19. The morals of (and in) stories

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Suppose a father were to put his child to bed, look her in the eyes and say: "Hard work pays off. Goodnight!" It is unlikely that the child would ever beg her father to repeat this maxim to her, much less do so on a nightly basis. However, if the father reads her the bedtime story of *The Three Little Pigs*, she is far more likely to ask to hear the story again and again. Perhaps she enjoys how her father embodies the booming voice of the Big Bad Wolf, or maybe she enjoys the suspense as each pig meets its demise before finding refuge in the clever pig's house. Whatever the reason, this narrative vehicle for the message that "hard work pays off" is far more enjoyable than being told this lesson directly. This enjoyment might explain why moral lessons are commonly presented in stories, which makes stories important to consider when discussing ethical and moral development. Stories not only shape the moral development of children, but they also impact the morality of adults, by shaping attitudes and beliefs regarding moral issues, by fostering nuance in moral reasoning through exposure to morally complex issues, and potentially fostering empathy, a social cognitive ability with clear moral implications.

STORIES AND DIRECT MORAL PERSUASION

Stories can have a clear and direct influence on ethics and morality when they present a particular moral viewpoint. This can be done rather explicitly, as is often the case with stories intended for children; or implicitly, in terms of the themes embedded in stories intended for adults. In both cases, these stories are expected to have a direct and specific influence on the moral beliefs of audiences. One reason why stories intended for both adults and children may help to convey morality lies in how deeply absorbing stories can be. With a good story, audiences find themselves completely transported into the world presented in the narrative (Gerrig, 1993). When audiences are invested in the consequences of a narrative, such as the fate of the characters or the state of a fictional world, they are likely to be receptive to the moral themes presented in the story.

Stories and Moral Development in Children

Perhaps the most obvious connection between stories and ethics are so-called "moral stories": simple stories told to children in order to communicate moral principles. These often take the form of fairy tales, but modern children's books are also often imbued with moral themes. However, in order for these stories to be effective in teaching morality, children must be capable of understanding these moral messages. Whether or not this occurs, and at what age, is the topic of some debate.

On the one hand, there is evidence that children may not be able to identify the moral themes in stories that appear so apparent to adults. In one study, children 10–11 years old struggled

to articulate the "point" of the story they were given to read (Taylor, 1986). Given that many moral stories are aimed at very young children—as young as 3–5 years of age—this result does not bode well for the potential of such children to extract moral themes. In fact, there is evidence that children only develop the ability to extract a story's message at around the age of ten (Goldman et al., 1984). This is also true of the moral of a story, specifically. Several studies have found that children often struggle to convey the moral of a story, even coming away with quite a different conclusion than the intended takeaway message (Mares and Acosta, 2008; Narvaez, 1998; for a review, see Narvaez, 2002). But is the ability to explicate a moral message necessary in order to be shaped by that message?

Rather than ask children to describe the morality of stories, a separate line of research has examined whether the behavior of children is influenced by simple stories designed to teach a moral lesson, such as fairy tales and fables (for example, *The Three Little Pigs*, or *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*). In one study, children between the ages of three and seven were randomly assigned to hear a story about honesty that was either positive or negative in valence (that is, positive: *George Washington and the Cherry Tree*; negative: *Pinocchio* or *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*; Lee et al., 2014). A third group read a control story with no themes of honesty (that is, *The Tortoise and the Hare*). These children were then placed into a situation in which they would be motivated towards, and capable of, lying. Children who heard the positively framed story about honesty were less likely to lie when given the opportunity, compared to the children who heard the negatively valanced stories or the control story. Based on these results, it appears that young children can be influenced by moral tales, even if they are unlikely to be capable of explicitly describing the imbedded moral of the story.

Research that followed up on this initial result has unveiled some interesting nuance. A conceptual replication initially found no effect of hearing a moral story on honesty when the transgression is perpetuated by someone else (that is, disclosing that the experimenter broke a toy; Talwar et al., 2016). However, after some probing, children in the positive moral story condition were more likely to be honest about the experimenter's mistake compared to those in the other conditions. This implies that the effects of moral stories might be both subtle and not immediately apparent. It is also possible that moral stories impact certain behaviors in different ways. With honesty, the choices are rather black and white (that is, honesty is good and lying is bad), and there is evidence that, with honesty, only positively valanced stories influence children's behaviors. In contrast, in situations where we hope to produce a desired behavior given its absence (for example, sharing versus not sharing), there is evidence that both positive and negative stories influence behavior. In one study, children exposed to both positive and negative moral stories were more likely to donate their stickers to ostensibly poor children than were those exposed to a control story, with those hearing a positive moral story donating the most of all (Du and Hao, 2018). These findings demonstrate how the moral behavior being targeted may be influenced in different ways by moral stories (for example, donating/not donating versus honesty/lying).

