986), 11.

[23] Roland Barthes, Image, Music, Text, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Noonday Press, 1977), 79.

Teaching as Story Telling (1986) that the story "is not just some casual entertainment; it reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience."[24] Stories help us organize our experience and serve as a model for future action. As Sarbin suggests,

> the narrative is a way of organizing episodes, actions, and accounts of actions; it is an achievement that brings together mundane facts and fantastic creations; time and place are incorporated. The narrative allows for the inclusion of actors' reasons for their acts, as well as the causes of happening.[25]

In many cases, time and place are woven into a narrative that helps one get a bearing on the reasons for the actions of those involved in the story. Stories tell one the principle used in decision making and the consequences that come from it.

Edward Porter St. John spoke early in this century about the importance of stories. He astutely pointed out that "the story finds its material in events, and especially in action: it presents the movement as flowing toward one end and in its impression emphasizes the whole of conduct."[26] This definition indicates that a story is more than just an entertainment and more than a tool to make sense of the world. What St. John uncovers in his conception of story is the moral aspect of narrative. A story is a representation of elements of the world that illustrates ways of conducting oneself. Even a simple story such as "The queen died, the king cried" can show a relation between events in the world and how a person conducts oneself. In short, the story's content holds certain moral advice and thus "carries the values of society."[27]

The way values are carried in narrative is a complex matter. Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that narratives provide a "historical memory" that forms a moral background, or framework, that affects our behavior.[28] Narratives often give us a full body of facts to work with; this is particularly true of historical narratives that show characters, actions, cultural facts, and other aspects of the time period. Some narratives, such as personal stories, may not do this explicitly, but the present cultural milieu will fill-in much of the information that is "missing." The environment, prior experiences, and other's stories help one

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[24] Kieran Egan, Teaching as Story Telling: An Alternative Approach to Teaching and Curriculum in the Elementary School (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 2.

[25] Sarbin, "Narrative as a Root Metaphor," 9.

[26] Edward Porter St. John, Stories and Story Telling in Moral and Religious Education (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1918), 8.

[27] Rollo May, The Cry for Myth (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991), 26.

[28] MacIntyre, After Virtue, 121.

to fill-in and complete the background of a story. This is true whether the narrative is historical, a classic novel, or a story told by our friend Joe. In fact, one of the most compelling aspects of a good story is that it helps individuals imagine a world as well as give an idea of their present situation. Thus, stories often link imagination with the "oughts" and "ought-nots" of the present living environment. It is this link with the moral and the imagination that make stories important to a moral education program.

Organization of the Study

        In the next chapter, the investigation of the different approaches to moral storytelling begins. Chapter 2 explores the content approach; Chapters 3 and 4 explore the process approach; and Chapter 5 explores the reflection approach to moral storytelling. These three approaches are further explored in Chapters 6 and 7 as Hare's three levels of moral thinking are used to develop a three-level approach to moral education through storytelling. Chapter 8 concludes the study and reflects upon possibilities for practice in today's public schools.

CHAPTER 2
CONTENT AND NARRATIVE

> Stories are the natural soul-food for children, their
> native air and vital breath; but our children are too
> often either story starved or charged with ill-chosen
> or ill-adapted twaddle-tales. - G. Stanley Hall[29]

Introduction

This chapter investigates the role of content in moral education by looking at a number of topics that concern moral education and stories. Among the topics discussed are character education and the work of various theorists. The aim of the chapter is to show that content, specifically narrative content, is an important aspect of moral education. In general, this chapter deals with the more conservative architects of moral education, since they are most concerned with a particular type of content. A content that attempts to recall tradition and life in simpler times is the cornerstone of their theoretical approaches. They see the best way of reinstating traditional values and upstanding character to be in stories that feature traditional values woven into the fabric of players and plots alike. Character is a slippery concept and its definition often changes with each writer. However, despite various conceptions of character, the role that stories play is similar. Stories, as basic content, are models for behavior. In later chapters, other conceptions of story will be looked at, but here only the traditional conception of story and its role as content for moral education will be considered.

Traditional Stories and Moral Education

In recent years, a movement has formed to focus on the content of moral education in schools. In some respects this movement is a reaction to the theories that were popular in the 1960s and 1970s that disparaged content in favor of a process approach (discussed in Chapter 3). This new, and somewhat reactionary, movement can be called a "content movement" because it is concerned with the way schools transmit the content of traditional values to children. Content for this movement is something "we should want all our students to know;" it refers to the basic building blocks of morality.[30] Thus, for the content movement, the basics of moral education are the traditional values of American culture.

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[29] Quoted in Edward Porter St. John, Stories and Story Telling in Moral and Religious Education (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1918), 102.

[30] William J. Bennett, Our Children and Our Country: Improving America's Schools and Affirming the Common Culture (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1988), 17.

A pivotal issue, once one has decided on what constitutes "the basics," is how to communicate these basic values. Many content theorists have turned to stories as a way to teach morality in American classrooms. They believe, as sociologist Amitai Etzioni does, that "values do not fly on their wings. They are communicated, effectively, around stories, historical narratives, legends, and such."[31] Thus, the content movement focuses on the telling of specific stories in order to provide a foundation for morality.

One of the new champions of moral content is William J. Bennett. With a Ph.D. in political philosophy and a Harvard law degree, he served as the chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities and as U.S. Secretary of Education during the Reagan presidential administration. He has written and spoken on many topics, but, most importantly, he is an advocate of school reform in the area of moral education. He has been outspoken on the issue of moral education in the schools and has recently published The Book of Virtues (1993). This book is a compendium of stories that have been used through the ages to impart a moral message. It reflects Bennett's mission to establish a core of moral values that will serve as the content of moral education, or what he calls "moral literacy."