Another factor that influences the impact of moral stories appears to be the realism of the protagonists. Stories for children frequently feature anthropomorphized animals as the main characters. But does this make it harder for children to generalize, seeing the connections between the story and reality? In an experiment where 4–6-year-olds read stories about sharing, half read a version with human characters and the other half read an identical story but with animal protagonists (Larsen et al., 2018). Children who read the story with human characters gave more altruistically than those who read the story with animal characters,

demonstrating that realistic and relatable characters might make moral stories more impactful (Larsen et al., 2018). That said, an attempted replication of this study found no difference in giving based on whether the characters were human or animal (Russell and Cain, 2022). This might be explained by the fact that this replication involved children who grew up in a rural environment, likely surrounded by more animals. In contrast, the earlier study relied on children who grew up in an urban environment, where they likely had less contact with farm animals. Other studies have also found that realistic moral stories can be successful in influencing children's attitudes and behaviors. In one study, researchers found that stories that showcase life-like friendships between differently abled children are successful in reducing prejudice and promoting positive behaviors towards the disabled (Cameron and Rutland, 2006). In another, researchers found evidence that a story is only effective in promoting moral behaviors in children when it is realistic, and is explicit in its messaging, such as that of a testimony (Rottman et al., 2020). Thus, the use of metaphor or allegory that is so commonly featured in children's literature may not be the implicit tool for moral development that we expect it to be.

Taken together, the existing research makes it clear that simply telling a child a morally laden story does not guarantee the expected effects. Younger children may not be able to articulate the moral of a story, for example, although it does seem that their behaviors can still be influenced by these stories in the absence of explicit understanding. That said, the impact of moral stories is likely influenced by various factors. Narratives might be effective in shaping the morality of children when they are more appealing, such as when they involve positive emotions (Lee et al., 2014; Talwar et al., 2016), relatable characters (Larsen et al., 2018; Russell and Cain, 2022), and concrete messaging (Rottman et al., 2020).

Stories also have moral implications for adults. Naturally, the transition to adolescence and then to adulthood precipitates changes in moral reasoning and, in turn, changes in one's relationships to moral stories.

Stories and Narrative Persuasion in Adults

It is tempting to assume that children and teenagers are ripe for moral development and adults are hardened to change. Although it is true that adults are often unwilling to change their beliefs (even when presented with contradictory evidence; Gilbert, 1991), adults are not immune to the powerful persuasion provided by narratives (Green et al., 2003). In fact, the idea that stories might shape the morality of adult readers is an ancient idea, covered in depth by Frank Hakemulder's seminal book which characterizes literatures as a "moral laboratory" (Hakemulder, 2000). When stories act to change attitudes and beliefs regarding ethical issues, the moral implications of stories for adults becomes obvious. Stories might even be more compelling than something like a rhetorical essay, because deep transportation into a narrative acts to discourage active counterarguing (Dal Cin et al., 2004). Research has indeed provided encouraging evidence along these lines. One study, for example, dealt with attitudes towards environmental concerns (Shen et al., 2014). There is growing consensus regarding our moral obligations towards the Earth, and increasing understanding that our environmental behaviors affect the well-being of all of us who exist on this planet. Unfortunately, there is little clarity on how to engender attitude change regarding this critical issue. In one study, participants read news stories about the environment that were either narrative in nature, or purely informational (Shen et al., 2014). Similar to the studies on moral stories for children, the articles were framed

either positively or negatively. What they discovered is that those who read the narratives which highlighted the negative consequences of environmental exploitation exhibited greater attitude change than those who read the purely informational articles. Similarly, a separate study found that imagining life on an alien planet in which prejudicial constraints mirrored those for marginalized individuals resulted in more favourable attitudes towards homosexuals (and other marginalized groups) compared to a lecture on the topic (Hodson et al., 2009). Thus, among adults, we have evidence that narratives can shift attitudes toward moral issues more successfully than other forms of discourse, and that the framing of stories in terms of negative consequences can be more effective than a positive framing.

Additional research on narrative persuasion regarding ethical issues highlights the importance of audience engagement. In one case, researchers were able to demonstrate an increase in tolerance for homosexuality when participants reported being transported by a story with a positive depiction of a homosexual character (Mazzocco et al., 2010). Participant immersion into the story was aided by emotional, as opposed to rational, responses. This demonstrates that it is not sufficient to merely be exposed to a narrative in order to see shifts in attitude. Instead, one must deeply imagine the situations and circumstances being depicted and experience an emotional response to these depictions in order to experience attitude change. In a related study, participants who held negative attitudes towards out-group members were assigned to read news article comments that were ostensibly written by a member of that out-group (Wojcieszak and Kim, 2016). Comments expressed support for the out-group that leveraged either narrative or numerical evidence (for example, statistics). Participants were more transported and more accepting of the commenter's message when the evidence was narrative rather than numeric. Even though participants did not explicitly admit attitude change towards the out-group, there was still a small effect of positive attitude change towards the out-group members, post-study. This complements some of the related findings among children. It is not enough to present a moral story or a moral position: the narrative must connect with the audience and be relatable, in order to promote shifts in cognition or behavior.

Much of the conversation about shifting attitudes regarding ethical issues, such as the treatment of marginalized individuals, focuses on education; the idea being that if people were more educated, they would be more tolerant. Indeed, higher education is associated with important prosocial characteristics such as less ethnic exclusionism (Scheepers et al., 2002). Unfortunately, education is not always accessible to all. In contrast, stories appear to be a highly accessible tool in the service of promoting moral behaviors. Stories exist in everyone's lives, in the form of television shows and library books, regardless of educational background. It is therefore heartening that narratives have the ability to shape cultural attitudes.

INDIRECT EFFECTS OF STORIES ON MORALITY

Stories not only influence morality directly via their themes, but stories also affect moral thinking in an indirect fashion. Rather than promote a certain principle (for example, people should accept sexual diversity), stories can also present complex dilemmas which demand that we grapple with opposing principles while presenting no clear solution. These dilemmas can in turn foster moral reasoning, trading unthinking adoption of moral bromides for nuanced moral stances developed via difficult and sustained thought. Stories might also affect morality

indirectly by fostering empathy for others, resulting in several downstream consequences with moral implications.

Stories and Moral Complexity

Stories can promote moral development in ways outside of the explicit or implicit presentation of pat moralities. By presenting complex and difficult problems in a rich and engaging fashion, stories can prompt readers to grapple earnestly with complex moral dilemmas. Stories bring these often abstract moral dilemmas to life, forcing audiences to fully confront their complexities. For example, in the film *Prisoners* (Johnson et al., 2013), audiences must grapple with a father's decision to torture a man who is suspected of abducting his daughter. Conversations around the ethics of torture can veer towards the simplistic, but a concrete and detailed narrative can illuminate and test the boundaries of one's own moral convictions. Would we not feel tempted to do the same, if put in the same situation with our own daughter? Stories help us to imagine in a gripping way what it would be like to have pre-existing attitudes and convictions challenged, evoking a process of moral rumination (Bartsch and Mares, 2014; Eden et al., 2011, 2017).

Moral development, as one matures, becomes less about distinguishing between right and wrong, and more about understanding the complexity—and often ambiguity—of moral conundrums. The problems we face in life do not always fit into neat categories, with obvious answers and just one correct course of action. Rather, we often find ourselves in situations in which different moral principles appear in direct conflict: a moral dilemma (Bebeau et al., 1995). A story about someone stealing a loaf of bread to feed their starving family pits two values in opposition: respect for private property on the one hand, and ensuring the health and well-being of loved ones on the other. Many of the stories we encounter (in novels, television, and film) include such challenging themes, promoting moral rumination (Bartsch et al., 2016; Bartsch and Mares, 2014; Eden et al., 2017). Moral rumination is the process by which we consider several perspectives on a given dilemma and evaluate which moral value should be prioritized (Eden et al., 2017). Stories help to foster moral rumination in part by promoting deep engagement and emotional involvement in the situation. When provided with scant details of a scenario in isolation, it may seem easy to glibly state how one would act or feel. However, when the same issues are embedded in a compelling story, the audience is provided with an opportunity to truly feel what it would be like to be faced with difficult moral conflicts. As a consequence, there is a greater probability of meaningful reflection, and as a result, growth.