Moral Literacy

Bennett describes his concept of moral literacy as being similar to E.D. Hirsch's notion of "cultural literacy."[32] Hirsch states that "to be culturally literate is to possess the basic information needed to thrive in the modern world."[33] This basic information is what forms the background knowledge that people need to have in order to make sense of the world. The word "literacy" usually is quite simply defined as "the ability to read and write," but a cultural literacy requires a base of knowledge that goes beyond the simple definitions of words.[34] Instead, Hirsch and Bennett see reading not as a mere decoding of words, but about understanding them. Literacy is not a mere skill, but

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[31] Quoted in William Kilpatrick, Gregory Wolfe, and Suzanne M. Wolfe, Books that Build Character: A Guide to Teaching Your Child Moral Values Through Stories (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 1.

[32] William J. Bennett, "Moral Literacy and the Formation of Character," NASSP Bulletin (December 1988): 30. Also see: E. D. Hirsch, Jr. Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

[33] E. D. Hirsch, Jr. Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), xiii.

[34] For a description of what the base of knowledge entails, see "The List" in Hirsch, Cultural Literacy, 152-215.

having a common knowledge to make sense of what one reads.
Hirsch states,

> the values affirmed in traditional literate culture can
> serve a whole spectrum of value attitudes.
> Unquestionably, decisions about techniques of conveying
> traditions to our children are among the most sensitive
> and important decisions of a pluralistic nation. But
> the complex problem of how to teach values in American
> schools mustn't distract attention from our fundamental
> duty to teach shared content.[35]

There should be, according to Bennett and Hirsch, a shared
content on the national level so we can communicate with the
same moral vocabulary. Americans throughout the land must
share a common set of moral values. The implication is
that, like literacy, one must be familiar with the
traditions and stories of one's culture in order to be
moral. Content for Bennett is thus the cultural tradition
in which a person is situated. A sound moral education must
be linked with the intellectual content of the culture.
      William Kilpatrick sums up the content movement's
position nicely.

> Communities and cultures depend for their existence on
> shared knowledge. Without such specific knowledge and
> a shared ethos, it becomes difficult for members of a
> community to communicate and cooperate. Those without
> this knowledge will always be condemned to the margins
> of society. If the knowledge deficit becomes
> widespread, the culture will collapse.[36]

The further move from a cultural literacy to a moral
literacy comes when it is claimed that there is more than
just a deficiency in factual information held by
individuals. There is a lack of shared moral content as
well. If we do not share the same moral stories, we risk
the "collapse" of our moral culture. Indeed, this fear of
collapse has caused some to claim that "the new illiteracy
is _moral_ illiteracy."[37] The remedy is not an easy one, but
many content theorists claim that a shared moral vocabulary
is a place to start. There is a sense in which the literacy
issues that they discuss are related. Stories are important
to a culture. Even liberal theorists, such as scientist
Roger C. Schank, point out that "knowing a culture means
knowing the stories that the culture provides."[38] To know

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[35] Hirsch, _Cultural Literacy_, 25.

[36] William K. Kilpatrick, _Why Johnny CanÆt Tell Right from
Wrong_ (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992), 117.

[37] Kilpatrick, Wolfe, and Wolfe, _Books That Build Character_,
19. Emphasis in original.

[38] Roger C. Schank, _Tell Me a Story: A New Look at Real and
Artificial Memory_ (New York: Charles ScribnerÆs Sons, 1990),
149.

those stories, it is in great measure necessary to be able to read and understand what is read. Thus, what moral content theorists call for is an expanded literacy program. Beyond basic literacy, being able to read and write, there lies cultural and moral literacy.

Bennett's moral literacy project harks back to the effort, known as character education, to preserve traditional values in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. A number of educators from disciplines such as philosophy, psychology, and sociology saw a society in change and worried about its moral state.[39] The character education movement developed in the 1890s and continued until the 1930s. During this time, it tried to develop ways to transmit morality to the young. Character educators sought a way of teaching children to react in a morally adaptive way to their environment.[40] In other words, character education aimed to form ideal individuals. In 1930, William Clayton Bower sketched his notion of the ideal person, one in whom character education was most fully realized, when he stated, "the ideal person is one whose personality is completely organized and stable and who at the same time has impulses, habits, attitudes, and ideas that are judged by himself and society to be good."[41] Character education focused on molding an individual into a self-disciplined unit that was a valuable part of the greater society. Values such as self-discipline, being an integral part of the community, and strong religious faith were often linked to character education.[42]

Character education, or its more contemporary version, moral literacy, is "the training of heart and mind toward the good."[43] It requires training to be done through a core of knowledge.[44] Thus, transmission of the content of a core of knowledge is of key importance, and stories are a way to do this. William Kilpatrick explains,

> stories have always been an important way of
> transmitting values and wisdom. They become all the
> more important in a society that, like ours, has
> experienced so much disruption in the family and in the

[39] William E. Chapman, Roots of Character Education: An Exploration of the American Heritage from the Decade of the 1920s (Schenectady, NY: Character Research Press, 1969), 10.

[40] Charles E. Germane and Edith Gayton Germane, Education for Character: A Program for the School (New York: Silver, Burdett and Co., 1930), x.

[41] William Clayton Bower, Character Through Creative Experience (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1930), 43. Quoted in Chapman, 16-17.

[42] Chapman, Roots of Character Education, 5-9.

[43] William J. Bennett, The Book of Virtues: A Treasury of Great Moral Stories (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 11.

[44] Bennett, "Moral Literacy," 30.