Moral rumination might be especially important when audiences are wrestling with societal issues for which they do not yet have a fully formed opinion. One qualitative study examined viewers of the television show *13 Reasons Why* (Daalmans et al., 2022). This show features themes of suicide and rape, two heavy subjects that many have not personally experienced. In this study, viewers expressed signs of moral rumination regardless of their personal experiences, and this was tied to their sense of closeness with the characters (that is, mediated closeness; Daalmans et al., 2022). Reinforcing the theme that has emerged from the research reviewed thus far, it is feeling engaged with the story and close to its characters that appears essential for stories to impact moral reasoning (Cohen, 2001; Green and Brock, 2000).

Stories also foster moral reasoning by allowing us to navigate the reality of moral ambiguity. Fictional contexts offer a controlled environment to encounter characters who may not fit cleanly into categories such as "good" and "evil." When it comes to understanding others, we

often use simple heuristics that dilute the intricacies of reality. One possible explanation for these heuristics is a lack of tolerance for real-life ambiguity, especially in the moral domain (Lauriola et al., 2016). People are also quick to dismiss contextual factors that might explain the behavior of others, and even consider others to be less multifaceted than themselves (Berry and Frederickson, 2015; Hooper et al., 2015; Ross, 1977; Sande et al., 1988). As a consequence, our moral development is hindered and our relationships with others can become ridden with conflict (Berry and Frederickson, 2015). And yet, in contrast to our well-documented desire for simplicity (both in moral categorization and in understanding others), there is a growing phenomenon of audiences championing morally ambiguous characters (Meier and Neubaum, 2019; Shafer and Raney, 2012).

Morally ambiguous characters have the ability to do what is right, but often do things that are wrong or even illegal (Meier and Neubaum, 2019). Nonetheless, audiences enjoy and support such characters (Janicke and Raney, 2018; Shafer and Raney, 2012). One reason for this surprising attraction is that people enjoy stories which mirror reality, and audiences seem to understand that real people are rarely unambiguously good or bad (Hoorn and Konijn, 2003; Raney and Janicke, 2013). Morally complex fictional characters allow us to see the conflict that people experience when facing moral dilemmas. This is in contrast to real life, where we tend to only see the consequences and not the context behind people's decisions (Berry and Frederickson, 2015). In this way, stories with morally ambiguous characters may provide a safe environment for people to explore the motivational complexities of others. Exposing audiences to the rich, complicated, and sometimes contradictory inner lives of others is a way in which stories might attenuate our assumptions and add nuance to our thinking about morality.

Even with the rise of morally ambiguous characters in media, and the audience support for them, there are barriers that preclude some people from engaging with stories that are built on premises they perceive as immoral. As discussed throughout this chapter, narrative transportation helps attitudes to align with a story's message (Appel and Richter, 2010; Green and Brock, 2000). But not everyone is willing or able to be transported into every story, especially ones presenting unconventional moralities. For example, it may be difficult to be transported into a fictional world in which something normally morally reprehensible is widely permissible, such as incest. The inability to be transported into a narrative that contains deviant premises or characters is called "imaginative resistance" (Gendler, 2000). According to one theory of imaginative resistance, people cannot be transported into a story when they fear an influence of the immoral themes in the narrative (Barnes and Black, 2016). People who care a great deal about moral purity and are sensitive to feelings of disgust are more likely to experience imaginative resistance (Black and Barnes, 2017). Because transportation appears essential for narrative persuasion (Green and Brock, 2003; van Laer et al., 2014), imaginative resistance is a clear obstacle to narrative persuasion (Black and Barnes, 2017). This is an important individual difference to consider when discussing how stories might promote moral development. Oddly enough, it may be those who are most concerned with their own morality that are least likely to reap the benefits of engaging with morally complex media.

Adding some complexity to individual differences in imaginative resistance, there is evidence that genre also plays a role in how receptive an audience may be to moral taboos in fiction. One study has found that people are more tolerant of moral taboos when they appear in a science fiction story, for example (Black and Barnes, 2021a). This may be because this genre is by its very nature speculative, inviting audiences to consider futuristic and alternative

realities. Reading or watching science fiction is also associated with openness to experience and creativity (Lin, 2014; Stern et al., 2019), which might mean that sci-fi fans possess traits tied to open-mindedness which makes them more likely to consider moral possibilities. How and under what conditions stories shape morality appear to change as we develop. With children, abstraction and deviation from reality make it difficult for audiences to draw connections between fiction and the real world. In contrast, for adults, the presence of ambiguity, abstraction, and otherworldliness might actually promote moral reflection and rumination, and ultimately moral growth.

Stories and Considering Others

Stories may also impact morality indirectly by promoting social cognitive abilities such as inferring mental states (that is, mentalizing) and empathy, the tendency to feel what others are feeling. Empathy is a cornerstone of ethical thinking as it helps us to understand those different from ourselves, which can reduce out-group prejudice (Boag and Carnelley, 2016). Through stories we encounter the experiences of other people who may be quite different from ourselves (Mar and Oatley, 2008). By fostering greater empathy for others, stories might also promote prosocial behaviors and other downstream consequences of empathy with moral components, such as prosociality and altruism (Mar, 2018). In this way, stories expand our morality by widening our circle of care for others, wrought through greater understanding of the inner lives of others (Hakemulder, 2000). This understanding comes about by taking on the roles, goals, and perspectives of characters. In doing so, we can mentally simulate experiences that we might otherwise never encounter, which in turn can refine our understanding of others (Hakemulder, 2000; Mar and Oatley, 2008).

Empirically, evidence that stories might promote social cognition—the suite of abilities, including empathy, that help us to navigate social situations—comes from a variety of sources. Lifetime exposure to stories predicts better social cognition for adults (Mumper and Gerrig, 2017) and for children (Aram and Aviram, 2009). However, experiments on this topic have not yielded strong evidence (Quinlan et al., 2023), likely because experimental presentations of short excerpts of text are a poor representation of a phenomenon that likely relies on frequent and prolonged exposure (Mar, 2018). Longitudinal studies are beginning to appear, delivering some promising evidence that leisure reading of literary texts predicts later social cognition in children (Lecce et al., 2021; cf. van der Kleij et al., 2022). Most germane to the current discussion, these longitudinal studies have found that reading predicts later prosocial behavior in children (Mak and Fancourt, 2020), adolescents (Lenhart et al., 2023), and adults (Kou et al., 2020). Greater empathy, engendered through exposure to stories, influences not only moral behavior, but also our sense of moral self. In a study of young adult fiction, for example, empathy explained the association between reading and greater integrity (Black and Barnes, 2021b).

There is a great deal of importance that lies in the style of the story being told. For example, there is evidence that people who read narrative accounts of struggling immigrants are more prone to express empathy towards this group than those who read expository accounts (Zeng and Winner, 2022). This was even the case for those who were unsympathetic to immigrants in America prior to reading the narrative (Zeng and Winner, 2022). Furthermore, the effects of reading the narrative accounts extended empathy beyond immigrants to other marginalized groups, such as Black Americans (Zeng and Winner, 2022). Some experimental work has also

directly linked empathy and perspective-taking elicited by stories to a reduction in out-group prejudice (Johnson et al., 2013c), perhaps facilitated by the generation of visual imagery while reading (Johnson et al., 2013b). In sum, there is promising evidence that stories might promote social cognitive abilities such as mentalizing, perspective-taking, and empathy, which may result in downstream consequences with clear moral implications, such as prosocial behavior and less prejudice towards out-group members.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND CONCLUSION

Based on the available evidence and theorizing, stories can impact the morality of children and adults, both directly via their themes and indirectly by evoking related processes. In light of the current findings, this is a highly promising avenue for future research. One aspect of this topic that would benefit from further investigation is how culture influences the association between stories and morality. Although there are certainly some aspects of stories that appear universal—in particular, their broad arcs and emotional themes (Hogan, 2003)—both stories and morality exhibit cultural variation (Graham et al., 2016; Imada and Yussen, 2012). An example of the promise in this approach is a recent book by Patrick Hogan, which systematically identifies the links between stories, empathy, and morality based on stories found in various cultures (Hogan, 2022).

Another promising direction is studying the relationship between morally grey media and moral permissibility. Morally grey media contain portrayals of characters, situations, and plots that are not clearly moral or immoral, such as the morally complex stories and morally ambiguous characters we discussed above. In one past study, exposure to adult fiction was consistently related to moral permissibility, but exposure to young adult fiction was not (Black and Barnes, 2021b). It is possible that young adult fiction more often depicts a clear moral divide between right and wrong, whereas the plots and characters of adult fiction are more likely to contain moral nuance and moral ambiguity. To test this possibility, categorizing both young adult and adult fiction based on their "moral clarity" would clarify whether these associations with moral permissibility arise from the moral ambiguity of these stories.

In closing, stories hold an intrinsic appeal for both children and adults, be they in the form of books, graphic novels, videogames, television shows, films, or theater. They are also highly accessible, which makes their potential to shape morality a potentially powerful and important tool for good. Fully exploring the potential for when and how stories might shape our morality would seem to be a moral imperative in its own right.

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